

Obvious and Subtle Misogyny in Russian Fairy Tales
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As was discussed in class, the idea of feminism is that it is a type of political stance that seeks to uncover and debunk patriarchal prejudices and social imbalances. The uncovering refers to subtle prejudices whereas the debunking refers to showing what they really mean. The idea of feminism also strives to expose the ways in which men make sure they are always in the high-status roles in society.

There are obvious ways in which misogyny is expressed in Russian folk literature, such as the idea of the “Bad Wives Tales”. The name alone would suggest this. Bad wives are those that do not fit the perfect mold of being quiet and obedient of their husbands. For not fitting into this mold, the wife will be punished by the husband, usually by being beaten until she is ready to obey him. On the other hand, there are many instances in which the misogyny is more subtle. One such idea for this kind of misogyny was suggested by Marcia K. Lieberman. This idea was called “Life as a Beauty Contest”. The idea basically suggests that females in fairy tales are rewarded for being beautiful. If a character is described as having beauty, they will be a good character. However, if the character is unattractive or ugly, the character will automatically be bad, evil, or ill tempered. Beauty is also rewarded in fairy tales. The beautiful maiden will be rewarded inevitably in the end of the story, not for what she has accomplished, but for the mere fact that she is beautiful. The reward for her beauty will most likely be that of the prince whom she will marry. The ideas held by Lieberman are also held by many other feminist critics of Russian literature. Although one of these themes is not quite as obvious as the other, both themes are equally as degrading from a feminist perspective.

“The Cossack gave her a good thrashing and left, and thereafter the woman no longer wanted to be a mayorness, and obeyed her husband” (Afnas’ev p. 141).

This ending, from the short story *The Mayorness* is just one incidence displaying a common theme found in Russian fairy tales. This theme is known as the “Bad Wives Tale”. It is quite obvious that these kinds of stories are very blatant with their misogyny. Even the title that is given to these tales, *bad wives*, makes it very obvious that these kinds of stories would be very degrading from a feminist perspective. Stories such as the one mentioned above served as an avenue through which the message could be sent to wives in society to obey their husbands or to suffer the consequences. The recurring theme of these tales features the disobedient, ambitious wife who ends up getting punished at the end of the tale for not following her husband’s wishes. There are countless examples of these types of tales in Russian fairy tale literature. Five examples of these such tales are *The Mayorness*, mentioned above, *The Old Woman who Ran Away*, *The Stubborn Wife*, *How a Husband Weaned his Wife from Fairy Tales*, and *Husband and Wife*.

In an excerpt from ‘*Some Day My Prince Will Come*’: *A Female Acculturation through the Fairy Tale*, Marcia Lieberman discussed the idea of powerful women in fairy tales. Whereas men are celebrated for having traits such as ambition, and a strong-will women that have these characteristics are shut down. She mentions, “...the counterpart of the energetic, aspiring boy is the scheming, ambitious woman” (197). The wives featured in “Bad Wives Tales” have usually not done anything remotely worthy of the punishment that they receive. More often than not, they are just women who are trying to accomplish something greater than the everyday womanly duties of cooking, sewing, and raising children. Some of the characteristics found in these fairy tales to describe these so-called “bad wives” are words such as disobedient, ungrateful, bossy, defiant, stubborn,

and sneaky. A quality such as defiance that may be perceived as a good trait in a man is looked down upon when it is found in a woman.

In the first story, *The Mayor's Wife*, the bad wife is described as an “ambitious woman”. Her husband is a member of the village council which needs to elect a new mayor. The wife, thinking she would be interested in holding such a position in her town, mentions to her husband that she would like to be elected. The story states that the husband then goes to the council, and in parenthesis the story reads, “his wife was a bad one and he wanted to teach her a lesson”. The only things that the wife did was try to move up in her society and make something better of herself. For this, she is considered a “bad wife” in need of punishment. The story continues with the wife beginning her rule as the mayor where she “drank wine with the peasants and took bribes.” The problem came whenever the Cossack was coming to collect taxes from the mayor. At that point, the wife was completely helpless and did not know what to do. So she turned to her husband who hides her knowing the Cossack would find her and beat her. After this, the story ends with the wife learning her lesson and never disobeying her husband again (141).

In the second story, *The Old Women who Ran Away*, an old man and old woman are sitting and talking when the old woman shares to him that she would like to have a son and a daughter. After this she says that she would like to have a party where she would invite her family, but not her husband's family. Of course, the husband becomes very angry at this, and when she still does not listen to him after several demands to invite his family and not her family, the old man goes on to “drag his wife by her braid”. Finally, he pushes her off the stove. When the old man leaves, the old woman decides that she is

going to run away. While preparing for this, the old man discovers her secret and hides in one of the bags that she is taking with her. When she wants to eat food from her bag, she discovers her husband. She continues on to beg him to forgive her and when he finally does, they return home (182-183).

In the third example, a short anecdote entitled, *The Stubborn Wife*, a peasant had just shaved his beard off and went to show his wife. When he tells her that he had shaved it off, she argues with him saying that he had clipped it, not shaved it. The two of them argue back and forth until finally the husband tells her that he will drown her if she does not agree with him. When she continues to disagree, he takes her to the water and pushes her head in. He asks her one more time, and because her head is in the water and she cannot speak, she instead makes the motion with her fingers like a pair of scissors (280). A spouse disagreeing about whether or not a beard was shaved or clipped is hardly a reason to get into an argument let alone reason to murder them!

The fourth story, *How a Husband Weaned His Wife from Fairy Tales* tells of an innkeeper whose wife loved fairy tales so much that she would not let anyone stay at their inn unless they could tell her a story. This angers the husband because it is hurting his business, so when an old man comes to stay at the inn he asks the man if he can tell stories. The old man tells him that he can, and so they go to see his wife. Before he begins, the old man tells her that under no circumstances can she interrupt him when he is telling the stories. She agrees, but when the man starts to tell the stories, he just repeats the same sentence over and over again. She finally interrupts the man and he is very angered. The husband, who is furious with his disobedient wife, jumps down and begins

to beat his wife. He beat her so much that after that, she began to hate stories and would not listen to them anymore (308).

The last story is called *Husband and Wife*. This story begins by describing the wife as “ingenious”. Every time her husband would leave, she would invite people over and have huge parties. Whenever her husband would return home, his wife would be very tired and achy. He determined that she had to be sick. Therefore, he went to get medicine and came upon a soldier whom he told the story to. When the husband goes back home and spies on her, he discovers her secret. The soldier and husband are so angry that they decide to trick her. The soldier brings straw into the house that he husband is wrapped up in. When the husband is in the house, he bursts out of the ropes, grabs the whip and begins to “belabor” his wife. It ends by saying he “cured her in no time” (369).

In addition to “Bad Wives Tales”, which are obvious examples of misogyny from a feminist perspective, there is the idea of tales in which the misogyny is a subtler theme. One such example of this type of theme was introduced by Marcia Lieberman. This is the idea of “Life as a Beauty Contest.” As discussed in lecture, the basic principle behind her idea was that beautiful equaled traits such as being meek and good-tempered, whereas ugly equaled traits such as being ill-tempered, ambitious and conniving. She claims that in these fairy tales, there are never any girls who are plain and good-tempered. Also, in a fairy tale, if a woman is beautiful, it is her ticket to being chosen and getting rich. The beautiful woman in these stories is always rewarded without even having to do anything. Lieberman states an example where there are several daughters in a family. The prettiest daughter will inevitably be singled out from the rest, regardless of what she has or has not

accomplished, and she will be chosen to receive the reward, which is usually to marry the prince (187). Marcia describes the problem with this idea in children is that a child will begin to associate beauty with being nice or good. The child may learn to become suspicious of ugly girls because they are usually portrayed in fairy tales as being mean and/or jealous (188).

In chapter six of *Myth and Fairy Tale in Contemporary Women's Fiction*, the idea of “beauty myths” is discussed. The idea stems from the those of Marcia Lieberman in that the focus of women in stories is not what she has accomplished, but what she looks like (97). Marina Warner suggests that beauty is a “currency forged for the benefit of those in power” (98). Whereas men in history are named for what they accomplish, women are left anonymous and instead are described as the “beautiful” woman. An example used is a story called *The Tale of the Voice*. In the story, the heroine dresses up in a beautiful, seductive disguise in order to get her man. It is also interesting that in the story an important detail is that the woman did not speak (98). The story only concentrated on her beauty. From her beauty, she obtained her prize. In the book, another idea discussed is that even in the fourteenth century, there were distinctions made between beauty and ugliness/evil. This also suggests that beauty is paralleled with power (99).

In Sharon Rose Wilson's, *Margaret Atwood's Fairy-Tale Sexual Politics*, she cites Bottigheimer's quote that, “The single most pervasive image evoked in the popular mind by the term *fairy tale* is probably that of a maiden in distress leaning from a tower window and searching the horizon for a rescuer” (137). She discusses this as the embodiment of the passive woman in fairy tales. This also goes along with the ideas of

the other feminists cited in that women in fairy tales usually have only one job in life: to be beautiful and wait to be rescued by their prince. Instead of doing anything, they are supposed to just look good and wait to be saved. When they are saved, their reward for their beauty is to marry the prince who saved them.

In virtually every Russian fairy tale, the most beautiful girl in the story will be the one that gets the prize in the end. This prize is usually to marry the prince. An example of this kind of tale is the story, *Dawn, Evening, and Midnight*. The story begins telling of a king who has three daughters. Instead of telling about any accomplishments that the girls have made, the story describes them as having “surpassing beauty” (457). Because the girls are so beautiful, they have the affection of their father the King, who guards them more than anything that he owns. The story tells that the father is so worried about their beauty that he built a special underground chamber to protect them from rough winds and the scorching sun. The daughters did not want to be locked up inside anymore, so they beg their father to let them out. As soon as the daughters go out to explore, the wind blows and carries them off. This suggests from a feminist perspective that the girls would be better off doing nothing but sit around and be beautiful. As soon as they wanted to leave the house and actually do something, there was trouble. The king sends for help from all of his councilors and boyars. He tells them that whoever can find the princesses will get to have whichever one he wants as a reward. When they cannot find the princess, the King sends a message to all the people that he needs help to find his daughters. In town, there is a woman who has three sons. The three sons set out to find the princesses. Throughout the story, the men are described as going on a long journey to find the princesses. They are brave and come across many obstacles. The men are

rewarded for what they do. On the other hand, the women in the story are described only for their beauty. Throughout the story they are waiting to be rescued by someone. Their prize for being beautiful is that many brave men will go out in search to find them. Once each princess is rescued from each separate castle, they are overjoyed and return home to the King. In the end of the story, each of the princesses is married to each of the three sons that rescued them (457-463). The girls in the story accomplished absolutely nothing, but were rescued and got their reward of marrying the brave young men that saved them from death. The majority of the story, like most Russian fairy tales, centers on the activity of the men. The women in the story, on the other hand, are introduced in the beginning as being beautiful. Whenever they try to do anything aside from just being beautiful, they run into trouble. Then, for the remainder of the story, they are absent while they are waiting for their heroes to come and rescue them. From a feminist perspective, it would be absolutely definite that if the daughters in the story were unattractive, the story would never have gone the way it did. If a girl in a fairy tale is described as being unattractive, it is indefinite that she will play a role as an evil person. Never will a princess be described as a plain-looking girl who is really intelligent that needs to be rescued. If the daughters were not beautiful, they would have never been rescued.

There are countless examples in Russian folk literature that feminists would be offended with. The misogyny in these tales can be very obvious in some cases, such as the example of "The Bad Wives Tales." There are many examples of these types of tales, but five that were discussed were *The Mayorness*, *The Old Woman who Ran Away*, *The Stubborn Wife*, *How a Husband Weaned his Wife from Fairy Tales*, and *Husband and*

Wife. Although many tales are very blatant with their misogyny, many tales are sneakier and have underlying meanings behind them. One such example is that of “Life as a Beauty Contest.” This idea is one in which the most beautiful characters in the fairy tale are the ones who receive the reward in the end. Beauty is associated with being good, and ugliness is associated with being evil. These ideas were brought about by Marcia Lieberman but similar views were also discussed by women found in the *Myth and Fairy Tale in Contemporary Women’s Fiction*, *Fairy-Tale Sexual Politics*, and *Metaphor, Fairy-Tale and the Feminine of the Text*.

Feminism is concerned with uncovering these and other types of themes found in Russian literature. These types of themes where the women hold less power than the men are prime examples of the patriarchal prejudices that they try to uncover and debunk. Feminists strive to change these kinds of views and to introduce these ideas to the world that fairy tales are not always what they seem to be. Sometimes they need to be looked at a little deeper.