

**Global Feminisms  
Comparative Case Studies of  
Women's Activism and Scholarship**

**RUSSIA**

**Mariia Viktorovna Mikhailova**

**Interviewed by Natal'ia Pushkareva**

**Moscow, Russia**

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**Mariia Viktorovna Mikhailova**, born in 1946, studied in the Philology<sup>1</sup> Department of Lomonosov Moscow State University, where in 1974 she defended her candidate's dissertation and, in 2000, her doctorate. She is currently a Distinguished Professor at Moscow State University in the Division of History of Russian Literature of the Contemporary Period and Modern Literary Process. Her academic work focuses on women's literature, women critics, and women playwrights of the Silver Age of Russian Literature<sup>2</sup>, and the restoration of "forgotten" female authors of that period.

Mikhailova became interested in gender research and the literature of women writers in the early 1990s. She was a member of the editorial board of the first feminist literary journal in Russia, *Transfiguration*, which was organized on the basis of the women's club "Transfiguration." She was a regular author in this journal for many years. At that time, she lectured in gender schools and participated in joint projects with her western colleagues. Thanks to her activity as a scholar and her love for her profession, aspiring philologists of the country's main university can listen to her special courses "Female Writers of the Silver Age," "Gender in the Literature of the Silver Age," and "Women's Drama in the Fin de Siecle: the Silver Age and Modernity."

For the past 15 years, she has maintained her connection with the women's movement in the Russian Federation by doing editing work and preparing a new generation of gender and literary researchers (14 candidate's and 1 doctoral dissertations were defended under her, including the first candidate's dissertation on contemporary prose by women in Russia). Undergraduate papers on women's literature are also written under her guidance.

Mikhailova is the author of about 500 academic works (including 4 monographs), over half of them on gender issues in literature. She is a member of the Academy of Natural Sciences, the Moscow Writer's Union, and the Professional Women's Advisory Board at the American Biographical Institute. She is also a winner of countless contests and has been awarded the title of Best Philologist of the Year (1996).

**Natal'ia L'vovna Pushkareva** was born on September 23<sup>rd</sup>, 1959 in Moscow, Russia. She is currently a Professor, Chief Research Fellow, and the Head of the Womens and Gender Studies Department at the Institute of Ethnology and Anthropology at the Russian Academy of Sciences. Her fields of interest include gender history, history of family relations, the social anthropology of the academic community, as well as the history of sexuality in medieval, modern, and contemporary Russia. The chief editor of the yearbook *Sotsial'naia istoriia (Social History)*, she also serves as president of the Russian Association for Research

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<sup>1</sup> Philology is the study of language. At the Moscow State University, philology students study literature, the Russian language, a chosen modern world language, as well as a number of general philological subjects such as an introduction to philology, general linguistics, and theory of literature. (Philological Faculty of Lomonosov Moscow State University. (n.d.). Retrieved November 3, 2019, from <https://www.philol.msu.ru/in-english/faculty/#7>.)

<sup>2</sup> The Silver Age of Russian culture during the first two decades of the twentieth century (around 1898- 1918) was a period simultaneously marked by a "burst of creativity and a foreboding pessimism." (David Withun. (2014, April 30). The Silver Age of Russian Culture. Retrieved November 3, 2019, from <https://davidwithun.com/2012/04/05/the-silver-age-of-russian-culture/>.)

in Women's History. From 1981 to 2016, she has edited more than thirty essay collections, published dozens of articles for both academic and non-academic magazines, and written dictionary and encyclopedia entries as well as monographs. Pushkareva is considered to be a principal founder of the field of women's studies in Russia.

**The Global Feminisms Project** is a collaborative international oral history project that examines feminist activism, women's movements, and academic women's studies in sites around the world. Housed at the University of Michigan, the project was started in 2002 with a grant from the Rackham Graduate School. The virtual archive includes interviews from women activists and scholars from Brazil, China, India, Nicaragua, Poland, and the United States.

Our collaborator in Russia is Dr. Natalia L. Pushkareva, who gathered a diverse group of feminist scholar-activists and colleagues for the Russia portion of the Global Feminisms Project and conducted the majority of the interviews. Our work in Russia was supported by a Collaborative Planning Grant from University of Michigan's Institute for Research on Women and Gender.

*Key Words: women writers, literary criticism, academia and Women's Studies, Marxism, memoir, women's literature, art as activism, education*

**Natal'ia Pushkareva: Mariia Viktorovna Mikhailova, professor of the School of Philology...**

Mariia Mikhailova: Now Distinguished Professor at Lomonosov Moscow State University.

**NP: Distinguished Professor at Lomonosov Moscow State University, School of Philology. Mariia, please tell us, briefly, about your life, your biography, and how your scholarly biography came to include a topic connected to women's literature.**

MM.: I have a fairly complex biography, in that I didn't immediately enter literary studies. I graduated from a nursing program; my mom had sent me there after the seventh grade because she apparently wanted me to fulfill some dream of hers, even though my family was full of humanists.<sup>3</sup> Both my grandmother and my mother were librarians, directors of major libraries, in fact. My grandmother was the director of the Chekhov Library<sup>4</sup> in Moscow in the '50s; my mother was the deputy director of the Nekrasov Library<sup>5</sup>. But nevertheless, after the seventh grade I entered this medical trade school, where I studied for three years, and because I was always a very disciplined girl and an excellent student—which I think is a terrible thing—I finished the school with perfect grades. But then I did something right: I realized that I had to start working. Even though, given my grades, I could have entered medical school immediately. But I realized I had to work. So I started working, and there I realized that I would cry over every patient, that they would be drowning in tears, because the state of medicine then and in the '60s was far from adequate. There were a lot of problems. And I have to say, I still remember all the patients I took care of and somehow tried to make better. So then I realized that it'd be better to cry over literary characters. And that I should, of course, enroll in a school of philology. There I could make use of my sensitive and emotional nature, as well as my discipline. Because I loved reading, and not just regular books but literary scholarship. I was always most interested in what others thought about what they'd read. So I joined a faculty of philology, which was difficult because I first had to take and pass qualifying exams covering eleven grades—twenty-five exams in total. They included mechanical drawing, they included astronomy, everything; I got A's on every required exam and entered university. In those years, it was incredibly hard to join a philology faculty; I remember the crowd going in to write the entrance essay—it was just a mob of applicants. Forty or fifty people per available spot. That was this kind of traditional system we had, and, unlike in the later system, I was applying as a complete outsider. I didn't have any contacts, any support. I did get a tutor in

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<sup>3</sup> She is referring to humanists as people who study humanities, which are academic disciplines that study aspects of human society and culture. (Study the Humanities at Stanford. (n.d.). Retrieved November 6, 2019, from <http://shc.stanford.edu/what-are-the-humanities>.)

<sup>4</sup> The Chekhov Library is the oldest library in South Russia founded in 1876. ("About library." Chekhov Library. Accessed February 25, 2018. [http://www.taglib.ru/en/o\\_biblioteke.html](http://www.taglib.ru/en/o_biblioteke.html).)

<sup>5</sup> The Nekrasov library is a historic library located in Moscow and founded in 1919. ("История." ЦУНБ им. Н.А. Некрасова. Accessed February 25, 2018. <http://www.nekrasovka.ru/articles/library/history>.)

English, though—it was always a weak spot. I prepared for the essay on my own, I also prepared for the oral exam in literature and language by myself, and I got an A on my essay. It was a miracle. There have been two instances in my life where I felt weak in the knees. I know what that's like—it feels as though someone hit you below the knees and they seem to break under you. The first time was when I got a pair of boots for myself via *blat*.<sup>6</sup> They were the first boots in Moscow. And the second time was when they brought out...

**NP: Why were they the only boots in Moscow?**

MM: Because there weren't any before them. They were the first imported boots, the batch from 1963. They were the first boots, they were French – I still recall them vividly, they had three buttons on the side. When I got a call saying I was getting the boots, I felt weak in the knees. So the first time was when I was seventeen; the second time when I was eighteen, when I got the entrance exam results and saw that I had gotten A's on my essay and the oral exam. They almost never gave out A's on the essay, so that's when I realized that I'd get in. I still had history and language left, but those weren't as important. I began studying at the school of philology, I did very well – I got the Lermontov stipend, which had one of the better stipends, 600 rubles<sup>7</sup> at the time. That was a lot. I was practically rich. I can't say I was very interested in scholarship at the time, though. It's more likely that I studied like that because everything interested me. I found reading interesting – I mean literary scholarship because I was mostly indifferent to the Russian language, because I wasn't interested in the mechanical nature of linguistic structures—they didn't do anything for me—but the study of literature is such a vast field of activity.

**NP: This was in the sixties?**

MM: Hang on... yes, I started in 1964 and graduated in 1969.

**NP: And at that time, in the '60s, had anyone in the Soviet Union ever heard the word "feminism"?**

MV: You know, I don't think I'd heard it. Though there was a fair amount of translated literature, there was a series called *The Foreign Novel of the Twentieth Century*. And it had a lot of novels that are now half-forgotten, but they were actually quite good, and in them women showed some sort of independence, they fought against the commonplace; then came Elsa Triolet with her wonderful novels *L'âge de nylon* (*Nylon Age*) and *Roses à crédit*

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<sup>6</sup> In the Soviet Union, *blat* was used to indicate connections or acquaintances who could help a person procure some difficult-to-obtain good or service. *Blat* was virtually necessitated by the Soviet economy because of constant shortages and queues for many goods and services. The word continues to be used in the post-Soviet context to indicate how a person makes use of their personal network in order to bypass rules or expectations in obtaining some good or service.

<sup>7</sup> In the present day, 600 rubles is equivalent to \$9.38 US dollars. (XE Currency Converter)

(*Roses on Credit*).<sup>8</sup> I have to say, I've always been interested in women writers because I've always had this...

**NP: Even in your undergraduate years?**

MM: Yes. Yes. You know, from the very beginning. It has to do with my family; my family, my mother and grandmother, who had very difficult lives. My grandfather was arrested in the Great Terror<sup>9</sup> in 1937, he had been a very prominent military commander. My grandmother was an incredible beauty, I will show you later. I'm now publishing her recollections in a journal, and the people reading them say that they're something unbelievable. She wrote them in the '70s, and then...

**NP: This is the one that was the director of a library?**

MM: Yes, she was the director. Here's a late photo of her, that's me, her and me. I'll say more about it later. Her life was that of a unique woman, because she maintained a passionate interest in life into her old age. It's the rarest thing: to be able to hold on until the end of your days to this lively interest. For instance, she collected everything that had to do with the Kennedy assassination. It affected her that much. She had all the clippings, all the little books, that were published about it then. After 1937, in order to save her daughter, she had to switch apartments nineteen times in one year.<sup>10</sup> She had to cover up her tracks all over Moscow. Once, years later, my mom and I got into a car, a taxi, and she took me to all the addresses that she could remember, which weren't all of them, of course. And after that - a life filled to the brim with work. A working life, where there was never any other husband, just work and raising her daughter, and then me. I should add that...

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<sup>8</sup> Elsa Triolet (September 25th 1896 - June 16th, 1970) was a Russian-French novelist and poet. (Special To the New York Times. "Elsa Triolet, 73, French Novelist." The New York Times. June 17, 1970. Accessed February 25, 2018. <https://www.nytimes.com/1970/06/17/archives/elsa-triolet-73-french-novelist-wife-of-louis-aragon-dies-won-45>.)

<sup>9</sup> The Great Terror refers to the Stalinist-era purges of 1936-1938 in which Stalin's secret police, the NKVD, arrested and executed between 700,000 to 1.2 million people as "enemies of the people." The term was coined by Robert Conquest in his book *The Great Terror: Stalin's Purges in the Thirties* (1968). Reasons given for the Great Terror vary: some attribute it to Stalin's paranoia, to a strategy of rule, or to a desire to rid the system of entrenched, ineffective bureaucrats by replacing them with younger cadres. But most contemporary historians agree that it contains a certain inexplicability. As Stephen Kotkin argues, "Stalin faced no imperative to murder them [his own officials]. He could sack or transfer any local satrap at will. Instead, he not only put Soviet officials to death or had them deported to slave labor camps en masse, but, in a huge expenditure of state resources, had them tortured to confess and, incredibly, had these Communists confess not to being corrupt or incompetent, but to plotting to assassinate him and restore capitalism on behalf of foreign powers." See Stephen Kotkin, *Stalin: Waiting for Hitler, 1929-1941* (New York: Penguin Press, 2017), 442.

<sup>10</sup> Because MM's grandfather was arrested and executed as an "enemy of the people," there was considerable chance that his wife could be as well. MM's mother, as a child, would not have been subject to arrest, exile, or execution, but without parents, she could have been sent to a Soviet orphanage, the conditions of which were miserable.

**NP: What kind of an upbringing was that? It seems a very matriarchal one.**

MM: Well, you know, in fact, there's something to your supposition. I was born out of wedlock.<sup>11</sup> My father never married my mother. But he did adopt me, as well as my brother. This was also a traumatic detail in our family, which...

**NP: He was married?**

MM: He was married. He was a very prominent scientist, he twice received the Stalin Prize<sup>12</sup>, he was a pioneer of Russian reinforced concrete, so, there is a building going up outside my apartment, and I see my father's constructions rise – it's called "prestressed reinforced concrete." He invented it; first there was Freyssinet in France, and my father was the second. Long story short, he was a prominent scientist. And of course he was afraid that his second family would affect his career. And he was also afraid of another thing: he was afraid of my mother's character, which got worse as a result of this. Of the whole situation. Because to go around pregnant without a husband in 1946, it was a terrible thing!

We lived in the type of apartment that is called a "corridor system."<sup>13</sup> Ten rooms, the neighbors peeking into all the pots, I was called a back-alley child because everyone knew that my mother didn't have a husband. But I do have to say, my father never abandoned us. He was a very honorable, very dignified person. He convinced my mother to let him adopt us, to give us his last name, and he helped us all his life.

**NP: He didn't have children?**

MV: He did. He did. He had an older son, who, I think, was ten years older than me. No, more than that, twenty. The whole affair with my mother happened when his wife was evacuated.<sup>14</sup> It was war time, my father seduced my mother with fried potatoes. Everyone was starving. But because he had special privileges, the fried potatoes played an important role. So the two main women in my life had these tragic, unfulfilled, unsuccessful fates – my mother was so beautiful; here she is at nineteen... And here is another portrait. She was so incredibly beautiful that when we walked along the boulevard, people would just stop. Stop

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<sup>11</sup> Born out of wedlock means to be born of parents who were not married at the time of birth. (Collins English Dictionary)

<sup>12</sup> The State Stalin Prize, often called the Stalin Prize, is awarded annually to individuals studying science, mathematics, literature, arts, and architecture to honor the most prominent achievements which either advanced the Soviet Union or the cause of socialism. (Wikipedia contributors. (2019, September 22). USSR State Prize. In *Wikipedia, The Free Encyclopedia*. Retrieved 17:04, November 11, 2019, from [https://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=USSR\\_State\\_Prize&oldid=917053012](https://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=USSR_State_Prize&oldid=917053012))

<sup>13</sup> Meaning an apartment building in which the doors to each apartment open into a main corridor.

<sup>14</sup> Hitler invaded an unprepared Soviet Union on June 22, 1941, taking large swaths of territory in the process. As a result, nearly 16 million people and 1500 factories from the Soviet Union's western regions evacuated east to other areas of the Soviet Union. See Rebecca Manley. *To the Tashkent Station Evacuation and Survival in the Soviet Union at War*, (Ithaca, Cornell University Press, 2009), 7-8.

and look. Somehow this always bothered me, I used to think about it a lot. It always seemed to me that a woman's situation is traumatic from the start. It doesn't matter, married, not married – something bothered me. That's why I always welcomed literature by women writers, from a very...

**NP: Young age.**

MM: Young age. Though I became a Bunin specialist.<sup>15</sup> I should note that...

**NP: Your candidate's dissertation was on Bunin?**

MM: No, I'll tell you about my candidate's dissertation and my doctoral dissertation separately. I wrote my thesis about Bunin based on his last collection of stories *Dark Avenues*. And there, you might remember, the main thing is passion, the main thing is love, the main thing is incompatibility between people. Again, in Bunin I still saw this traumatic, dramatic, and tragic context in which nothing ever works out. And the woman always ends up in a monstrous situation, which is what I tried to convey, even though my topic was purely literary, the "Philosophical-Aesthetic Principles of Bunin's Work." But still, in one way or another, it was something that came up. I got a recommendation to a doctoral program right away because I had a really good thesis. I have to say, though, that it's all to a great degree thanks to my supervisor. He was the dean of the faculty...

**NP: Were there any female instructors at that time?**

MM: Yes, there were a lot of female instructors because in a lot of ways philology is a female science.

**NP: Even in those years, in the '60s?**

MV: Always, always. There are always more girls, so there were few boys in the faculty. And they could pick the most striking ones—since it's a beautiful school, and the philology girls are very beautiful—the boys always had that. Maybe 20 percent of students were boys, no more than that. Now the number is even lower. Though there was an equal number of male and female instructors. There were also a lot of men. That is, it was still men going into scholarship. And, of course, thanks to Aleksei Georgievich Sokolov, who was very welcoming, very encouraging—I suspect he might have had some very tender feelings toward me, though he never expressed them in any way, he was always very proper and so on—I started my PhD program. There I had a very different topic, one that had to do with criticism. Since criticism is also an aspect that is very interesting to me; as I mentioned, I'm always curious to see how the same thing can be evaluated from different perspectives. I think that's the most appealing thing, because the same material, depending on methodology, can produce a completely different result. I wrote a dissertation on the

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<sup>15</sup> Ivan Bunin (October 10<sup>th</sup>, 1870- November 8<sup>th</sup>, 1953) was a Nobel Prize winning author best known for his works such as, *The Life of Arsenev* and *The Village*. He was one of Russia's most popular writers in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. (The Editors of Encyclopædia Britannica. "Ivan Bunin." Encyclopædia Britannica. May 05, 2017. Accessed February 25, 2018. <https://www.britannica.com/biography/Ivan-Bunin>.)

literary criticism of the Silver Age. It was about realism, modernism, etc. And they kept me at the faculty. I didn't defend right away, I didn't make the deadline, I defended two years later and began teaching.

**NP: And that was when you first struck upon the subject of women?**

MM: You know, that was really something that never entered my head. I'll tell you about a particular moment. I became involved with the subject of women, when I realized that—and I was already teaching that same criticism and literature of the Silver Age—I just noticed that there were no female names. It was catastrophic.

**NP: This was in which years?**

MM: I began teaching in the '70s, and there were only two female poets in literature, Akhmatova<sup>16</sup> and Tsvetaeva.<sup>17</sup> No prose writers – just an empty, empty space. One couldn't talk about Gippius,<sup>18</sup> because, even when I was putting together a chrestomathy<sup>19</sup>, I couldn't mention, even mention, the name Gumilev.<sup>20</sup>

**NP: Okay, and what about Soviet literature? There were, after all, Bergholz and others?<sup>21</sup>**

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<sup>16</sup> Anna Akhmatova (June 11th 1889 - March 5th 1966) was a well-known Russian poet and writer. Her work falls into two periods of Russian history- pre-revolutionary and Soviet- and embodies a tragic interpretation of 20th century Russia.

<sup>17</sup> Marina Tsvetaeva is a well-known Russian poet and prose writer from the 20th century. She wrote during a tumultuous time in Russian history about the experience of women during "the terrible years." Tsvetaeva also had a tragic personal life, losing one daughter to famine, another to a labor camp, and her husband in a span of 20 years. She hanged herself in 1941 after evacuating the USSR during a German invasion. ("Marina Tsvetaeva." Poetry Foundation. Accessed February 25, 2018. <https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poets/marina-tsvetaeva>.)

<sup>18</sup> Zinaida Nikolayevna Gippius was a Russian symbolist poet, playwright, novelist, and essayist. Her work was oftentimes political, with content responding to Russian politics and the Bolshevik Revolution. (The Editors of Encyclopædia Britannica. "Zinaida Nikolayevna Gippius." Encyclopædia Britannica. January 16, 2012. Accessed February 25, 2018. <https://www.britannica.com/biography/Zinaida-Nikolayevna-Gippius>.)

<sup>19</sup> This is a volume in which text examples are arranged in a manner to be pedagogically useful; in the US we typically call this kind of volume a "reader," but it might not be arranged so specifically to maximize its usefulness in teaching a particular subject.

<sup>20</sup> Nikolai Gumilev was an imaginative Russian poet who wrote before the Bolshevik Revolution in 1917. He used imagery and Symbolism to make his works come to life, and was married to Anna Akhmatova. "Nikolai Gumilev." Poetry Foundation. Accessed February 27, 2018. <https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poets/nikolai-gumilev>.

<sup>21</sup> Olga Bergholz (1910-1975) was a Soviet poet who shared her work on Leningrad radio during the blockade of the city and served as a symbol of hope for many citizens of the USSR during that time. ("Olga Bergholz - Olga Bergholz Biography - Poem Hunter." PoemHunter.com. Accessed February 27, 2018. <https://www.poemhunter.com/olga-bergholz/biography/>.)

MM: Yes, there was Bergholz with her *The Day Stars*, but, you know, still... There was Panova with *Serezha*.<sup>22</sup> But still... Also there was Ketlinskaia and...<sup>23</sup>

**NP: So there were some names, but they were considered lesser authors?**

MM: No, they weren't considered lesser, but they didn't register as female names.

**NP: How did you develop an interest specifically in the female voice in literature and the desire to study it, in our literary scholarship, in the '70s?**

MV: That's what I was saying—no, it was probably later, when I was already teaching and discovered one very interesting critic whose name isn't known at all. There was a certain Elena Koltanovskaia – and when I found her I suddenly started to understand that there was a huge number of female critics. They never show up at all. I started studying this Koltanovskaia; this was sometime in the '80s. And, in addition to other things, I noticed that they are never studied as figures who have a unique perspective of their own. And then I noticed—though this was already in the '80s, probably closer to the '90s—that many of these female critics wrote about women. They were also interested in what is called a female text, female voice, female discourse. And, again, Koltanovskaia, this was also very interesting, she had such a difficult life. She was working very intensely during the Silver Age, and then was completely pushed out of literary criticism in the '20s. She tried to get back into the Soviet literary establishment, began corresponding with Seifullina, but it didn't work out, she died in 1952, and it's unclear where her archive is, where anything is.<sup>24</sup> She died somewhere in Ukraine. So everything was tied to these female lives, unless they were officially accepted, like Galina Serebriakova, who wrote about Marx and about Jenny Marx.<sup>25</sup> Though I have to say, that was also a fairly tragic life.

**NP: And Zoia Voskresenskaia who wrote about Lenin.**<sup>26</sup>

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<sup>22</sup> Vera Panova (1905-1973) was a Russian writer and journalist who wrote in the style of Soviet Realism. She won three Stalin prizes, including one for her story *Sputniki* (The Train) that was later turned into a play and TV show. ("Vera (Fëdorovna) Panova." Authors' Calendar. Accessed February 28, 2018. <http://authorscalendar.info/panova.htm>.)

<sup>23</sup> Vera Ketlinskaia (1906-976) was a poet and prose writer who described the struggle of her generation during the World War II era throughout her work. ("Dictionary of Russian Women Writers." Google Books. Accessed February 28, 2018.)

<sup>24</sup> Lidiia Seifullina was a Soviet journalist who wrote works such as "The Lawbreakers" (1922), *Humus* (1922), "A Peasant Tale About Lenin". (*The Great Soviet Encyclopedia, 3rd Edition*. S.v. "Lidiia Seifullina." from <https://encyclopedia2.thefreedictionary.com/Lidiia+Seifullina>)

<sup>25</sup> Jenny Marx (Jenny van Westphalen, 1814-1881) was the wife of philosopher Karl Marx and also an active female socialist figure. ("The Life of Jenny Marx." Jacobin. <https://www.jacobinmag.com/2016/02/jenny-karl-marx-mary-gabriel-love-and-capital>.)

<sup>26</sup> Zoia Voskresenskaia (1907-1992) was a Soviet diplomat, secret agent, and author of children's books. ("Zoya Voskresenskaya." Wikipedia. February 17, 2018. [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Zoya\\_Voskresenskaya](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Zoya_Voskresenskaya).)

MM: Yes, but Serebriakova in addition had relatives who were victims of the repressions.<sup>27</sup> I knew her cousin, and after they came to arrest her parents, she stopped growing, she became a dwarf. It was her cousin. She is very small. She worked with my mother, by the way, as a librarian. Her name was Rita Bek. Serebriakova was Jewish, you know. You see, there you had to set everything—your life—up very meticulously.

**NP: How did your school and the academy in general react to the fact that someone wanted to study specifically women in literature?**

MM: I can tell you that it was very difficult. By the time I could start doing something, it was already the '90s. It was the time of Perestroika,<sup>28</sup> and the most important thing is that prior to it I switched to literary Marxism.<sup>29</sup> I have a second direction that I consider very important: it's the study of Marxist criticism, which is something no one here does. I call myself the last Trotskyist because I work on Trotsky; I first wrote about him in my dissertation, and about many others.<sup>30</sup> That is, I showed that there weren't just four people—Lenin, Plekhanov, Lunacharskii, and Vorovskii<sup>31</sup>—there were a lot of people, and many of them were women. Zasluch is important, Figner is important,<sup>32</sup> and Marxism in a lot of ways helped me focus on this female...

**NP: Kollontai.**

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<sup>27</sup> Galina Serebriakova was a Soviet writer whose works include *The Youth of Marx* (books 1-2), *The Stealing of the Fire*, and *The Summits of Life*. (*The Great Soviet Encyclopedia, 3rd Edition*. S.v. "Galina Serebriakova.")

<sup>28</sup> Perestroika, literally translated as "restructuring," was a movement for a higher standard of living and greater socialist self-governance, introduced by Mikhail Gorbachev in the USSR in 1987. <http://www.historyguide.org/europe/lecture16.html#perestroika> "Perestroika"

<sup>29</sup> Marxism is a socioeconomic analysis of class relations and historical development that encompasses the political and economic theories of Marx and Engels. These theories were later developed by followers to create communism. (McLellan, David T., and Henri Chambre. "Marxism." *Encyclopædia Britannica*. January 02, 2018. <https://www.britannica.com/topic/Marxism>.)

<sup>30</sup> Trotskyism, named after Leon Trotsky, is an ideology derived from Marxism that is particularly critical of Stalinism. (The Editors of *Encyclopædia Britannica*. "Trotskyism." *Encyclopædia Britannica*. November 08, 2015. <https://www.britannica.com/topic/Trotskyism>.)

<sup>31</sup> These men are notable Marxist critics. Lenin edited a Bolshevik illegal local newspaper, *Proletary* (*The Proletarian*) along with collaborators, Lunacharskii and Vorovskii. (Lenin, V.I. *Lenin: The Ideological Struggle in the Working-Class Movement*. Accessed March 01, 2018. <https://www.marxists.org/archive/lenin/works/1914/may/04.htm>.)

<sup>32</sup> Vera Figner (1852-1942) was a female Russian activist who was acting leader of The People's Will, a group of activists who sought to overthrow the tsar through by infiltrating military groups and causing terror. (Alpern Engel, Barbara and Rosenthal, Clifford N. *Five Sisters: Women Against the Tsar*. DeKalb: Northern Illinois University Press, 2013. <https://muse.jhu.edu/>)

MM: Yes, Kollontai, of course.<sup>33</sup> On this female angle. Because, first of all, why did women become involved with Marxism? Because they were the people who were the most degraded, oppressed, Jews and women. That's who formed the foundation of Marxism. I'm not talking about the largest figures, but all these women: there was an Ida Akselrod, and a Liubov' Akselrod,<sup>34</sup> there were very major women authors, serious ones. And somehow this also pushed me to the belief that, again, this is important to study. But in the '90s I still didn't dare to declare this at the school, because I had tried and the reaction was very negative.

**NP: When you say you tried, when was that?**

MM: It was already the '90s when I tried.

**NP: And was there any information at the time about Western literary scholarship, about gender studies?**

MM: You know, not yet. Our faculty had practically nothing. I was the first one to get into it, because in the '90s we started the journal *Preobrazhenie* (*Transfiguration*). It was the first...

**NP: Can you tell us a little more about that journal?**

MM: Yes. I think it was a really important breakthrough, a momentous...

**NP: Act.**

MM: Yes, event that happened thanks to Nina Gabrelian, thanks to Diana Medman, who as a businesswoman was able to provide funding. The six volumes of the journal that we managed to publish – it had the subtitle “Feminist journal”; at first it said “feministic” but then we corrected it to “feminist.”

**NP: What year did the first volume come out?**

MM: The first was in 1993, and then I started traveling for collaborative projects to the West, to Western conferences.

**NP: At the start of the '90s.**

MM: It was the early '90s, after all. Because prior to that, there was also a journal called *Mariia*, but these were all underground journals. You have to remember that everyone was still afraid of the word “dissident.” Even during Perestroika.

**NP: Were they also afraid of feminism? After all, it had such a “bad image”?**

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<sup>33</sup> Alexandra Kollontai was a Russian Soviet activist who advocated for the Soviet republic to organize women into the socialist agenda. She paid special attention to mobilizing women from the working-class and peasantry. (Ryan, Sally. The Alexandra Kollontai Archive. <https://www.marxists.org/archive/kollonta/into.htm>.)

<sup>34</sup> Lyubov Axelrod (1868-1946) was a Russian revolutionary, Marxist philosopher, and art theoretician. ("Lyubov Axelrod." Wikipedia. March 01, 2018. [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Lyubov\\_Axelrod](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Lyubov_Axelrod).)

MM: Yes, after all, you know, it's just this... For instance, when I brought this journal as a gift in the '90s (I was a very naïve person back then, very young) to my dean—our dean was a woman who since that time...

**NP: That's Riutina?**

MM: No, I'm talking about Marina Leont'evna Remneva<sup>35</sup>.

**NP: Ah, Remneva.**

MM: Yes. And I brought her this journal. It said "feminist journal"—I brought it to her because I was brimming with pride because in this journal I was writing about women, because I was restoring lives, because we were writing about feminism... And then I saw her reaction, which was a little condescending, maybe even half-negative and half-condescending, and in general quite disdainful.

And I realized that this—as a student might say today—wasn't cool, wasn't needed here. And in those years, I was a strange bird because I was always saying that women's literature has to be studied independently. This doesn't mean that women's literature is good, and some other kind is bad. We are not talking about quality, because even a mediocre text can contain some intentions, some interesting inclusions, that will convey so much, because it will be a particular language, a particular vision, communication of a particular experience. I was saying this, but I still remained alone, even though already in the '90s I introduced a special course, "Women Writers." I've been teaching it for twenty years, focusing on different aspects: women writers, gender in women's literature (because women's literature can come without the gender "sauce"). Literature, perhaps, can come in various...

And then I had this... I got a lot, by the way, from the club *Preobrazhenie* (Transfiguration), in which we also existed, all these feminist clubs that were starting to appear then. It wasn't a women's movement, but it was women who came together united by a different banner. Under the banner of feminism. At that point one could already speak of feminism, yes. But at the university, it was still mostly men, and when you started talking about it at the department, they began cringing. Back then, they cringed timidly; now, they can cringe however they want. I think that in that respect, the men's attitude toward the topic, little has changed here. Maybe it's different for younger people.

But I am talking about the middle and the older generations, who relate to gender and related to it then with such... Though I always told them that feminism can be leftist, radical, humanist, this kind, that kind. I told them all that, but they didn't care and could only conclude: "you don't like men." But it was hard to say about me that I didn't like men; I

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<sup>35</sup> Marina Leont'evna Remneva is a famous Russian author who wrote a book about the grammar of the Church Slavonic language. (Церковнославянский язык: Грамматика с текстами и словарем by Marina Leont'evna Remneva. (1999, January 1). Retrieved November 3, 2019, from <https://www.goodreads.com/book/show/15711031>.)

accepted their courtship, I dressed a certain way... But they still felt weird about it. Though when I announced the special course, no one objected, I continued to teach it.

**NP: This was in which year?**

MM: It was in the mid-1990s. The mid-1990s...

**NP: Was there a sense then that anyone who got involved with the topic of women in their discipline could expect some support from the West? Or did your interest have nothing to do with Western money, grants, Soros?<sup>36</sup>**

MM: No, that wasn't the case. The one thing I had was collaborative projects with Germany. Especially with Freiburg<sup>37</sup>, especially with Elisabeth Cheure,<sup>38</sup> it was very intensive.

**NP: That was at the end of the '90s.**

MM: It was the end of the '90s, 1996. There were joint conferences; I got a lot out of them, I have to say. Then, when I traveled to the West, I realized that our country existed in a sort of vacuum, some sort of a lacuna<sup>39</sup>, while nearby they have long since applied gender-based approaches not only to texts by women but also to those by men, that gender exists as a whole scholarly framework that can be very fruitful. And people in the West have almost finished the stage of name rehabilitation and are now working on something else. It was very enriching for me, very interesting, and that was around the time when our gender centers also started to appear.

There appeared a very serious center of gender studies in Ivanovo<sup>40</sup>. The Kharkov center<sup>41</sup> and Ira Zherebkina, who was its pioneer.

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<sup>36</sup> Open Society Foundations (Soros) is a philanthropic organization founded by George Soros that supports civil society groups projects with the aims of promoting justice, education, and social welfare. ("Open Society Foundations." Wikipedia. February 13, 2018. [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Open\\_Society\\_Foundations](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Open_Society_Foundations).)

<sup>37</sup> Freiburg im Breisgau, or more commonly "Freiburg" is known as the "Jewel of the Black Forest" and is located in a university city within Germany. (Wikipedia contributors. (2019, November 4). Freiburg im Breisgau. In *Wikipedia, The Free Encyclopedia*. Retrieved 17:10, November 11, 2019, from [https://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=Freiburg\\_im\\_Breisgau&oldid=924476087](https://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=Freiburg_im_Breisgau&oldid=924476087))

<sup>38</sup> Elisabeth Cheure is a Slavist who was awarded the Order of Merit of the State of Baden-Württemberg for her work pertaining to the equality of men and women in science and society. ("Elisabeth Cheuré." Wikipedia. January 29, 2018. [https://de.wikipedia.org/wiki/Elisabeth\\_Cheure%C3%A9](https://de.wikipedia.org/wiki/Elisabeth_Cheure%C3%A9).)

<sup>39</sup> A lacuna is a gap in a manuscript, inscription, text, painting, or a musical work. (Merriam-Webster Dictionary)

<sup>40</sup> Ivanovo is a Russian city northeast of Moscow. Just north of the Uvod River, the Museum of Ivanovo Chintz exhibits traditional textiles. (Wikipedia contributors. (2019, September 22). Ivanovo. In *Wikipedia, The Free Encyclopedia*. Retrieved 17:16, November 11, 2019, from <https://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=Ivanovo&oldid=917238705>.)

<sup>41</sup> Kharkiv (Kharkov in Russian) is the second most populous city in Ukraine, located in the northeast of the country. It is the largest scientific center of Ukraine and the administrative center of the Kharkiv region.

**NP: You mean Zhrebkina from Ukraine?**

MM: Yes, her. I think that one of the best projects of that center was the journal *Gendernye issledovaniia* (*Gender Studies*) that she started to publish. She gave a lot of space in it to literature – she published everything that I suggested. And finally, in 2000, I had a PhD student to whom I gave the topic “women’s literature.” It was the first dissertation in Russia on women’s literature. The student was Tania Rovenskaia. She wrote about contemporary women’s literature.

**NP: Did she emigrate to the West?**

MM: No, unfortunately she transitioned to business projects. She is now a fairly major player in the organizational sphere, a sort of brand consultant for those Davos meetings.<sup>42</sup> And I have to say that I’m sad about that, because she was very talented. The first part of her dissertation included everyone, from Luce Irigaray and on, all of Western feminism, she decoded all of it and successfully defended.

**NP: What year was that?**

MM: That was in 2001. But there’s another thing: the topic itself was approved, but it didn’t generate any particular enthusiasm; the enthusiasm was rather in the community of women. Among those who were working on this, everything that Tania did was a revelation: her whole dissertation, analysis from this particular point of view. At the university I keep following the same line. Now it’s becoming...

**NP: For how many years now?**

MM: Almost thirty years. Almost thirty.

**NP: And there has been some progress....**

MM: Quite the opposite! I think it’s the opposite. I think that now, in the last eight or so years, things are getting more and more difficult. I keep giving out dissertation topics about women, among others, of course. One of my students defended the first dissertation on Berberova in Russia;<sup>43</sup> another, the first dissertation about Shchepkina-Kupernik as a translator in Russia.<sup>44</sup> It was important to me to show that women, especially in the Silver

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(Wikipedia contributors. (2019, November 6). Kharkiv. In *Wikipedia, The Free Encyclopedia*. Retrieved 17:17, November 11, 2019, from <https://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=Kharkiv&oldid=924840387>.)

<sup>42</sup> Each year, the World Economic Forum meets in Davos, a resort in Switzerland, where world business, political, and economic leaders come together to shape their international agendas. ("World Economic Forum." Wikipedia. March 03, 2018. [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/World\\_Economic\\_Forum](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/World_Economic_Forum).)

<sup>43</sup> Nina Berberova (1901-1993) was a Russian writer who wrote stories such as “The Resurrection of Mozart” and “Cape of Storms” and wrote about Russian exiles in Paris. (Upchurch, Michael. "Little Russia." *The New York Times*. December 01, 2001. <http://www.nytimes.com/2001/12/02/books/little-russia.html>.)

<sup>44</sup> Tatiana Lvovna Shchepkina-Kupernik (1874-1952) was a Russian writer, poet, and translator. ("Tatiana Shchepkina-Kupernik." Wikipedia. February 17, 2018. Accessed March 03, 2018. [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Tatiana\\_Shchepkina-Kupernik](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Tatiana_Shchepkina-Kupernik).)

Age, especially abroad, were the conduits of culture. After all, all foreign literature during the Silver Age was presented and translated by women. Because translators were mostly women. Because, of course, translation didn't pay well, and they needed to work, while men could work in better-paying professions. We have de Maupassant<sup>45</sup> in a woman's Russian translation. And many others. I am very proud of this: we will be putting together a book, we are restoring the names of not only those women who hold places of dignity and can be discussed in respectable forums discourse, but also those women who were expanding thematic boundaries as much as they could, boundaries that in Russian literature were very strict.... I am referring to the acceptability of certain themes in Russian literature in general, not just their being voiced by women. For example, Evdokiia Nagrodskaia<sup>46</sup>. In 1995, I published her well-known novel, *Gnev Dionisa (The Wrath of Dionysus)*. It's a scandalous novel; before the revolution it was published ten times because it talks about the ideas of Weininger<sup>47</sup>, about how women have a male element and men have a female element; it openly talked about the issue of homosexuality. About how it shouldn't be discredited. And she wasn't a feminist. She, on the contrary, shows how dangerous the extremes of feminism can be. How dangerous the external attributes of feminism can be: to put on pants, to recite slogans – that all that isn't progress on the path for which women should strive. I just had a Chinese woman defend a dissertation on Nagrodskaia. I think that it's such a breakthrough that I brought her name out of the kind of literature that's called "belles lettres," mass literature, mediocre, improper, virtually a pornographic element. I showed that it's all literature – honestly, I did a lot of it myself as a directed my student. She was very receptive to my direction, very excited, she found it interesting. And she brought this into the sphere of acceptable research.

**NP: Is there reason to hope that in this way your ideas, including those that have to do with the reception of Russian women's literature, might find their way to China and in China will be received in the way we would wish? Or is it difficult to advance**

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<sup>45</sup> French writer Guy de Maupassant is famous for his short stories, which paint a fascinating picture of French life in the 19th century. (Wikipedia contributors. (2019, October 26). Guy de Maupassant. In *Wikipedia, The Free Encyclopedia*. Retrieved 17:19, November 11, 2019, from [https://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=Guy\\_de\\_Maupassant&oldid=923140777](https://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=Guy_de_Maupassant&oldid=923140777).)

<sup>46</sup> Evdokia Nagrodskaia's novel *The Wrath of Dionysus*, with its theme of gender roles and sexual identity, became a sensational and controversial bestseller in Russia. Long before postmodernism suggested that gender was a social construct rather than a biological absolute, Nagrodskaia's novel put this issue before middle-class Russian audiences hungry for popular fiction. (The Wrath of Dionysus. (n.d.). Retrieved November 4, 2019, from [http://www.iupress.indiana.edu/product\\_info.php?cPath=1037\\_3025\\_3029&products\\_id=21056](http://www.iupress.indiana.edu/product_info.php?cPath=1037_3025_3029&products_id=21056).)

<sup>47</sup> Otto Weininger was an Austrian philosopher whose single work, *Geschlecht und Charakter* (1903; *Sex and Character*), served as a sourcebook for anti-Semitic propagandists. (The Editors of *Encyclopaedia Britannica*. (2019, September 30). Otto Weininger. Retrieved November 6, 2019, from <https://www.britannica.com/biography/Otto-Weininger>.)

**themes that have to do with the women's voice in literature in China? Or is there hope that it'll be successful there?**

MM: Natal'ia, you know, I think that the young generation of the Chinese has changed. Now...

**NP: More internationalized?**

MM: Well, yes. You know that Chinese women respond to things more actively. They are more active than...

**NP: Our women.**

MM: Our women. Because I can see among my students a kind of weariness from being in a losing battle. I can definitely tell you that all those—well, not all, of course, that's an exaggeration, not all—but many hopes that we had in the 1990s about the development of feminism, about the inclusion of women, their adaptation to new conditions, they ultimately weren't fulfilled. And today women are tired of this, they don't want it anymore. The majority of my girls, as strange as it may sound, almost don't want to be socialized/to develop.

**NP: But they still take on women as a research topic?**

MM: Yes, they do, but in a way that is separate from their own biography. For example, for me, my work with women's texts was very important for my maturation. I told you earlier that my family situation played an enormous part. The work I'm doing now in this direction, in trying to restore some justice—it is the main goal of my life, perhaps—to restore some justice for those not only forgotten, but even exiled female figures, this work sustains me. And it may be the only thing that gives meaning to my life, because today, unfortunately, teaching no longer allows the possibility of being wanted or needed, but this sphere tells me that my "sorrowful work won't disappear."<sup>48</sup> And I never repented taking it up. In other spheres, I regretted, grew disillusioned, lost inspiration, but here, I am still burning. You know, I am always taking on projects, publishing books, it's important to me. Because I still believe that a written, published version will remain, even if there's only a single copy, it will be in demand. It's very difficult to push them through, but I push through all my recent publications. That is, I push a lot through.

**NP: And what does it change for modern women? Do they read these books of ours?**

MM: You know what? I'm not doing it for the women. I am doing it for the men. I can tell you that when I came up with the project "Women's Drama of the Silver Age," all the literary scholars outright laughed at me. They told me: "You want to write about women's drama? There is no such thing. Where have you found female playwrights in the Silver Age?" And no prominent literary scholar could think of a single name – someone

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<sup>48</sup> A reference to an 1827 Pushkin poem about the exiled *Decembrists*.

remembered Gippius<sup>49</sup>. Sure. But that's it. She wrote some plays. And when I suggested it, I put together this book, and I can...

**NP: And that [inaudible]?**

MM: Of course. But that's Verbitskaia<sup>50</sup>. And she didn't write plays. Anna Mar wrote plays, as did Miret, as did Teffi, as did Shchepkina-Kupernik, it's that volume over there... When male scholars see it, they draw back, they are embarrassed that there is a whole field they know nothing about.

You see, it turned out to be very important. When you manage to make a breach, something starts to seep in. Men's minds are more of a priority now, because our men are somehow very backward, very strange, sluggish, focused on something else. And you know, they still treat female scholars with a sort of condescension, like "well, yeah, it can happen." You know, it's like in that joke when a boy comes to his mother and says: "mom, everyone tells me that I have a square head." "Serezhen'ka, no, who could possibly think that?" she says as her hands caress the right-angled contours of his temples. It's just like that: "there are some women, they are talented, of course, they break through...." It had a major effect on me that I myself was shaped in this environment and continue to be shaped by it. I can say that in the sphere, I never stop evolving and moving forward internally. Because engagement with women's texts opens up a virtual sea of various opinions, giving you the opportunity to discuss lives, to reflect, to empathize. My emotionality, with which I entered philology, is useful here. Of course, now I worked a lot with documentary literature, women's memoirs. It's not a coincidence that I started publishing my grandmother's recollections because, you know, what the female memory registers, some of its manifestations – it's to some extent very different from what the male memory registers. The female experience is very different, and this doesn't mean that it includes some sort of attention to petty detail, it's really a more sensual impression of the world, more tangible. It's very interesting to me. I also have my father's memoirs, he also remembers the way he was as a child... And the comparison of a girl's and a boy's memories is such an experience! The boy models himself. He sees himself as a rescuer, a bandit, doesn't matter who, specifically, but he perceives himself in a manner that's not real, he keeps constructing himself. But a girl perceives herself and herself specifically in this life. She always hears, feels, smells, sees, and so on. And I think that's very important. And these memoirs can be not of great people but of very regular ones. This is the kind of small history that, I think, is incredibly rich and offers a vast field of study.

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<sup>49</sup> Zinaida Nikolayevna Gippius was a Russian poet, playwright, novelist, editor and religious thinker, one of the major figures in Russian symbolism. (Wikipedia contributors. (2019, September 28). Zinaida Gippius. In Wikipedia, The Free Encyclopedia. Retrieved 17:30, November 11, 2019, from [https://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=Zinaida\\_Gippius&oldid=918423129](https://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=Zinaida_Gippius&oldid=918423129).)

<sup>50</sup> Anastasia Alekseevna Verbitskaia is a Russian writer who was an important female figure in early-twentieth-century Russian culture. (The Oxford Encyclopedia of Women in World History. (2019, November 3). Retrieved from <https://www.oxfordreference.com/view/10.1093/oi/authority.20110803115457152>.)

**NP: Does your work with young people in this direction promote gender education? Is it important for girls? Does it expand their ability to understand certain processes, to perceive themselves more accurately? Why do we need this type of research, broadly speaking, not only for scholarship as such and not only for literary studies, but for... for those who follow us, the next generation?**

MM: As you know, since I am still teaching, I interact a lot with young people, young women. Maybe it's the result of our unsettled contemporary Russian life, but they—even when they are interested in some of the things we're been talking about, women's literature, its interpretations—they still later veer off and choose not scholarship, not gender studies, but, to put it simply, family bliss and domestic well-being. Honestly...

**NP: They are not very interested in scholarship?**

MM: That's right, and socialization in general, strange as it may sound. Today the attitude is very different. They're thinking about their careers, their income, money because... I remember myself at that age, and I can say I wasn't an exception in my constant desire for self-improvement. I wanted to master everything! I wanted to learn to write! I wanted to be a critic, I still really love just being a critic. I write about film, about theater, about books. Of course, I always wanted to earn money doing that. Back then, in Soviet times, you were paid 18 rubles for a film review, and that was very good. Today you either don't get paid at all, or get paid pennies... Here, a review in a thick journal is 700 rubles. It's laughable. You spend a week writing it, if you want to write a good one, reading the book, and so on.

These girls are still aiming to make money, do something, of course, but .... In their ambition I don't see any desire to tune themselves into a higher order of thought. They are smart girls, they are good, respectable. I recently had a student who wrote a wonderful dissertation about the fallen woman. About brothels, about prostitutes in the Silver Age. It really was a wonderful work. Now she just edits some texts, she likes it . . . She got married, and that's wonderful, she likes to cook . . . And that's it! I have to admit, she is a marvelous cook, she knows Spanish, but I - maybe she is tired from writing the dissertation. That happens, of course.

**NP: I think it's the historical context.**

MM: I think that it's the historical context. Because it's not just her, they all want to get married. It's very difficult to get married when you are in a philological department. It's a problem. It's difficult to get married in general, that's true. But they just cocoon themselves in their isolated worlds and hide. Maybe it's just a stage. By the time they are forty, they will have raised their first child, and maybe they'll return to the profession, and maybe they'll remember those feminist ideas that I once tried to instill, to embed, that I told them about. They were very receptive. But...

**NP: Do you agree that the explanation could be found in the absence of the kind of feminist activism that was present in the nineties?**

MM: Without a doubt. I was just starting to talk about that. At the time, I really was carried by that wave. That wave picked me up because I was ready to swim in its stream; for me, the '90s are completely unique, I can confidently say that if there was anything successful in my life, it was the '90s. By all metrics.

I was happy, because I understood that I can speak the truth, that I can write what I want, I can participate in what I value, and these democratic strivings turned out to be really productive for me. It was then that I started to write a lot, about various things; for instance, I could then say something new about Marxism.<sup>51</sup> Without sliding into leftism, without sliding into conservatism. I have a work which still remains the only objective work on Marxist criticism in thirty years. But all this waned and disappeared. You know, there's just nowhere for women to go these days. Those same women's clubs in the '90s, for instance, have now become some sort of women's social gatherings. There is something to them, they have great knitting, wonderful hats, everything's good there; and there are some very energetic ladies who manage to use these things to create some sort of a brand, trend, that gives them the ability to travel somewhere as a group, to organize something....

**NP: Were you still associated with any schools or women's organizations in the early 2000s? And what are things like now?**

MM: I took part in gender seminars, traveled to Foros as a lecturer.<sup>52</sup>

**NP: But they stopped in the early 2000s.... The centers began closing, all activity dwindled when they started declaring people foreign agents and such... We have to ask: Can we see any women's activism today? Can you highlight anything as an example of the female voice or word? Perhaps, not necessarily in the form of a publication but maybe some actions or something that you recall as important to you in terms of our Russian version of feminism?**

MM: Here we have to mention the people who post on Facebook. Of course, they are women who are a bit younger than me, whom I know and who are in my friend list... And they carefully track the instances of discrimination in publications, texts, the speeches of our...

**NP: Politicians.**

MM: Politicians, for example. Which now occur all the time. There is virtually no public appearance during which women are not degraded. And they don't even realize what they

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<sup>51</sup> Marxism is a socioeconomic analysis of class relations and historical development that encompasses the political and economic theories of Marx and Engels. These theories were later developed by followers to create communism. (McLellan, David T., and Henri Chambre. "Marxism." Encyclopædia Britannica. January 02, 2018. Accessed March 01, 2018. <https://www.britannica.com/topic/Marxism>.)

<sup>52</sup> Foros is a resort location in Crimea. ("Foros, Crimea." Wikipedia. March 03, 2018. Accessed March 03, 2018. [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Foros,\\_Crimea](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Foros,_Crimea).)

are saying anymore. For instance, I remember the situation with Berlusconi<sup>53</sup>, when we found out he had a mistress, and many people said, “Oh, how cool, he has a mistress, how enviable.” Even though this was a shameful episode for a politician. So the women watch for things like that.

Other than that, I haven’t noticed anything. Because I think that...

Of course, there is also women’s friendship. For instance, my grad students are close to each other. I always loved bringing them together so that they could support one another.

**NP: Is there women’s solidarity? A desire to support one another precisely because women have suffered discrimination and so on?**

MM: Natal’ia, I think the idea that women have suffered has already disappeared. You haven’t noticed this? Somehow it’s not acceptable to talk about what the life of women was like in Russia, that they had passport problems, divorce problems, they couldn’t, for instance, move to a different city without their husband’s permission. And now that’s all erased. We now have such a smooth history, such a smooth or smoothed out past, and, most importantly, political discourse that has spread on a large scale and with a wide reach... that says that women had it good... Of course, men beat women in the villages...Of course, there were some horrors, but in general, a woman had her household, she was in charge of it. She had her tongs, she had her oven... Sure, her mother-in-law tyrannized her, but when she herself became the mother-in-law, she had power over her daughters-in-law. That’s how distorted our perception of the past has become. So what suffering can you talk about anymore? Everyone feels that, on the contrary, women are suffering now. The poor things are forced to work, they always owe something to someone.

It is true, women now have to work for the sake of money, but in Soviet times, my mother, for example, worked not for money but for the Idea. Because a Soviet woman was a different kind of being. It has to be said that the Soviet Union succeeded in creating a Soviet mentality, a Soviet person. These were women that were... happy during that time. My mother was a happy woman, despite her, in many ways, unsuccessful woman’s life. She switched to something else, she stopped thinking about a husband, at some point she stopped thinking about children – she became a social activist of sorts, and that gave her happiness.<sup>54</sup> Because even children don’t always bring happiness, as we know. Sometimes there is actually more grief...

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<sup>53</sup> Silvio Berlusconi is an Italian media mogul and former Prime Minister of Italy who owns the largest broadcasting company in that country, Mediaset. He is a controversial figure in modern Italian politics since his tenure as Prime Minister was filled with scandalous sex affairs, poor judgment, and rash decision-making. (Wikipedia contributors. (2019, September 26). Controversies surrounding Silvio Berlusconi. In Wikipedia, The Free Encyclopedia. Retrieved November 13, 2019, from [https://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=Controversies\\_surrounding\\_Silvio\\_Berlusconi&oldid=918062867](https://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=Controversies_surrounding_Silvio_Berlusconi&oldid=918062867).)

<sup>54</sup> She’s describing her mother, using nearly the same concepts as the heroine of the 1977 Soviet film *Office Romance*. The heroine there is a “social activist” – basically someone whose life is dedicated to the Komsomol

But today's woman works not because she wants to self-actualize, but because she wants to earn money. Of course, there is some variation, but still.... So you can't talk about women's suffering anymore. So I now simplified even my special courses; sometimes I talk precisely about suffering. Now I use gender in men's texts, I work on men-misogynists, because there are texts like that, where you can see that some men outright hate women and convey this thought throughout their works. There was an author named Mark Krinitskii, I even published his book *The Woman in Lilac*, and he simply hates women, hates them... He has this one character, Ivan Durnev, Ivan the Fool,<sup>55</sup> who is always deceived by women. His wife deceives him, his mistress deceives him, he goes to a brothel – even the prostitutes there deceive him. Poor guy, things are so terrible for him, he, a man, suffers so much, so much.

I think that it was in the beginning of the last century that men started seeing women show their individuality. And this led to worries, their works started manifesting this fear.

**NP: Male fear?**

MM: Male fear. Male fear is so interesting to show. But still, I can't fully show that women remained in an inferior position because my students won't accept it. No matter how hard they fought to get through, how they tried to enter politics – it never worked. And for such a long time. Of course, I am interested in Soviet women's literature. But I haven't been able to get to it.

**NP: But characters changed in Soviet women's literature, no? There figures like Nastia Kamenskaia appeared, who do something professionally while their husbands do domestic work.<sup>56</sup>**

MM: Certainly. But there is a problem with your question. You focus attention on something that shouldn't even be noticed. Why does it matter who made dinner today? If you have time, you make it. And greet your Vania happily.<sup>57</sup> If you have to work late, Vania cooks. But, you know, this is done not because... But in our Marinina's works, it looks forced. Marinina emphasizes, for instance, that Nastia doesn't use makeup, that she is lucky to have a husband who can cook something, but if she were unlucky with her husband, everything would probably fall apart. If he said what he wants. You see, even in this focus there are

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or the Party – who never thinks about a husband or children, but the hero of the film woos her and transforms her from frigid into an attractive, feminized woman. Soviet discourse criticized this type as much as it encouraged it.

<sup>55</sup> Durnev sounds like the word for “fool” in Russian, *durak*. Ivan the fool is a common character in Russian folktales.

<sup>56</sup> Nastia Kamenskaia most likely refers to a literary character created by Aleksandra Marinina, who was a police investigator. (Shneidman, N. N., and Jeffrey Howard. Denton. *Russian Literature, 1995-2002: On the Threshold of a New Millennium*. University of Toronto Press.)

<sup>57</sup> Vania, a nickname for Ivan, is a common male name in Russia. MM uses it here to as a colorful way of saying “your husband.”

things that, I think, by now we shouldn't even notice. It shouldn't be so paramount, it should be already internalized. And this male-female dialogue you have should have to do with more complex psychological points, not the basic domestic issues. I myself really like to cook, I love to cook, but it can't replace everything else in my life. It can be more important than something else, but it can't be the most important thing. But it seems to me that today women are returning to their previous social role, that, figuratively speaking, we lost everything that we achieved during the Soviet era. During that time, we made enormous gains in terms of women's...

**NP: There were huge gains.**

MM: Enormous gains, even compared to the West. The West, of course, has never matched the progress that we made back then. Because we...

**NP: I have another question: are you familiar, even by name, with organizations that bring together female scholars in your academic institution? There are "Women of MGU," "Women with a university education," "Women in academia and education." They are nonprofits that bring together female scholars and educators. Do you think we need them, or no? Can they somehow advance our educational goals, or can we only rely on what we ourselves teach in our lectures? And another question: is there any need for such social activism and women's activism?**

MM: Well, I think if they were active I would... I do know about them. I even attended one presentation by women, we have these meetings to hear reports, and I'm part of the academic council. So there was a presentation there. But I think that all of this, at least now, happens on a very formal level. The "Women of MGU" limit their activity to holding fairs at certain holidays to benefit the poor. It's that same "theory of small deeds"<sup>58</sup> that was popular in the 1890s that we always laughed at (while reading the classics). At that time those small deeds might have been needed, in the illiterate country that Russia was then. But now these women's organizations limit themselves to small deeds alone. I never once got a call from any of these organizations, even though I could, for instance, give a talk about women writers. After all, it's always interesting to hear about literature, you can tailor it to any level so that anyone can come and be interested to hear about what people used to write about. Never. No one ever contacted me. At one point we used to have people in the faculty who worked on gender studies. But somehow everything dissipated, disappeared.

**NP: What about contacts with foreign organizations or individual specialists who work on women's literature, our women's literature? Do those still exist?**

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<sup>58</sup> The Theory of Small Deeds (Abramovshchina) is a doctrine proposed in Russia in the liberal-populist newspaper *Nedelia (The Week)* during the 1880's. Advocates of the small deeds theory called on the intelligentsia to enter their local self-government institutions and work as teachers and doctors to serve the popular welfare. (Small Deeds Theory. (n.d.) *The Great Soviet Encyclopedia*, 3rd Edition. (1970-1979). Retrieved November 13 2019 from [https://encyclopedia2.thefreedictionary.com/Small+Deeds+Theory.](https://encyclopedia2.thefreedictionary.com/Small+Deeds+Theory))

MM: To an extent with Finland, which was strong in gender studies. Irina Savkina is still there. But the contacts are more on a personal level . . . There are no more projects connected with a universal women's interest in some sort of broad aspect of global women's issues in sociology, history, politics, literature, and so on. I don't hear about any.

**NP: Has the way you think about “feminism” changed since you began studying the topic of women, “women’s voice in literature,” in the early ’80s? After twenty, , do feminist goals still seem the same? What does feminism mean to you, in general? This question is probably important in the sense that I’m asking whether many people’s, say, our students’ fears about feminism are justified. Those students of ours who respond to the question: “are you a feminist” with “no, I’m very from any feminism.” Where do these fears come from? So this is two questions. On the one hand what is feminism for you, and on the other how can we help the young generation that follows us avoid fear of these themes?**

MM: I think that earlier, when we were talking about this in the '90s, we maybe went a little too far. Yes, because to us, it was so important, becoming free. We somehow forgot that for the majority of women, the home front—their household, husband, children, even something like embroidery—plays an enormous role. We somehow took it upon ourselves to assert: we need this, we don't need this, this doesn't matter, it will work out on its own... Oh, the breath of freedom, that's what we emphasized... Today, I understand that the “presentation” of feminism needs to be more subtle, in a way, taking account of... I don't want to say “women's nature.” And, one must say, this nature is very individual. I think the concept of “women's nature” is completely provisional. For instance, I know women who simply don't want to have children. There are women who don't want to marry. There is an enormous number of women who value their freedom and their egotism... You know, a number of these women have appeared—these egoists—who just want it so nobody bothers them. They want to live as they please... You know, it's also some shade of feminism that we didn't consider. What do we sow, promoting feminism? We promote this kind of will, these egotistic desires and needs that are very strong in humanity in general... Maybe we have to muffle them a little, building a dialogue with other ones. I think today the presentation of feminism has to take into account these concomitant<sup>59</sup> factors and the dangers found in its radical forms.

Even though I am fine with LGBT groups, I think that promoting certain lifestyle elements will have consequences. After all, young people are very sensitive to what they hear around them. They hear a lot, they want a lot, and they begin to hit upon something... And maybe if they didn't constantly hear things, they wouldn't have hit upon them. I'm saying this because these days I have a lot of lesbians in my circles.

**NP: Was it like that in the '60s and '70s? I think that then...**

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<sup>59</sup> Concomitant means naturally accompanying or associated. (Merriam-Webster Dictionary)

MM: Of course, they weren't openly so. But there were definitely fewer. Because, first of all, they concealed it. I can say that I met them, but now, when it's become so acceptable—and I don't at all want to imply that it's shameful; it's perfectly fine, don't misunderstand me—they are more visible... I think that intimate life in general isn't for display. I don't announce what kind of men I like. I don't tell everyone that I like brown-haired men of the Italian type, right? Because not everyone is interested in that, it's not my main trait. But today, among the younger people, it's common to tell and show, and there is a certain glamor in it, in saying "I'm with a girl now"...

**NP: A desire to demonstrate something?**

MM: Yes. This seems dangerous to me, and it's also an extreme of feminism that was interpreted a certain way. Some feminists really think that men are not very necessary. It's really like that. But men *are* needed and there here to stay anyways, so we have to reckon with them. But there's this fashionable extremism now...

Of course, I am a feminist. I don't tolerate discrimination of any sort. It's the most painful thing for me. All these comments I hear are intensely insulting. Belittlement at work when... Look at the Academy of Sciences<sup>60</sup>, Natal'ia... Just look at it! It's a fellowship of men. They have so many full members and corresponding members, and how many are women? Five percent?

**NP: Less than that.**

MM: Three percent...

**NP: Even less, 1.8 percent.**

MM: Can that be normal? Can it really be like that? Given that there are actually more women working in academia. They are very productive, they are very responsible. Often in contrast to these administrators. Our Moscow University has only one dean who is a woman.

**NP: Of course.**

MM: In the entire university, which now has forty-eight faculties. Just one. And it's been like this for thirty years. She just won't give up her position. She is now eighty years old, and she won't give it up. It's a kind of quality of hers. Is that normal? Is that possible?

I think that we need to present feminism in a way that includes this too, but taking into account the pull toward other values that women still retain. We shouldn't smooth them out, toss them out, ignore them, we have to find a balance. That's what I think is important.

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<sup>60</sup> The Russian Academy of Sciences is a network of scientific research institutes from across the Russian Federation and contains additional scientific and social units such as libraries, publishing units, and hospitals. On November 21, 1991, it was confirmed as the highest scientific institution in Russia by a decree of the President of the Russian Federation. (The Isreal Academy of Sciences and Humanities. (n.d.). Retrieved November 7, 2019, from <https://www.academy.ac.il/Index7/Entry.aspx?nodeId=864&entryId=18906>.)

**NP: Thank you very much for this discussion and I hope we meet again.**

MM: Thank you for listening.