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HIST 329

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Generations of Transcending Literature, Stalin's Contest

Vasily Aksyonov's *Generations of Winter* uses each member of a fictional family to represent different aspects of the real historical Stalinism. Through their relationships, voice, and motives, each individual Gradov is designed to symbolize something far larger than an individual's experience. Nina Gradov embodies the metaphorical emergence of a new Soviet generation of the intelligentsia, different from their pre-revolutionary ancestors. Aksyonov uses poetry through her as the voice of the young intelligentsia developing a nuanced perspective extended from classic Russian literature and philosophy. Aksyonov presents Nina's poetry as the new intelligentsia's effort to preserve the Marxist dream—the dream of proletarian liberation from bourgeoisie exploitation—against the suppression of that dream by a regime of self-proclaimed Marxism. In doing so, she represents a tie between the suppressed dreams of Marxist liberation and classic Russian literary-philosophic thought.

Nina's voice preserves Marxist ideations that the proletariats gave rise to during the first revolutions—the same ideas that overthrew oppressive powers-- the Russian people are muffled and redesigned by the Soviet regime. The Soviet Union suppressed the ideations of intelligentsia on the grounds that they did not provide the state with the stability that would be needed to maintain the regime. Criticisms of political thought

produced by the state were ousted by the Soviet regime; Aksyonov is an author who reveals the voices of others whom have criticized the Russian Empire through Nina, who mobilizes revolutionary philosophical culture back into the Soviet Union.

Nina's presence is made known as the 18-year-old who has a desire for acquiring, learning the political ideologies in literature. Her namesake is after a character in Russian playwright Anton Chekov's play, *the Seagull*, in which 'Nina' is the daughter of a wealthy landowner, a playwright, and romantically interested in writers whom influence the political motives represented in her work. Aksyonov takes the Nina from *the Seagull* and parallels her with his own Nina Gradov, who orchestrates her own politically-charged play, *Family Revolution* within *Generations of Winter*. The allusion to *the Seagull* as a metaphor for liberation makes its presence again when Nina is a part of the *Working Woman* firm and conversing with another employee about how the "public woman" has transcended from social slavery through the arts. Both interlocuters write for *International Literature* recognize that *the Seagull* metaphors, ironic speech, should remain in the past—that it lacks the brash nature needed for heroic times ahead to revolutionize the Stalin regime (207-210).

Aksyonov introduces Nina in conversation with her brother Kirill, who are both students of higher education. Contrasted, the Gradov brother is depicted as apathetic, adverse to the "old Lenin" ways of the Soviet Union, retorting Nina's poetry on Lenin's NEP with angry shrugged shoulders. The younger sister is introduced with the poet Mayakovski, a revolutionary whose art supported the Communist Party during the

Russian Civil War, deemed a Russian Futurist from whom she defines herself after becoming a published writer (29, 210).

She represented the contrast between her ideals and the Stalinist regime by applying her revolutionary ideologies to the *Family Revolution* play; she is enthused by the Blue Shirt's liberal, pro-Bolshevik ideology behind a "spirit of rebellion" that did not appear genuine in the Georgian-influenced performance (30-31). Aksyonov differentiates Nina's distasteful view of the Stalinist Soviet regime by the influx of ethnic Georgian politicians; in several instances, Aksyonov uses "Georgian" to describe something synonymously disingenuous, like a smile (83). Her relations to literature and Lennist-Marxist political philosophy challenge, at heart, the Georgian representation in her work. Nina's inherited roots of the endogenic Russian Revolution challenges the Georgian exogenic representations of Marxism in the current Stalin regime as a beastly fire-breathing dragon with no resemblance of a *Homo sapien* (245).

Indeed, the Marxist political philosophies have influenced Nina's rhetoric and interests. Aksyonov later presents Nina reading *Novy Mir* (New World/Peace) derived from the Leninist Soviet Union that guided the Communist Party (CPSU)(59-60). The paper is known for its criticism of the Stalinist regime, in which Nina is reading the scandalous Pilnyank's *Tale of the Unextinguished Moon*. Pilnyank's work focuses on the paternal protagonist under Stalin<sup>1</sup> ordered to assassinate a CPSU leader from the former regime. Inspired by Pilnyank, Nina sees her father in the moonlight alluding a parallel to

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<sup>1</sup> Stalin is not explicitly stated to be the orderer of the assassin in *The Tale of the Unextinguished Moon*. The orders in the work are known as "the three who lead." The book is later considered to be banned for such an accusation, as is the later read work of Pasternak's *Spektorsky*.

the operation her father conducted at work and the assassin in *the Tale of the Unextinguished Moon*; she questions her suppressed romanticism of the former regime, “not living the way [she] should, doing everything wrong. . . ashamed of the poetry [she] likes, honest with herself and admit that [she’s] bored with the Party cell. . .”(59). Before Nina falls asleep with thoughts of revolution and concludes that her thoughts are validated by the sound of her parents’ lovemaking, coincidentally resembles Pilnyak’s remark that Russian revolution smells of sexual organs.

Pilnyak’s work was also published in a Bolshevik journal, *Red Virgin Soil* (*Krasnaya Nov*), in which Nina also was published for her short stanza of Odysseus, foretelling of a future to come (80). The trumpet of the Iliad that signaled the onset of the Trojan War for Odysseus-- similarly Nina leaves for Red Square and meets her conflict, her war. Or, the night return home only recognized by the other dog Pythagoras, parallel to the Odyssey after Athena disguised Odysseus as a poor person (lower class proletariat) to return home, only the dog and Mandelstam recognized her where others (Savva) have fled from interest (87, 136). She is wholeheartedly influenced by the philosophies of the old intelligentsia, of Greek and Marxists of the Russian Revolutions, it has begun to make her presence known to the OGPU and family. Kirill is questioned after discovering Nina’s poem and asked if he has found love, as if Nina’s love were found in the romance of intelligentsia, pursued after reading Pilnyak, and verified with Mandelstam (121, 138). Nina’s father is influenced by her literary success in modern politics; he is found by her, asleep, with a copy of the same edition of *Novy Mir* in his hand turned to *the Tale of the Unextinguished Moon*.

Nina has developed into the identity she fought for; she has mobilized her beliefs from philosophers of the Russian revolutions into a modern woman. The statue on Pushkin square reminds her that literature transcends generations<sup>2</sup>, and she is the next generation of a Blue Shirt, a Futurist, and the trumpets of her Odysseyan fortress had called her (207-208). Nina's youthful humor influenced, or at least blended into, the Moscow intellectual circles that founded a confidence to the extent that humorous *khokhmas* overshadowed the terror and paranoia beset from the NKVD (240). *Khokhmas* are a novella lexeme derived from Alexander A. Zinoviev's idiolect. Although Zinoviev was born just after the revolution, he was exiled from the Soviet Union for publishing violent anti-Stalinist literature and philosophy in foreign states. Aksyonov displays Nina's relationships with scholars and philosophers over time as mutually influential and preserved through her writing.

Aksyonov does not limit Nina's intelligentsia scope to literature written by citizens of the Russian/Soviet state. Of course, classic Greek philosophy aforementioned has influenced Nina's writing. Other exogenic works have benefited Nina's relationships with foreign agents; understanding definitive cultures through literature, particularly Hemingway, has bridged the American-Russian relationship into the Great Patriotic War. Russian and American intelligentsia were also bridged linguistically; the French language has been a learned component of the intelligentsia Bourgeois in the Russian Empire and the European economic elite. Aksyonov shows a mutual comprehensibility and

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<sup>2</sup> Fun fact, the Church that's referenced in this paragraph, on the corner of Pushkin Square is the same one that I am a member of- I was especially touched. Anytime a place is mentioned, I can smell it.

immediate bond between Nina and Reston, the American national, one that leaves him longing for her their first departure (317-322). Aksyonov's instance between these characters represent the American infatuation of Russian exoticism and means of cultural cooperation through relatable intelligentsia. The emergence of French blends into the *khokhmas* when Nina is interviewed with *Izvestiya*, like *Pravda*, the official state newspaper (355). Intelligentsia is transcending higher accepted into the public realm.

Ultimately the attention of Nina's poetic work became the vice of her final resolution. Chekov's *the Seagull* returns in the song published in *Komsomalka*, the newspaper for the communist youth, through Nina's work, *Clouds in Blue*. Verses and stanzas of the song are direct allusions to the finale of *the Seagull*: For the third day in a row/ I look down the barrel of a cannon/ . . . we will meet, me and you/. Aksyonov blends the works to allude to the suicide of Chekov-Nina's brother and the romance of the pilot Nina Gradov meets. The song is intentionally recognized by a Chekov-looking general in her performance to support this allusion (502). In Nina's final moments, she first shows admiration of the Georgian accent, among soldiers, a sense of nostalgia—in an instance, at the front she is broken on flashes of impending death, assured by Nabokov's night of *the Execution*. Although it is unclear if she perished, making one last presence at a funeral, in her last attempt to find peace with Georgia, she cannot; even by love (Lyubov) her dreams are still impeded by a copper sky and marching heads, making her skin contract, shake and spasm, a tool of Stalin's regime (518).