

# **The Image of “Sinister Feminists” in Modern Russian Public Discourse: Discussing The Later Dystopias of V. Pelevin**

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## Introduction

In Russian science fiction, the ratio of male and female authors is such that the priority has always belonged to men. According to researchers<sup>1</sup>, this phenomenon is explained by the fact that the so-called “hard science fiction”, which told readers about the achievements and prospects of real science, was a priority in the Soviet Union. Authors described technical details and the operation of various mechanisms, and the exploration of new territories. All these topics, as was traditionally believed, may be of interest primarily to men. The main characters of such works, written by male authors, were men more often than women. Female characters were on the sidelines: they could be the helpers of male characters; they could play the role of a “damsel in distress” who the hero needed to save; they could act as a hero’s love, often a fatal woman. However very rarely did they play an independent role in the plot. There were exceptions, of course, and very bright ones: several movies based on teenage books by Kir Bulychev (also a male author) about a girl from the future Alisa Selezneva – one the movies can be described as a dystopia. However, the general trend was such that there were much more male authors in the literature than female authors.

Little changed in the twenty first century. The feminist movement in society and in literature came to Russia in the 90s together with democratic Western values, but it never became popular. Russian people generally believed women in Russia sufficiently emancipated without the "Western" feminism, having all the rights and privileges on par with men. This was nominally the case, since Soviet Russia after the 1917 revolution was one of the first countries where women were legally proclaimed equal with men. However, much changed after the Soviet Union collapsed. The literary critic Dmitry Bykov (2019)<sup>2</sup> believes that all the achievements of Soviet feminism have been lost in modern Russia. Currently there are attempts to revive the Orthodox values in the country, with patriarchy and the subordinate position of women in relation to men considered to be the more important ones.

Ukrainian feminist and female writer Olga Chigirinskaya writes in her blog<sup>3</sup> (2012) that male Russian authors tackle themes interesting primarily to men, and in the most cases the main characters in their books are male. Female characters are also found there and often expertly written, but the problem is, as Chigirinskaya notes, that they are written by men. Since traditionally in Russia the female worldview is considered emotional, illogical, and since women tend to pay more attention to interpersonal communication rather than the problems of science and technology, making them the main characters of science fiction would not make much sense. They would not be able to explain how mechanisms or inventions work. Women in Russia are considered less ambitious than men, and therefore they would not be able to lead an expedition - neither into space, nor

into uncharted corners of the earth or other planets. Female science fiction writers are also forced to narrate from the perspective of male characters, because otherwise the scope of the science fiction genre would be violated. In some other genres (for example, in fantasy), there are more opportunities for female characters, but anyway, writers of both sexes prefer to choose males as the main characters, since they would be more active and more familiar to readers than a female character.

In this sense, the popular writer Victor Pelevin can serve as a typical example for characterizing female characters in works of contemporary Russian science fiction. His novels are known not only in Russia, but also abroad – especially two of his early works, *Life of Insects* (1993) and *Generation “P”* (1999). The list of his heroines includes tragic figures (Natasha-fly from “Life of Insects”), mythological wise maidens (the werewolf from *The Sacred Book of the Werewolf*), and fatal women who bring the demise to men who were unlucky enough to contact them (Myus from *Numbers*). In his several later dystopia novels, feminist oriented women appear on equal terms with the main characters, and Pelevin’s view of these feminized and independent women is highly correlated with the typical ideas of feminists in modern Russia. Often he portrays them with male attributes (“woman with balls”) or gives them typical male qualities (ruthlessness, cold calculation, cruelty), for which some critics<sup>4</sup> accuse Pelevin of misogyny. While in his early novels readers could find positive images of independent and intelligent women, later works feature an increasingly negative image of the “sinister” masculine feminist. Critics<sup>5</sup> have traditionally called Pelevin a “translator” of the mindsets that prevail in modern Russia, implying that every

year he writes a novel in which he postulates and reinterprets the events of this year in a postmodern way. Paraphrasing Lenin, who called Tolstoy “a mirror of the Russian revolution”, Pelevin could be called a “mirror” of Russian modernity. In this sense his observations are of value to the researchers of modern mass culture, since they provide them with the most relevant material. In this article, I am going to analyze the heroines from the two latest works of V. Pelevin (*iPhuck 10* (2017) and *Secret Views of Mount Fuji* (2018)) in order to create a portrait of the modern Russian emancipated woman as she appears to Pelevin.

#### 1. Victor Pelevin and popularity of his novels inside and outside Russia

In Russia, Pelevin is an iconic figure, and many of his works (especially early ones translated into many European and Asian languages) are considered iconic. The “turboreality”<sup>6</sup> of *Life of Insects* (1993), in which people organically turn into insects and insects turn into people, allowed Pelevin to gain popularity among fans of science fiction and among readers of “serious” realistic prose. For Russia in the 90s, the so-called “period of the initial accumulation of capital”, when interest in the West was still strong, his use of ideas of “exotic” eastern Zen Buddhism (in the novel *Chapaev and the Void* (1996)) were welcomed as new and unusually attractive<sup>7</sup>. His convincing theory of consumption, references to the actual phenomena of Russian politics in the novel *Generation “P”* (1999) as well as its prophetic nature<sup>8</sup> made Pelevin a kind of “guru” for many Russians of the Perestroika era.

In 1996, Pelevin participated in the International Writing Program residency at the University of Iowa and gave an English interview to an American-Canadian writer Clark Blaize. When Pelevin's novel *Generation “P”* was published in 1999, it was sold over 3.5 million copies worldwide. The book received a number of awards including Germany's *Richard Schoenfeld prize*. In 2001, Russian expats in Japan invited Pelevin to Tokyo, where he gave several interviews at various literary seminars.

In Russia his books were discussed on radio and television, famous actors voiced the radio show based on *Life of Insects*. The film based on the book *Generation “P”* was released in 2011. The film starred many famous actors of the time, making up for the lack of outstanding special effects. It became iconic in Russia and had a significant impact on the minds, similar to the effect *Fight Club* (1999) made on American and global audience. The film became one of the few domestic dystopian films released in modern Russia.

After that Pelevin takes a hiatus, and since 2004 starts to publish one novel a year, each stirring a controversial yet stormy response from critics.

The writer is placed in the cohort of postmodern authors; he has worked in various genres such as a historical novel of the early twentieth century, detective story, parable, as well as genres of dystopia and Russian cyberpunk. The main characters of his works are men, as is typical for most Russian male authors. However, in works published in the twenty first century, the theme of feminism, or rather, criticism thereof, appears more and more often. Female characters appear as well – feminists who are fierce and cold-blooded when confronting male characters. Many

critics<sup>9</sup> characterize Pelevin as a writer who unmistakably feels the spirit of the times and is able to grasp its essence, to transmit precisely those ideas that are in the public consciousness at a particular time. Pelevin captures modern stereotypes perfectly and refracts them in his prose in his characteristic ironic postmodern manner. For instance, in the absurdist short novel *Omon Ra* (1992), he questions the space programs of the two superpowers, the USA and the USSR, resonating with the common stereotype that neither the Soviet nor the Americans had ever taken a space walk.

Pelevin is a non-public figure: according to the literary critic Bykov (2018)<sup>10</sup>, he has "lived in the astral world" over the past few years, and he does not go to literary meetings and PR companies. For example, in May 2011 it was reported that Pelevin would personally attend the *SuperNatsBest* award ceremony, which would have been the writer's first appearance in public. However, he did not show up<sup>11</sup>. The site pelevinlive.ru posted 46 interviews with a writer who "does not give interviews". The latest interview is dated 2010. Where Pelevin lives now is unknown, but in 2019 he released his new novel, *The Art of Light Touches*. According to Pelevin and the novel, the current agenda of public opinion in Russia this year is as follows: the attitude to Western democratic thought and to feminism and gender issues in modern Russia is far from welcoming.

## 2. Feminism and women in modern Russia

In the 90s, after the Soviet Union collapsed, the Russians were fascinated by the Western culture and the democratic values that it proclaimed. American popular culture

flooded Russia; American films, music, TV shows became wildly popular. Russian women, confident that feminism was flourishing in the Soviet Union and in modern Russia, began to get acquainted with the western version of feminism, the ideology of which is presented in such famous TV shows as *Xena: Warrior Princess* (1995-2001), *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* (1997-2001), and *Sex and the City* (1998-2004). In Russian language, the word “sex” with a meaning of sexual intercourse became commonplace (in the USSR it was not so widely used). Representatives of the LGBT community appeared on the Russian pop stage and TV, their image changed and became positive, while in the Soviet Union homosexuality was regarded as a disease and it was impossible to talk about it publicly.

The trend towards democratization and westernization of society continued throughout the 2000s, but in the 2010s the economic situation in Russia worsened, due to the global crisis and falling world oil prices. Situations of public protest against the current regime began to arise; oppositionists, who actively talked about corruption, started to appear. In 2012, Putin became president again, and in 2014, the Euromaidan took place in Ukraine and the Crimea peninsula became part of Russia. Western countries imposed economic sanctions against Russia, and the country gradually began to isolate itself from the West, seeking political and economic partners in other directions. In social and cultural life, a rethinking of democratic values occurred, and a tendency to search for primordially Russian values, such as Orthodoxy and other patriarchal values, arose and began to gain strength.

As liberal opposition states, modern Russia itself shows all tendencies to become a totalitarian regime again, in which there are “sexual repression”, infringement of minority rights (including representatives of LGBT people, for example), lack of freedom of speech and pluralism of opinions, and gender inequality. According to the literary critic and one of liberal opposition leaders D. Bykov, who highly appreciates Pelevin's work and in 1999 even managed to interview him, “modern Russian society is very militarized, it is in a state of permanent combat readiness” (2019)<sup>12</sup>. Russia is a large country and in its history there have been many wars and, in recent history, the confrontation of two world superpowers, which ended in the collapse of the Soviet Union. Now, 30 years after the collapse of the Soviet empire, people are still rethinking what happened to them then. The older generations are nostalgic for the Soviet past; the middle generation, born at the turn of the eras, is too busy surviving in modern realities; the younger generation, although having absorbed English language and Western values from early childhood, nevertheless does not know another president, except for Putin. Like many times in its history, Russia is at a crossroads, which path to take, it is vacillating and, perhaps, the situation will change for the better. However so far, the current trends are as follows: a rollback to the past on many issues - regarding ways of engaging with the West, regarding the gender agenda. At the beginning of the 20th century in Russia, in one of the first among other countries, feminism won a huge victory: women got equal rights with men, gained the opportunity to work and earn money, and state support for motherhood and childhood. Now we are witnessing degradation on all these issues: the prohibition of



American families to adopt Russian children from orphanages, the decriminalization of domestic violence, repression against members of the LGBT community, discrimination against women in the workplace (for example, the existence of a list of prohibited professions for women), etc. At the same time, in the proportion of 146,804 people of the total population of Russia, the number of women is 78,760 (data as of January 1, 2017). Until now, the role of women in politics is negligible. Second roles are traditionally offered to a Russian woman: a loving and understanding wife or mother who has no ambition, who is the “reliable rear” for her husband and for whom family creation and childbirth are still the height of self-realization. It is still not accepted to talk about the woman’s sexual life, the Soviet slogan “there is no sex in the Soviet Union” is still valid<sup>13</sup>. Russian literature is still chaste and describes the scenes of “sex by consent” reluctantly, and the descriptive language has not been developed. People still often say about a woman who has achieved professional success or possesses some status things (for example, an expensive car): she got it through bed, that is, with the help of a status man.

Pelevin, whom many critics<sup>14</sup> accuse of misogyny, not without reason, nevertheless, in the person of his heroines depicts various stereotypes that public opinion imposes on women in modern Russia. Each female image of Pelevin is a certain “niche” for women, a kind of behavior model appropriate to their status in a militarized masculine society, such as modern Russia. Each female image is interesting in its own way and has its own tradition in Russian literature. This essay will discuss only about the most relevant, most recent Pelevin’s female type: about the

modern emancipated women, as they appear in the public consciousness of Russia in the twenty first century. For this purpose, the images of two heroines of two late Pelevins novels, *iPhuck 10* (2017) and *Secret Views of Mount Fuji* (2018) will be considered.

### 3. Images of emancipated women in novels *iPhuck 10* and *Secret Views of Mount Fuji*

Novel *iPhuck 10* we can characterize as a Russian cyberpunk, because there is AI, gloomy futuristic entourage and modified bodies. The described world of the end of the twenty first century consists of the regions of Payess (or the Crotch) and the new Confederation (successors of the USA), the European Caliphate (captured by the Islamists of Europe), Russia and the eastern superpower. People no longer have physical sex because of the dangerous strain of Zika virus and the process itself has been stigmatized as unethical. There are special devices for virtual sex – “androgynous” and “iPhucks”.

There are no direct indications in the text of the novel, but signs imply that the characters live in a society of victorious feminism, at least of some feminist principles. According to Galina Yuzefovich<sup>15</sup>, literary critic of the liberal Internet publication *Meduza*, “in the world created by Pelevin, the trends barely outlined today, have reached their apogee. The category of gender has completely lost its traditional meaning (for example, Mara officially refers to herself as a “woman with balls” type, since testosterone dispensers have been implanted in her)”, and the traditional concept has also broken up with the concept of

gender understanding of sexuality. Due to the spread of viruses, not dangerous for its carriers, but fatal for their posterity, “bodily sex is gradually marginalized and even criminalized” (those who practice it are scornfully called “pigs”), and in its place comes artificial insemination and, most importantly, diverse and complicated sex with gadgets<sup>16</sup>.

In the novel the role of AI plays Porfiry Petrovich, a literary-police algorithm. He investigates crimes and simultaneously writes detective stories about it, earning money for the Police Department. Marukha Cho (Mara) is a real woman and an art critic with a lot of money and her specialty is the so-called “gypsum”, the art form of the first quarter of the twenty first century. She needs an assistant to analyze the market and decides to rent Porphyry. To communicate to Porphyry she uses her device, “iPhuck 10”, the most expensive love gadget on the market and at the same time the most famous of the 244 detectives of Porfiry Petrovich. Subsequently, it turns out that Mara, with a team of like-minded people who died in the past, has created artificial intelligence that can generate works of art. Sales of these works bring Mara significant income, but there is always the danger of detecting a fake. Porfiry later discovers Mara’s real intentions towards him and is practically destroyed, having managed to save a backup copy of his algorithm. The AI created in the past by Mara in the image of the girl Jeanne, whom Mara considered lost, absorbs pieces of Porphyry’s code to hide Mara’s fraud.

For a long time throughout history, Mara managed to make the gullible and simple-hearted Porfiry a fool, pretending that she was in love with his 17-year-old copy. In fact, Mara is a

ruthless, insensitive, hard-hearted person who does not spare anyone to achieve her goals: neither her own friends with whom she created Jeanne, artificial intelligence, nor her assistant Porfiry. She looks like a radical feminist (usually all feminism in Russia is associated with this group of feminists): a shaved head, ear piercings, she has an athletic frame, diet-hardened body. Despite the fact that she has “iPhuck 10”, a gadget for women, she is a lesbian and in love with Jeanne, another artificial intelligence. Mara characterizes herself as a “woman with balls,” and in sexual life with Porfiry she often behaves rudely: thus, having learned that Porfiry is “draining” part of the information to the police department, Mara virtually penetrates him using a telephone box.

Porfiry, compared with Mara, despite all the references to Porfiry Petrovich of Dostoevsky (the cunning investigator from *Crime and Punishment* (1866) who called the bluff of Raskolnikov) looks very kind, defenseless, and powerless. He looks like a kind innocent child: he is interested in the world around him, asks himself philosophical questions, remains faithful to the Police Department, and believes Mara, believes that she is in love with him. He is easy to fool. He arouses the sympathy of readers, while Mara and Jeanne seem heartless villains who are only interested in their own benefit.

In the novel it is not clear who owns power in this society, but something else is completely clear: an empowered woman is a monster who will spare no one in her path, who can only destroy and arrange falsifications. Such a “woman with balls” is worse than an empowered man, because she is deprived of morality, compassion, and at the same time, not as smart as she

wants to appear. Such a woman will bring only evil to an ordinary man and doom him to perdition.

The stories of the heroines of *Secret Views of Mount Fuji* are more complex and ambiguous. It was for the images of women in this novel that Pelevin was criticized for his misogyny.

The *Secret Views of Mount Fuji* is about our time. The main narrators, on whose behalf the narration is being conducted, are two, Fedya and Tanya. They were classmates at school, Fedya was in love with the beautiful Tanya, but she preferred a plain-looking classmate to older men, mostly bandits, since the youth of both heroes fell on perestroika. Tanya was a beauty from a poor family, she had nothing but appearance; and with the help of beauty and youth she managed to successfully use her wealthy male patrons to receive money and expensive things from them. However, by the age of 30, Tanya had lost a significant part of her beauty, gained weight, and remained alone. Her last patron gave her a small apartment, and in it Tanya began to eke out a miserable existence, working as an accountant in some small company.

One day, a case drives her with Fedya, who became an oligarch and, for fun, bought himself a course of immersion in Buddhist nirvana. To achieve nirvana, Fedya must get rid of regrets, and so he meets his former love, Tanya, to whom he still has a youthful feeling, sees her ugly and fat, aged, and, grinning, leaves, thereby humiliating Tanya to the core.

Later, the humiliated Tanya meets with a sect of sinister feminists who dedicate her to their cult and talk about the secret weapons that any woman owns. This is the so-called "pussy hook", with the help of which a woman hooks a man who has attracted

her and, applying her powerful weapon to him - an illusion, wraps herself from him whatever she wants.

In the end of the novel, Fedya, who began to have problems with uncontrolled immersion in Nirvana, voluntarily submits to Tanya, who catches him with her "pussy hook," and only with the illusions that Tanya uses on him, he manages to remain involved in this world.

In the novel, the ideologist of the secret feminist movement, whose adherents draw strength from the chthonic lizard deity sleeping in the vent of Mt. Fuji, acts as a half-woman-half-man, another "woman with balls". In fact, this is an aggressively pumped man with polyorchism (four testicles), introducing himself as a feminist named Giselle and considering himself an alchemical woman (that is, in the form of this grotesque character, the ideal of the Russian woman that existed even before the revolution is embodied: "I am a plowman, I am a bull, I am a woman and a man"). She looks even more masculine than Mara, and her views are even more radical: men are not people, but just prey, a way for a woman to get the benefits she needs, however, unlike an ordinary woman, emancipated woman do not need to shave her legs and armpits. Thus, I emphasize, in the modern public consciousness in Russia the image of the feminist appears. Not a very attractive image, isn't it?

In a world of novel which is similar to modern Russia, all power belongs to a man, a woman can get some benefits from men only while she is young and beautiful, then she will not be needed. Critics accuse Pelevin of misogyny for the fact that in this novel he portrayed men and women differently. Men have all the power and privileges, they are richer than women spiritually,

they (at least, at first) strive for a new experience, for spiritual enrichment. Women are powerless, stupid, they see their own benefit only in manipulating, deceiving men, the highest happiness for them is to get themselves a rich oligarch and "milk" him.

It is possible that Pelevin does not like women, after all, he is a male writer, writing for men, which is by no means unusual for Russian literature.

### Conclusion

In two of his later novels, Pelevin portrays the image of the "sinister feminist": a brutal, cold-blooded, ambitious woman, in whose character traditional masculine features are clearly visible. Such a woman in the grotesque world of his novels is physically half male because testicles are artificially implanted in her body. The image of such a woman echoes the so-called "popular" image of a strong and independent woman, and the literary roots of this image can be seen in the saying: "I am a plowman, I am a bull, I am a woman and a man." A similar kind of feminist (or rather anti-feminist) agenda is characteristic of the late work of Pelevin, whom literary critics such as G. Yuzefovich, D. Bykov, and others call the "translator" of meanings in modern Russian media space. He captures these meanings, processes them and gives them to his readers in a grotesque ironic postmodernist manner.

Russian feminists charge Pelevin misogyny for the fact that in his novels he portrays feminists exclusively in a negative way. In her review of *Secret Views of Mount Fuji*, G. Yuzefovich

claims that "the emancipation of women, the symmetrical weakening of men and the erosion of traditional gender roles (or, rather, their essential transformation while maintaining the formal status quo) in his eyes openly becomes an event sinister, jeopardizing the slightest possibility of salvation"<sup>17</sup>. The critic reproaches the author for satirizing the values and ideals of modern feminism and attributes this to the personal author's tendency to "not love" women. In our opinion, however, it is not a matter of Pelevin's personal preferences, but that, "broadcasting" the topical agenda in his novels, he voluntarily or involuntarily informs his readers about the problems and fears that exist in modern Russian media space. The media forms the opinion of ordinary Russian people that feminism is an attribute of Western democratic discourse, which should be disassociated since the West and the USA appear in modern Russian media as agents not friendly to Russia. Democratic discourse and feminist propaganda can be strong, can be dangerous - a kind of "woman with balls", so they can not be trusted. Thus, ordinary Russian people are formed by the conviction that just like the "sinister feminists" manipulate the minds of men in their favor, the democratic West also manipulates the minds of ordinary Russian citizens in order to benefit from them. Modern media create a fear of liberal values and feminism, and Pelevin observes these trends and tries to warn his readers about this.

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<sup>1</sup> Amnuel, Paul, "There is no hard SF in Modern Russia". 17 July 2018, <https://knife.media/amnuel-interview>. Accessed 20 December 2019.

<sup>2</sup> Shihman, Irina, interview with D. Bykov, 18 November 2019, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6oDmYa7tPZA>. Accessed 20 December 2019.



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<sup>3</sup> Chigirinskaya Olga, a blog, 24 March 2012, <https://morreth.livejournal.com/2012/03/24>. Accessed 20 December 2019.

<sup>4</sup> Yuzefovich, Galina, "Secret Views of Mount Fuji: an open spiritual sermon", review, 20 September 2018, <https://meduza.io/feature/2018/09/20/taynye-vidy-na-goru-fudzi-otkrovennaya-duhovnaya-propoved>. Accessed 20 December 2019.

<sup>5</sup> Milchin, Konstantin, "From science fiction's writer to grumbling: how Victor Pelevin changed", 22 November 2017, <https://news.tut.by/culture/569852.html>. Accessed 20 December 2019.

<sup>6</sup> His early works were attributed to the genre of the so-called "turborealism".

<sup>7</sup> Critics called it "the first Zen Buddhist novel in Russian". The writer himself called it "the first novel which takes place in an absolute vacuum". In 1997 the novel won Russian *Strannik Award* for science fiction, and in 2001 it was shortlisted for the International *Dublin Literary Award*.

<sup>8</sup> Not without reason, many critics (Bykov D., Milchin K. and so on) believe that in his *Generation "P"* he predicted a public request for the emergence of such a political figure as President Putin, not to mention the fact that he created a completely viable theory that describes a modern consumer society).

<sup>9</sup> Milchin, Konstantin, "From science fiction's writer to grumbling: how Victor Pelevin changed", 22 November 2017, <https://news.tut.by/culture/569852.html>. Accessed 20 December 2019.

<sup>10</sup> <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zB77-xfAMZc&t=379s> (2018.11.11).

<sup>11</sup> It has been suggested that the writer does not exist and Pelevin is actually a code name for a group of authors or even a computer.

<sup>12</sup> Shihman, Irina, interview with D. Bykov, 18 November 2019, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6oDmYa7tPZA>. Accessed 20 December 2019.

<sup>13</sup> Men willingly describe their love affairs, for example, in popular TV shows, *Comedy Club*, and create a positive image of a "real" man, macho, winner, successful female hunter, while the image of a free woman, unmarried and changing partners, still demonized and negative, such a woman is necessarily a "whore".

<sup>14</sup> Yuzefovich, Galina, "Secret Views of Mount Fuji: an open spiritual sermon", review, 20 November 2018, <https://meduza.io/feature/2018/09/20/taynye-vidy-na-goru-fudzi-otkrovennaya-duhovnaya-propoved>. Accessed 20 December 2019.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid.