

ОРИГИНАЛЬНАЯ СТАТЬЯ

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## Гендерное равенство как часть национального менталитета. Изменение положения российских женщин в 2010-е годы и его отражение в литературе

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### АННОТАЦИЯ

В статье рассматриваются изменения положения женщин в российском обществе во втором десятилетии XXI в., которые все еще находят свое место, несмотря на неизменные убеждения. Начиная с анализа социального, экономического, религиозного и политического фона 2010-х гг., статья расширяет понимание отражения этих изменений посредством дискурсивного анализа двух представительниц современных женщин-поэтов в Интернете, опубликованного в период с 2010 по 2019 г. В статье подчеркивается влияние меняющегося гендерного климата и освещаются возможности женщин отстаивать свои права.

**Ключевые слова:** гендерное равенство; гендерный климат; поэзия; средства массовой информации; интернет-сообщества

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ORIGINAL PAPER

## Gender Equality as a Part of the National Mentality. The Shifting Position of the Russian Women in the 2010-s and its Reflection in Literature

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### ABSTRACT

This article explores the changes in women's position in Russian society in the second decade of the XXI<sup>st</sup> century, which still find their place despite the ossified and immutable beliefs. Starting from the analysis of the social, economic, religious and political background of the 2010-s, the article advances understanding of the reflection of those changes through a discourse analysis of two representatives of contemporary female internet poets, published between 2010 up to 2019. The article underlines the growing weight of the changing gender climate and highlights women's opportunities to campaign for their rights.

**Keywords:** gender equality; gender climate; poetry; mass media; internet communities

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The following aspects determine the motivation for the present study: the lack of gender research in Russia; inadequate legislation and government policy in the sphere of gender roles and rights; the rise of Russian feminist activities in the last decade; and, finally, the development of modern internet poetry which popularizes the idea of women neither having enough protection nor being treated as self-sufficient members of society.

Materials for discourse analysis include the works of modern internet poets Vera Polozkova and Irina Astakhova, whose works became initially disseminated through internet resources. The choice of these particular authors is conditioned by their inexorable popularity and the widespread response from their female audiences, as well as by the topics that they target in their creative work.

The subject of the present study is modern Russian poetic works of popular female authors.

The object of the work is the way gender inequality is echoed in the poems of the authors mentioned above.

The methodology of research: a comparative and critical analysis of special literature regarding the appearance and use of feminines in the modern Russian language; discursive analysis of contemporary poetic works aimed at deducing the belittlement of women in society; linguistic and cognitive interpretation of the obtained data.

## SOCIAL BACKGROUND

At the beginning of the 2010-s Russian mass media wholly ignored the problem of inequality of rights between men and women, creating the image of feminists as sexually dissatisfied, morally degraded, and masculinized women seeking power over men and abjuring canon values, as well as propagating the image of a woman as perfect housewife, devoted wife and caring mother. Russian authorities have long avoided using the word “feminist” in the names of organizations.

Thanks to numerous women’s movements and feminist internet communities together with the appearance of a higher number of female writers, for instance, Maya Kucherskaya, Gusel Yakhina, Polina Zherebtsova, etc., the situation started to appear more favourable. The situation is getting salutary despite the evident government promotion of masculinity to buoy the national psychology up and to legitimate more significant

innate gender differences — imagining women as needing protection, and men as protectors [1].

On the other hand, Russian women seem to have been emancipated since the twentieth century [2]. On the legislative level, they have equal rights with men, while women from the West had to fight for a long time. In most cases, they plan a family budget, are highly educated (58% of professionals are females) and work in any sector ranging from medicine to politics. Despite this, according to the study offered by The World Bank Russia occupies the 34th place in the level of gender equality, being between Morocco and Uganda (Iqbal, Sarah, et al.). The best conditions are in education, but in politics, it has been the worst until the moment when in 2013 women achieved 9% representation in the Federal Council and in 2015 — 15% representation in the State Duma, which is the highest percentile throughout the Russian history. Women occupy presently four seats out of 32 in the government of the Russian Federation: prime-ministers Olga Golodets and Tatyana Golikova as well as two ministers — minister of healthcare Veronika Skvortsova and minister of enlightenment Olga Vasilieva. Central Bank of Russia is now headed by Elvira Nabiulina, who became the first women to administer the central bank of the Great Eight country<sup>1</sup> [3].

Moreover, out of more than 500 representatives of domestic enterprises which took part in a survey offered by the headhunting website Superjob, more and more employers started to pay less attention to the marital status of the female candidates than nine years ago. However, gender preferences remain for the time being. Employers prefer male candidates: 7% will only recruit a man and 4% only a woman; for 50% of employers men are preferable and 39% will only take on a female [3].

Women are in higher demand in subservient positions: teachers, designers, nannies, personal assistants, secretaries, nurses, stylists, and fitness coaches. Russian Federal State Statistics Service provides the following data: women’s salary constitutes 28.3% than of the opposite gender, earning on average \$517 (32.6 thousand rubles) and \$722 (45.5 thousand rubles) respec-

<sup>1</sup> ВЦИОМ, Федеральная служба государственной статистики. Российский статистический ежегодник. Federal Service of State Statistics, Russian statistical yearbook. Federal Service of State Statistics, 2018. (In Russ.).

tively. Much of this discrimination finds its roots in the social construct. Particularly, it owes to the expectation that all women are potential mothers and their efficacy and productivity are automatically lower than those of the opposite sex [4].

A law promoting gender equality has been passed by the Ministry of Labor, which reduces the list of jobs unavailable to women. Previously this list included 495 professions which were intended only for men; now there are only 95 [5]. Today, women may be employed as parachuters, truck and tractor drivers, metro machinist, etc. But they still cannot work in productions, which use poisonous substances, as they can reduce their reproductive function, as well as cannot be employed as aviation mechanics, divers, welders, miners, and builders of secret governmental buildings.

#### GENDER STUDIES IN RUSSIA

Gender studies are commensurately divided between state research centres, websites, departments at higher education institutions, scientific journals, activists and non-government organizations [1, pp. 543–548]. Presently, research projects are mainly being developed at the department of gender studies at the Higher School of Economics, Moscow Centre for Gender Studies, informational portal “Woman and society”, Department of Gender Studies at the Neva University of Language and Culture and Samara State University together with the non-government organization The Saratov Center of Gender Studies. The number of such organizations has increased by 12% in the last ten years. The most burgeoning theory developed by the researchers is the theory of social construction, where the analysis and research are predominantly oriented towards such social issues as gender discrimination, professional segregation in the job market, the political representation of women, gender discrimination, violence against women and gender stereotyping. The research themes are greatly influenced by western ideologies (prevalently American). The main goal of these studies is not limited to theoretical work. Still, its purpose is also to make people aware of the acute topic by conduction enlightening seminars and conferences and to ameliorate cooperation with state-owned and government organizations [1, pp. 550–559].

#### VERA POLOZKOVA

The signature feature of Vera Polozkova’s poetry is her sincerity and emotionality, along with the zeal to correlate her creative work with real life, which contribute to the main topics touched in her poetry: the themes of love, happiness, freedom, and the anxieties of a young woman. Hence, she won recognition by coinciding with the moods, tastes, and preferences of the contemporary youth. According to critic Evgeniy Ermolin, “she reflects all virtues and weaknesses of the new generation. Polozkova’s poems are an extract and partially a sublimation of the generational experience. The generation recognized themselves in Vera. There is your feeling in her love. And it loved back” [6].

Vera Polozkova illustrates the tragic fate of women in Russia. Particularly in her poem “Текст который напугал маму” (The text, which frightened my mother):

*Я одна боевое подразделение по борьбе со  
вселенскую энтропией;  
я седьмой год воюю со жлобством и ханже-  
ством,  
я отстаиваю права что-то значить, пи-  
сать, высказываться  
со своих пятнадцати тем, что Бог, может  
быть, иногда глядит на нее и думает:  
— ну она ничего, справляется. Я, наверное, не  
ошибся в ней.*

I myself is a combat group which fights for the worldwide entropy

it’s already the seventh year that I’ve been fighting greed and sanctimony

I am asserting my rights to mean something, to write, to speak my mind since I was fifteen.

God may be looking at her and thinking: — she is fine, coping with everything. Probably I was not mistaken in her [7, p. 128].

Contradictions, in her inner world, stimulate adaptation to the rough reality, which stays aloof and enhances the search for a solution to overcome intrinsic conflicts. Instances of self-disgust, antipathy and vagaries of life are to be vanquished for the higher spiritual purpose. She is idiosyncratic and concentrates on the evaluation of her perception. Her feelings regarding lived-through experiences aggrandize and attain a tragic and sacred meaning through poetry.

In her second book, “Photosynthesis”, the theme of break up becomes convoluted with the

theme of travel. She interprets the break-up, not as the beginning of something new, but as an imminent unbearable solitude.

*“Моя нежность к тебе живет от тебя отдельно...”*

My tender ness to you lives separately from you...

*Здесь мы расстанемся. Лишнего не люблю. Наверистишь когда-нибудь теплым антициклоном”.*

Here we will part. I don't like anything extra. Visit me some time with a warm anticyclone [8].

In the poem “От меня до тебя” (From me to you) transmittance of the mood often reaches its lyrical apogee and the distance between the lovers either contracts “равное ночи в поезде” (as if a night on the train) or stretches to eternity “как от острова и до острова” (as if from an island to an island) or transforms metaphorically “равно речи в поиске Формулы” (equals to speech in search of a Formula). Panoramic descriptions of train stations, trains and carriages become symbolic for her search for cosiness and comfort [9, p. 14].

*“Провожаящих просьба покинуть вагоны...”*

Seers-off should leave the carriages.

*“Не сходи с моих рельсов...”*

Do not go off my rails.

*“Ехать, слушать колеса, рельсы, частоты пульса.”*

To go, to listen to the wheels, the rails, the pulse rate.

*“...внутреннем поезде воздух горяч и сух,*

*Если есть пункт прибытия — путь до него неблизкий...”*

In the inner train, the air is hot and dry,

If there is a destination point — it is not close...

*“Я проснусь на конечной, от неожиданной тишины,*

*и безропотно освобожу вагон...”*

I will wake up from unexpected silence at the final stop

And submissively leave the carriage... [8].

Many Russian women relate to this imagery in Polozkova's poetry because they encounter the inability to build a healthy partnership and to create a wholesome family unit. It is also widespread that a woman is denounced for her solitude owing to the traditional pattern of settling down at a young age.

#### АКН АСТАКHOVA (IRINA АСТАКHOVA)

Irina Astakhova gained her popularity in 2011 by uploading a video with a reading of her emotion-

ally charged poem “Тебя там хоть любят?” (Are you loved there?) on YouTube, which gained 1.2 million views, followed by winning the award for the best art project during the annual ceremony of the 16 Tonnes Club. Her writing is devoted not only to the typical female motives of unrequited love, separation, and melancholy, but also philosophical themes, i.e. self-identification and constant search for the meaning of life. The themes of her poems vary concurrently with the poet's growth and development, which transformed over time into the hedonistic perception of the world along with passive and enervating observations of their own destiny. It can be seen in her poem “Мы молоды, одеты и пусты” (We are young, dressed up, and empty), as well as “Тупик” (Deadend), “Из окна такси я наблюдаю, как моя планета стремительно съезжает по оси” (From the window of a taxi I am observing how my planet is slightly going off the axe), which is so relevant and applicable to the Astakhova's contemporaries.

The author often combines her poetry with melodic and harmonious background music. Astakhova often posts recordings of her own moving readings of her poetry, in which she opts to visualize landscapes, i.e. fields, mountains and sea, making the image of nature an integral part of her creative work. The sea and forests aid to remedy wounds and provide inspiration. For instance:

*Не спрашивай, друг: никаких новостей!*

*душа нараспашку — сегодня не в моде.*

*мне нравится больше бывать на природе с тех пор, как я стала бояться людей.*

Don't ask me, my friend. I don't have any news!

The wide-open soul. It's not fashionable today.

I like to go to the countryside from the moment I started to be afraid of people [10].

In comparison with Vera Polozkova, Astakhova does not make her poetry autobiographical and personal. The lack of details underlines the universality of philosophical problems.

*Что вторичное? что главное?*

*где отчизна?*

*что случится с нами славными после жизни?*

*где найти любовь? бесстрашие?*

*свет? свободу?*

*что с родными станет нашими через годы?*

What is secondary? What is primary?

Where is the motherland?

What will happen to dear our afterlife?

Where shall we find love? Fearlessness?  
Light? Freedom?

What will happen to our relatives over many years? [10].

One of the peculiar features of Irina Astakhova's poetry is the distinction between two lyrical characters: a man and a woman. In her book, "Мужская лирика" (Men's lyrics) men's feelings become uncovered, but their representation did not coincide with the typical archetype of an emotionally unavailable human being. On the contrary, Astakhova's lyrical character turns out to be in search of true love, decrying people for their shallowness and feeling unappreciated and misunderstood. The male character reflects on the global consequences of his deeds and looks back to estimate the gravity of the situation, as seen in "Вокзал" (The train station) and "Мама" (Mom). This protagonist combines two bipolar characteristics: on the one hand, he exhibits traditionally masculine traits, as depicted in "Катрин" (Catrine) and "Надежда" (Hope). On the other, he embodies female traits, as well, for instance, figurativeness, expressiveness and attention to detail, the desire to leave the city, unite with nature, and an affinity to self-analysis. It can be deduced from "Давай уедем" (Let's go away) or "О сожалениях. Вокзал." (About regrets. The train station). Therefore, the author underlines the shortcomings of societal expectations, which dictate the stereotype of men's firmness and strength. Accordingly, Astakhova stresses the uniformity of both genders and the idea that one is dominant over the other.

*Я жалею, что мало читал,  
Я жалею, что много пил;  
Я по жизни всегда искал  
Легкий путь — и не находил.  
Я жалею забытых мной,  
Я жалею, что был несмел,  
Я жалею, что за спиной  
Я плевать порою смел.  
Я жалею, что был неправ,  
Выбирая всегда не тех.  
Что поделать — сказался нрав:  
Человека тянет на грех.*

I regret not reading enough.  
I regret drinking much.  
I was always searching  
For an easy way. And I never found it.  
I regret forgetting someone.  
I regret not being brave.

I regret spitting behind the back.  
I regret being mistaken and  
Always choosing the wrong ones  
What can I do?  
Nature is to blame.  
Man is prone to sin [10].

## CONCLUSION

It is evident that it will not be possible to solve the problems of gender inequality and overcome the structural discrimination against women without the development of feminist ideas in Russia. The most promising perspective, in my view, is that such developments will occur when the achievements of global feminism and gender equality become part of the national mentality. At the same time, the national mentality is formed by many factors, including the political, religious and social climate in the country, as well as art and literature.

We may observe the interdependent process modern creative works that implicitly or explicitly reflect the present state of affairs and call for the change of public opinion on the problems of intergender relations, which are, in turn, echoed in language. The appearance of new lexis cannot but be motivated by the transformations taking place in society. The scale of the newly introduced words is minuscule, and they might be perceived as somewhat artificial by native speakers; thus, the public reaction towards this sort of lexis is often ambiguous and uncertain. However, it should be noted that introducing and accepting linguistic innovations is not a one-day process, and authoritative representatives of the cultural elite should foster it.

The present study looks at the creative works of two modern Russian poets — Vera Polozkova and Irina Astakhova, who gained their popularity mostly due to their sincere and at the same time straightforward manner of condemning the current socio-political climate in intergender relations. Female poetry has never been considered germane when compared to male poetry, except for a limited number of Russian female poets. The poems by Polozkova and Astakhova find a widespread response from readers belonging to different social classes, which in itself is a sign of the shifting public opinion. The postulated masculine stereotypes in contemporary culture differ significantly from the antecedent historical periods, demonstrating a shift in the perception

of masculinity throughout time. Female poetic discourse is closely related to the issues of gender stereotypes, reflecting the specific changes of lexical representation of the “Man” as well as of the authors’ linguistic identity. Both Polozkova and Astakhova are characterized by ambiguous and duplicitous nature in their evaluability. Both poets adhere to the opinion that partnership is essential for the coexistence of men and women in a healthy milieu and the construction of a strong society.

If we compare the poems of these two authors, it is evident that the means and ways of foregrounding the topics differ significantly. Polozkova’s ideas are expressed explicitly: straightforward arguments have no hidden contexts. In her poetic works, she addresses many vulnerable spots of modern Russian society: she criticizes the governmental policy, social aspects of life, and, finally, the underestimated status of women. Her poems are very personal, and we can observe a strong connection between the protagonist and her own experience. This kind of personalization serves as the best angle to win the readers’ positive response and support. While Astakhova’s poems produce a more abstract and detached impression, she only hints at the problems that, in her opinion, exist in modern society. She leaves it for the reader to make a particular conclusion, never clearly postulating her point of view. One may suggest that both Polozkova and Astakhova reflect their own unhappy experiences through the ideas expressed in their poetry. It is vital that their feelings of self-assertion correspond with, and probably are the result of, the changes taking place in the attitude towards women in general.

From every aspect discussed above, we have drawn several conclusions. The role of women in modern Russian society has been traditionally imposed by two leading powers — the government and the church. Historically Russian women have

been obedient wives and caring mothers, sacrificing their careers and interests for the sake of harmonious family life. This situation fostered the growing inequality of rights that can be observed in different spheres of life. Still, the social climate is beginning to change, mainly due to the activists fighting for women’s rights, but in no small part due to influential feminist poetry widely shared and discussed in social networks. Female poets, such as Vera Polozkova and Irina Astakhova, among many other, develop a genuine understanding of the new stage of intergender relations, where the interplay of mutual respect and support evolve into a successful partnership. Thanks to the poetic representation of equitable relationships between partners, women refuse to settle for less.

Overall, theoretical and empirical studies have shown that construed hegemonic masculinity continues to be reproduced in the consciousness of men and women. The “real man” is expected by the surrounding social environment to pursue victory, take risks, struggle, express leadership, and succeed. However, there is also natural masculinity, which we have viewed as life following a male habitus — a life in which there is no rigid framework of the image of the “real man”. A real man is any man who does not impose and perform hypermasculinity. Moreover, natural masculinity represents neither a crisis of masculinity nor an example of failed masculinity. What it does more than anything is enable men to be natural. In this context, I should like to focus on the fact that a new reflection of the phenomenon of masculinity is of relevance and may lead to changes in problems of gender.

Indeed, as Russia’s women’s movement activists strive to improve women’s position in society, they have encountered political, as well as economic opportunities and obstacles, which require further analysis.

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