

## REALITY THROUGH PHANTASM: A STUDY OF LUDMILLA PETRUSHEVSKAYA'S FANTASTICAL TALES

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### Abstract

Ludmilla Petrushevskaya is one of the most read and revered contemporary writers in Russia. Her writings were banned in Soviet Union, because they were considered too dark and melancholic. Her works got published only after the onset of Glasnost in late 80s. Her work has been lauded by critics and readers alike not only in Russia but in the west also. Petrushevskaya's oeuvre ranges from fairy tales to drama and novel. Her works have achieved classic stature. Present paper is an attempt to study five fantastical tales "The Father", "The Cabbage-Patch Mother", "Marilena's Secret", "The Old Monk's Testament", and "The Black Coat" from the book "There Once Lived a Woman Who Tried to Kill Her Neighbour's child": Scary Fairy Tales." These tales of Petrushevskaya are considered to be fantastical but straddle the line between reality and fantastic. These tales are absurd, appallingly bleak and full of anarchy. The tales I have chosen for the study, are from the fourth group; "Fairy Tales". These Tales are also bleak and grotesque but the protagonists of these tales try to subvert their fate and manage to snatch some light from flurry of positivity in darkness. Petrushevskaya with unpalatable rawness depicts reality of everyday life of soviet and post-soviet people.

Ludmilla Petrushevskaya is one of the most read and revered contemporary writers in Russia. She started writing in mid 1960s; however, her works got published only after the onset of Glasnost in late 1980s. Her writings were banned in the Soviet Union, because they were considered too dark and melancholic. Major publishing houses refused to publish her works because of its dark content and advised her to come up with happier endings<sup>i</sup>. Ludmilla Petrushevskaya is known as a writer who discusses the most prevalent and uncomfortable aspects of life, which often go unnoticed, such as motherhood, abortion, marriage, divorce, domestic life, and alcoholism. Petrushevskaya is considered the leader of the neo-naturalistic wave in contemporary Russian literature. "Chernukha" (Чернуха- slang term for Neo-Naturalism) is particularly used for Petrushevskaya's writings.<sup>ii</sup> In contemporary literary studies, this term is used for any representational piece of art in which the darkest, bleakest aspects of human life are discussed<sup>iii</sup>. In her major works "Immortal love", "Our group", "Time: Night", Petrushevskaya particularly focuses on the tragedies of everyday life. Her stories and plays predominantly have women as main characters and the main theme is the fate of women. Petrushevskaya is often criticised for tragic endings of her works. Nonetheless, in this following paper I have chosen to study tales with happy endings. The paper is an attempt to study five fantastical tales -"The Father", "The Cabbage-Patch Mother", "Marilena's Secret", "The Old Monk's Testament", and "The Black Coat" from the book "There Once Lived a Woman Who

Tried to Kill Her Neighbour's child": Scary Fairy Tales." There are nineteen short stories in this collection, which are divided into four groups: "Song of the Eastern Slavs", "Allegories", "Requiems" and "Fairy Tales". The tales I chose to study are from the fourth group; "Fairy Tales". These Tales are also dark and bleak but the protagonists of these tales try to subvert their fate and manage to snatch some light from the flurry of positivity in the darkness.

Fairy tales and parables have a long and rich history in Russian literature. Fairy tales were written by most prominent figures of Russian literature: Pushkin, Tolstoy and Gorky. In the early Soviet Union fairy tales, magic and fantasy were labelled idealistic. E.V. Yanovskaya, in her article "Does the proletarian child need the fairy tales?", argued that the proletarian child does not need the fairy tales, because fairy tales belong to bourgeois children's literature. (Stories for Little, Jane Ann Miller, 1999) A great support in favour of the aforementioned genre came from Maxim Gorky. In 1934, at the first Soviet Congress of the Writers' Union, Maxim Gorky gave a speech about far-reaching implications of folklore on the working people as it belongs to first and foremost the working people. The revival of the folklore and the fairytale started and later on, it was consciously used as a propaganda tool for the advancement of communism (Jack Zipes, Greenhill Pauline, and Johnston Magnus Kendra, *Fairy-Tale Films Beyond Disney: International Perspectives*, 2000). Village prose writers such as Shukshin and Rasputin have also written fairy tales. In contemporary Russian literature an increased interest has been observed in the works of the fairy-tale genre. Many contemporary writers like L. Ulitskaya (*"История про кота Игнасия, трубочиста Федю и Одинокую мышь"*), Fazil Iskander (*"Кролики и удавы"*), Eduard Uspensky (*"Вниз по волшебной реке"*), A. Usachev (*"Жили-были ежики"*) have written and are writing fairy-tales. Unlike traditional fairy tales, contemporary Russian fairy tales are complex; the aesthetic construct and the social content have changed in contemporary Russian fairy tales, which need to be studied further.

*"There Once Lived a Woman Who Tried to Kill Her Neighbour's child": Scary Fairy Tales*" is not only an excessively dark and scary title but also antithetical to the general perception of fairy-tales. The selection and categorisation of the tales under different labels have significant importance. Perhaps it is because of the general perception about fairy-tales that these stories taken for my study fall under the labels of "fairy-tales", since despite the dark and scary narratives, all these tales have happy-endings. In her book "Fairy Tales: A New History", Ruth B. Bottigheimer separates fairy tale from folk tales and tales of magic. They differ in terms of structure, plot of narrative and characters. Folk tales are tales about the life and belief system of its audience. Unlike fairy tales, characters in folk tales are from the familiar world of the audience. While fairy tales necessarily have to have happy endings, folk tales may or may not have happy endings. Fairy tales and folk tales can be tales of magic but all the tales of magic cannot be fairy tales or folk tales. Petrushevskaya's tales blur this thin line between folk tales and fairy tales, where tragedies of everyday life of common people are dealt with in fairy tale style.

In the first tale "The Father" from the group "Fairy tales" a man is desperately searching for his "unknown" children. Nobody could help the man. Once he helps an old lady to carry her bags to her apartments. The old lady tells her to take the local train to the fortieth kilometre. He takes the train to the fortieth kilometre, reaches an abandoned hut in the dark woods. There he meets an unknown child, who comes to the hut in the middle of the winter night. He dresses him properly, feeds him bread, and puts him to bed. He puts down his warm coat for the child to lie on, caresses the child. Soon after, a barefooted woman comes to the hut searching for her child. It was her child. The man gives her the child and leaves the hut and reaches another hut which is exactly the same. He searches the room and finds kids' clothes, boots etc. While comforting

himself in woollen clothes, he realises that the mother and child need these clothes and boots, more than him. He realises that he has “all that they need” and runs towards the other hut where he left the mother and child. He takes the child in his arms and the mother “obediently, closing the eyes, gave him her burden and together they walked back to their hut.”

This is not a conventional fairy tale where a mother is searching for her child in the dark woods and a prince or a fairy comes to help her. Nonetheless, despite a few alterations, the basic narrative structure remains intact. The old lady, whom the man helped, carrying her bags to her apartment, sent both, the man and the woman, to the fortieth kilometre, which is a train-station in the middle of nowhere, on the edge of the jungle. Then there is a house in the middle of the jungle. In a traditional setting it would appear as a trap, setup by a witch, but here everything turns just opposite. Here the old lady played the role of a good fairy. She knew that they needed each other. The child needed a father, the mother needed someone to share her responsibilities and the man was also longing for children; finally with the help of the old lady they found each other. The tale ends very much like a conventional fairy tale, where in the end everything is set right with a happy ending.

The second tale from the group fairy tales is titled “The Cabbage Patch-Mother”. In this tale a woman has a “tiny little daughter named Droplet” whom she carries in a matchbox. The woman carries her daughter to the doctor, because for almost two years she has not grown at all. The doctor examines the tiny daughter with a magnifying glass. As the tale progresses we come to know about the previous failed pregnancies of the woman. This tale is basically about a woman’s fears during pregnancy. Another tale “Marilena’s Secret” from the same group is a fairy tale about a fat woman, who was two different women, Maria and Lena, but now conjoined into one fat giant woman by a magician because they rejected his proposal of love. The supremely fat Marilena gets a job in a circus and gains immense popularity. She starts endorsing products of clothing and toothpaste companies. As she becomes rich and famous her secretary tries to take advantage of her by sending her to a dieting and cosmetic surgery clinic, where she almost got killed by thugs. The tale ends on a happy note where Maria and Lena outsmart the wicked secretary, break the spell of the wizard and free themselves from one fat body. Both the tales “The Cabbage-Patch Mother” and “Marilena’s Secret” contain supernatural elements. These fantastic tales of Petrushevskaya straddle the line between reality and the fantastic. Petrushevskaya uses fantasy as a tool to reveal the unsettling realities of modern times, such as plastic surgery, dieting clinics etc. which often go unnoticed by many. The tale “The Old Monk’s Testament” is devoid of any magic, spell or supernatural elements. This tale is about an old monk who sacrifices his life to secure the life of others. The old monk, like a good fairy in traditional fairy tales, comes to the rescue of the people of an impoverished town. The final story of the anthology is “The Black Coat”. It is a chilling tale about a girl who tries to commit suicide and in the state of amnesia she experiences that she is in the limbo between life and death. She finds herself in a dark empty apartment, where she meets another woman, who also tried to commit suicide and now she is also in the limbo between life and death. Both of them have a few matches and they must find a way out before the matches run out. The matches are a symbol of reasons to live. Living is an option here. The girl lit all her remaining matches at once and decides to live on.

In Petrushevskaya’s fairy tales we can see the echoes of traditional fairy tales; the twin ballerina sisters cursed by the magician, a tiny droplet-baby in a cabbage, carried in a matchbox, all of these figures are very familiar to established fairy tales. All the tales open with sentences, which are very typical of established fairy tales, such as “There once lived a father who could not

find his children”, “There once lived a woman who had a tiny little daughter”, “There lived an old monk who climbed up to ...” All the tales have happy endings, the plot structure is also very familiar to the traditional fairy tales, where some kind of crisis occurs in the life of the hero/heroine, the prince, a fairy comes and solves the problem, and the hero/heroine live happily ever after. The writer used all the tropes of a traditional fairy tale but with a twist. Unlike traditional fairy tales, where the beautiful Vasilisa is tortured by her stepmother, stepsisters and sent to Baba Yaga or the princess who is stowed away in towers, these tales feature modern constrictions and dangers, such as mental instability, disease, loneliness, suicide, abortion, parenthood, poverty etc.

One of the distinctive features of Petrushevskaya’s tales are that her protagonists are often nameless; a woman, a man, a monk, a girl. These nameless protagonists and places facilitate the narrative in depicting the crisis on a collective level, which broadens the chronotope of the crisis, for example the tale “The Black Coat” is not just about one girl, trying to commit suicide; there are many more like her, abandoned, divorced, depressed, who are not able to accept the harsh reality of life. In the end of the tale the writer comments “On the other side of the city a woman vomited up a handful of pills and washed her mouth thoroughly.”<sup>iv</sup> The protagonists of Petrushevskaya are not individuals but they are types and have collective identity. Petrushevskaya’s fairy tales have an interwoven narrative of fantasy and contemporary reality, which not only provides them great depth but also, at the same time, complicates them. Her work represents the further development in the field of fairy-tales as a genre.

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<sup>i</sup> See complete interview of ludmilla petrushevskaya, retrieved from <https://www.kirkusreviews.com>. 22/10/2015

<sup>ii</sup> <http://www.pitt.edu/~slavic/sisc/SISC1/docs/graham.pdf>

<sup>iii</sup> <http://www.pitt.edu/~slavic/sisc/SISC1/docs/graham.pdf>

<sup>iv</sup> Petrushevskaya, L. S., “*There Once Lived a Woman Who Tried to Kill Her Neighbour’s Baby: Scary Fairy Tales*”, Penguin, 2009, pp. 194