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## A PSYCHOANAYTIC INTERPRETATION OF MARIA ARBATOVA'S "MY LAST LETTER TO A.'

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### Summary

This article focuses on the short story "Моё последнее письмо к А." ("My Last Letter to A.") by Maria Arbatova, a feminist who established her reputation as a pioneer of the women's movement in early post-Soviet Russia. She is also a successful novelist, short story writer, playwright, poet, journalist, talk show host, and politician.

In "My Last Letter to A." Arbatova, who received 'underground' training in psychoanalysis as a young adult, reintroduces to the Russian public psychoanalytic ideas that were suppressed during the Soviet period. She draws heavily from the teachings of Sigmund Freud, the founding 'father' of psychoanalysis, as well as from the ideas of Hélène Cixous, Luce Irigaray, and Julia Kristeva, who, grouped under the label 'French psychoanalytic feminism', are considered to be the 'mothers' of poststructuralist feminist theory. The objective of this essay is to examine to what extent these two branches of psychoanalysis have influenced Arbatova's writing of "My Last Letter to A." specifically and her views about feminism in general.

**Key Words:** Feminism, post-Soviet, psychoanalysis, literature.

### Introduction

During the early years of the Bolshevik regime, the Soviet psychoanalytic movement flourished, with all of its activities supported to some degree by the state.<sup>[1]</sup> Indeed, according to Martin Miller, author of *Freud and the Bolsheviks: Psychoanalysis in Imperial Russia and the Soviet Union*, "it can safely be said... that no government was ever responsible for supporting

psychoanalysis to such an extent, before, or since.”<sup>[2]</sup> However, by the end of the 1920s, all matters relating to Freud and psychoanalysis were forbidden by the Stalinist regime,<sup>[3]</sup> leading to the eradication of any trace of their existence in Soviet life. This lasted until the end of the Soviet era (the late 1980s), when once again it became permissible to openly discuss and debate Freud’s writings as well as the concepts of other psychoanalytic theorists.

One of the first to reintroduce psychoanalytic ideas to the Russian public was Maria Arbatova, a feminist who established her reputation as a pioneer of the women’s movement in early post-Soviet Russia.<sup>[4]</sup> In addition, she is a successful novelist, short story writer, playwright, poet, journalist, talk show host,<sup>[5]</sup> and politician.<sup>[6]</sup> Having received ‘underground training’ in psychoanalysis as a young adult during the Soviet period, Arbatova in the 1990s sought to psychologically rehabilitate women by creating an organization called ‘Гармония’ (‘Harmony’) and offering individual counseling; she also served in 2000 as a psychoanalytic advisor to Ella Pamfilova, the first woman to run for the Presidency in Russia. But what about her literary works? Are they, too, informed by psychoanalytic thought, and if so, to what degree? To answer this question, we need look no further than Arbatova’s short story “Моё последнее письмо к А.” (“My Last Letter to A.”), which, first published in 2001, describes the modern woman’s revolt against ‘phallocracy’ and its systematic repression of female sexuality and identity.

In “My Last Letter to A.,” it is clear that Arbatova draws from the psychoanalytic teachings of Freud, the founding ‘father’ of psychoanalysis. However, it is equally clear that she is indebted to H el ene Cixous, Luce Irigaray, and Julia Kristeva---women who, grouped under the label ‘French psychoanalytic feminism,’ are considered to be the ‘mothers’ of poststructuralist feminist theory (a theory that directly ties sexuality to language).<sup>[7]</sup> The objective of this essay is to examine how and to what extent these two branches of psychoanalysis have influenced the composition of “My Last Letter to A.” specifically and Arbatova’s views about feminism in general.

As the title suggests, “My Last Letter to A.” belongs to the epistolary genre. Written in the first person, the narrative is a woman’s letter addressed to her long-lost lover, who has emigrated to Paris. The woman, who is not identified in the text, appears to be a direct mouthpiece for Arbatova, conveying her views and personal experiences, which is characteristic of her literary works in general. In fact, it is safe to say that the letter writer and Arbatova are one and the same.

The letter begins with the author identifying Soviet society’s ‘symbols of phallocracy’ ---symbols that appeared as early as middle school. She writes, for example, that when a young girl reaches puberty and begins to “fill out,” her school uniform is not designed to accommodate this natural transition to womanhood; instead, “the seams under the armpit dig deep red creases into [her] skin,”<sup>[8]</sup> pinching her and causing her pain. “School aprons,” the author declares, “are a symbol of phallocracy.... You have to get used to the apron from the start.”<sup>[9]</sup> Another symbol referred to in Arbatova’s narrative is the young school girl’s ponytail. The author tells us, for example, that if a school girl doesn’t wear her hair in a ponytail or a pigtail, the teacher will chastise and shame her, and implicitly refer to her as a future prostitute: “What’s that? Get out of this class! Tidy up your hair! You know where you’ll end up if you wear your hair loose like that? I would say it out loud but there are boys in the class!”<sup>[10]</sup> No less strident is the tongue-lashing they receive if they wear rings and earrings; in fact, the teacher will not even start the lesson until they have taken them off, declaring that she refuses “to teach in a brothel!”<sup>[11]</sup> Arbatova’s point here is clear: Under Soviet society’s restrictive patriarchal views of female sexuality, a sexual puritanism of the most suffocating kind, teachers and other authority figures fostered sexual repression in young girls by associating natural forms of female gender expression (clothing, jewelry, and hair choices) with feelings of guilt and shame.

Arbatova's view of Soviet society as the manifestation of multiple symbols of phallocracy shares a strong commonality with the ideas of French psychoanalytic feminists (Cixous, Irigaray, and Kristeva), who regard Western culture as 'phallogocentric': a culture in which man (white, European, and ruling class) perceives himself as "the unified, self-controlled center of the universe," while the rest of the world which he defines as Other "has meaning only in relation to [him], as man/father, possessor of the phallus."<sup>[12]</sup> Conversely, this concept determines the woman's perception of herself. If the phallus is 'the desired' and women are defined by what they lack (the phallus), then they will only identify themselves in relation to men, and exist separated from their own sexual identities (their bodies and desires). This said, it is clear that Arbatova, like the French psychoanalytic feminists, resists phallocracy, phallocentrism, and the systematic repression of women's experience.

Arbatova's use of 'symbols' in her narrative also appears to be a borrowing from French psychoanalytic feminists--specifically Kristeva, whose most important contribution to feminist thought is that signification is composed of two elements with gender connotations, the 'symbolic' and the 'semiotic.' According to Kristeva, the 'phallic/symbolic order' signifies masculine/paternal, which, following the intervention of the phallus in a child's development, includes the acquisition of formal language, culture, meaning, order, structure, and the social. The 'semiotic,' on the other hand, represents the pre-Oedipal stages of a child's development, signifying a preverbal, physical, instinctual space connected to the feminine/maternal.<sup>[13]</sup>

Following Kristeva's theoretical constructs, Arbatova in her narrative seeks to subvert the 'phallic/symbolic order' (specifically the symbols of phallogocentric oppression) and assert the 'semiotic' (the female realm). She also urges other Russian women to do the same, insisting that if they don't resist the symbols of phallogocentrism and assert their femaleness and female sexuality, they will lose their independence and become nothing more than sexless automations in a phallic-centered society: "If you give in on [wearing] your own hair [loose]," she writes, "you give up having a mind of your own. Like having your head shaved for the church, army, or prison!"<sup>[14]</sup>

Although Arbatova's views are heavily aligned to French psychoanalytic feminist thought, Freud's teachings also permeate her narrative; in fact, Freud is even mentioned directly. During an editorial argument, in which the author is present, a middle-aged woman disparagingly calls Freud one of the "most awful figures of our age" for his role in creating a mass of young women without complexes. "And people without complexes" she argues, "are people without moral standards!"<sup>[15]</sup> Arbatova's views on this matter stand at the other end of the spectrum and are consistent with Freud's beliefs. Like Freud, Arbatova maintains that repression and constriction of sexual behavior in youth will have a detrimental impact on an individual's overall health, possibly even leading to some form of neurotic illness --- a theory that Freud would later call "the corner-stone on which the whole structure of psycho-analysis rests."<sup>[16]</sup> In other words, Arbatova, who became sexually active at the age of fifteen, believes that acting on the sexual impulse in one's youth is not only natural, but healthy and essential to one's future happiness. If they don't, she maintains, women will develop "hang-ups," and "end up drifting between loneliness, cancer clinics, and unhappy marriages, while piously reciting a history of parental prohibitions."<sup>[17]</sup> Or they will end up like the prim, asexual teacher she describes earlier in the story: a woman who during the day presents "a fearful image," but who at night "weeps into her pillow bemoaning her unclaimed femininity."<sup>[18]</sup>

It is not difficult to explain Arbatova's views within Freud's structural model of the psyche. Using his theoretical constructs, one can argue that Arbatova seeks to free the id, the instinctual and primitive part of the mind that contains sexual desires, from the control of the ego, the realistic part of an individual's psyche that mediates between the desires of the id and the super-ego (the

individual's moral conscience). The implications of an individual's ego developing in a phallogocentric society such as Soviet Russia are obvious. Since the ego is directly influenced by the external world, it cannot help but be adversely affected by the social realities and norms of a phallic-centered culture, along with the practices and rules that dictate how to behave. Arbatova, however, presents a solution: The individual can resist the domination of a phallogocentric-influenced ego by liberating the id, that part of the psyche which operates in the unconscious part of the mind and is thus unaffected by the everyday world. Like Freud, Arbatova believes that the way to release the repressed id is through psychoanalytic treatment, a belief also underscored in "My Last Letter to A." In the story we are told in detail how the narrator often visits a psychoanalyst, begging him to liberate her 'id' from the control of her 'ego' (specifically, her complexes), and how the experience she is left with afterwards is cleansing, cathartic, and life-renewing.

Arbatova further argues that freeing oneself from one's complexes is an essential step in the development of one's self-worth. Throughout the narrative, she continually encourages women to develop a sense of high self-esteem, maintaining that it will liberate them as well as give them the ability to love their fellow man. She poses the question: "How can I possibly love mankind while having a wretched view of myself?"<sup>[19]</sup> The answer, of course, is "you can't," and her question is clearly intended to be rhetorical. But how exactly does one develop a sense of self-worth? According to Arbatova, women need to follow her example and enlist the aid of a psychoanalyst, who will help free them from their complexes, most importantly their sense of inferiority in relation to men and their perception of themselves as the 'weaker sex.'

In an effort to promote genuine equality between the two sexes, Arbatova also encourages the modern Russian man to free himself of complexes---specifically, the sexual inferiority complex. For example, she is incensed when she learns that her youthful romance with a "famous television superman" ended abruptly because he realized that he was "not up to the mark in bed."

Not up to the mark --- what does that mean? And where is the mark? What's with this insane masculine world in which you treat the sexual act as a Leninist exam, in which you don't do it for your partner but to earn a good mark for your performance. Because with your partner you are never left tête-a-tête. Around your bed, or a park bench, a glade, a car, in which you are both transfixed, enchanted by tactile contact, there is an invisible panel of judges chanting in sexless voices: "Get on with it, old chap! We are watching you! Don't let us down!"<sup>[20]</sup>

Arbatova then goes on to say that in ninety-nine cases out of a hundred, "what interests [men] is not your delicate skin or the fragrance of your hair, but the hierarchy of power between you. He will wear the number of your orgasms with him like a row of medals."<sup>[21]</sup> From Arbatova's perspective, a man who equates a woman's orgasms with male supremacy and domination is not a man at all, but a child. As she repeatedly states in "My Last Letter to A," it is only when men and women shed complexes associated with feelings of superiority and inferiority, respectively, that they become adults in the true sense of the word.

Although Freud's influence on Arbatova is indisputable, she by no means shares all his views. Freud, who adhered to a phallic-centered view of women and female sexuality, associated the early stages of development with masculinity, claiming, for example, that little girls, as well as little boys, were 'little men'; he also maintained the idea of 'a single, masculine libido', and associated an infant's clitoral pleasure with phallic enjoyment.<sup>[22]</sup> Obviously, this is not a position that Arbatova would endorse. Indeed, as evidenced by "My Last Letter to A.," she supports the opposite point of view, associating the early stages of human development with femininity. In the narrative, we are told that when she visits her psychoanalyst, she implores him:

to peel away from [her] those layers of ossified complexes, like a snake sheds its skin, so [she] can emerge renewed, shaken by the discovery that the sun and the grass are bright and clear as in childhood, and [she] regain[s] a child's taste of an apple, the scent of flowering maple and the roughness of its bark.<sup>[23]</sup>

As evidenced in this passage, it is clear that Arbatova, views the early stages of development as a physical field closely connected to one's senses and instincts: "a child's taste of an apple" (taste), "the scent of flowering maple" (smell), and the sensation a child feels when touching "the roughness of its bark" (touch). She also associates it with nature ('the sun,' 'flowering maple,' and 'the grass'), which is a conventional symbol of renewal, motherhood, and nurturing ('Mother Nature'). Moreover, it can be argued that Arbatova, in her use of nature imagery (and the association it elicits as a 'nourishing maternal space'), is making an implicit reference to that period in a child's early development when he/she has not yet separated from the mother in order to enter into the masculine world of language, culture, and meaning ('the symbolic').

It is also important to consider the style and form in "My Last Letter to A.," which represented a welcome and exciting departure from the canons of conventional Russian literature at the time of its publication in 2001. Traditionally, men in Russia (as in other countries) have dominated the literary arena, both objectifying the world and reducing it to their terms.<sup>[24]</sup> Arbatova, however, challenges the existing literary order by writing a narrative that reduces the world to *her* terms. To this end, she employs varied techniques that allow her to successfully convey those qualities intimately tied to the 'feminine' or 'semiotic' realm: the poetic, the rhythmic, and that which lacks meaning and structure.<sup>[25]</sup> In other words, Arbatova, following Cixous's imperative in "The Laugh of the Medusa," "put[s] herself into the text" so as to give representation to "l'écriture féminine" or "women's writing."<sup>[26]</sup>

When reading "My Last Letter to A.," the reader immediately recognizes that it was authored by a woman. By using the epistolary genre, Arbatova is not forced to follow a linear progression, which would represent the masculine form of structure and order traditionally associated with rhetoric. Instead, she writes whatever comes into her head, veering off in all directions and switching abruptly from one topic to another, without any smooth or logical transition. Her technique is essentially one of 'free association,' a technique also used in psychodynamic therapy. The narrative begins with the author discussing the stages of a woman's journey in life, starting with puberty. She then devotes three paragraphs speculating about the genre of her narrative, after which she returns to her initial topic (adolescent girls engaging in sexual activity, which represents the next stage of a woman's journey in life). From this point on, there is little, if any, cohesion in the text. Arbatova introduces monologues from people who are not identified, goes off on a tangent about a love-barren prostitute and her loveless client, reminisces about her youthful romance with a famous television star, recalls a conversation she had with a female journalist who likes to play games with her ex-husband, and talks about her German friend from Cologne and her visit with A. in the bar of the Actor's Club in Moscow. Not surprisingly, we are baffled by the text --- a reaction that Arbatova fully anticipates when she writes in the final paragraph of the letter that A. "will read this with no less perplexity than the reader."<sup>[27]</sup>

In addition, Arbatova employs several poetic devices, such as repetition. For example, she repeatedly uses her former lover's initial "A." in conjunction with the words "to whom this letter is addressed/ written," which is rhythmic and reads like a refrain throughout the narrative. She also uses striking similes. For example, she compares her female colleague's remark about the immorality of women without complexes to a "rolling snowball," so that even her colleague is "unable to retrieve the original snowball from the snowman."<sup>[28]</sup> Another example is when she likens the peeling

away of layers of ossified complexes to “a snake shed[ding] its skin.”<sup>[29]</sup> However, Arbatova’s most successful analogy is the one she uses to describe her romance with A. She tells the reader that she had a “mother-of-pearl” relationship with him and then expands on her use of the word “mother-of-pearl” with other kinds of sea-related imagery (waves, ripples, seashells) in an effort to physically impart the sensuality and luminosity of their relationship to the reader. She writes that the word “mother-of-pearl” rolls from the lips “like a wave,” and then immediately follows these words with another simile, “as if pouting its lips for a kiss.” It also holds a “ripple of watercolors” and “a dance of lights as in a turning seashell.”<sup>[30]</sup>

The genre of “My Last Letter to A.” is also noteworthy. Although Arbatova claims that this piece belongs to the epistolary genre, “that eternal genre of women’s letters addressed to their long-lost lovers,”<sup>[31]</sup> it is, in fact, not a letter at all. A., to whom the letter is written, is only addressed in the third person, and his presence in the text is marginal. Rather, the text reads like an example of female introspection or ‘women’s consciousness,’ with the narrator looking inward and examining internal thoughts, feelings, and memories unique to the female experience --- a form that is clearly given representation as a vital and long-overdue alternative to traditional literary male introspection. Echoing the views of Irigaray and Cixous, who both vehemently decry the fact that women have no way of representing themselves in a world dominated by phallogocentric order and discourse, Arbatova writes:

Phallogocentrism has legitimized all forms of male introspection but denies the same rights to women. All these Henry Millers and their lesser brethren, whose writing elucidates with religious fervor their coming to terms with their genitalia, in which hierarchy genitalia enjoy the status of master and introspection that of slave.<sup>[32]</sup>

Arbatova then goes on to say that the male world, with the phallus at its center, is a “hopeless” world that has long since become “the end.”<sup>[33]</sup> It is not particularly difficult to discern her underlying meaning here: With the male world bankrupt, the only hope for future civilization lies in the female realm, yet as long as women remain imprisoned by a phallogocentric language that does not allow them to express their sexuality and assert their identity, there will be no hope for the future at all.

Finally, there is the profession of A. to consider. A. is a poet, a vocation that typically gives expression to qualities that are at odds with traditional masculinity --- qualities such as vulnerability, doubt, and self-awareness. Indeed, much of the author’s affection and regard for him stems from the fact that he deviates from the norm, refusing like other men to measure himself in terms of his genitalia or to suppress his true feelings, no matter how unmanly they may seem to others. In fact, it is precisely this that makes him “a real man” in the author’s estimation. She writes: “I fell in love with him because he never uttered a single trite word, never offered a view that had not fed through his heart. He looked like a real man among automations.”<sup>[34]</sup>

Like the author, A., too, seeks freedom from constraints, freedom of expression, and freedom of choice. However, unable to find this freedom in his homeland, he, like so many of his compatriots, emigrates to France, a place where he can live like a true poet, strolling along streets in Paris with his white bulldog, conversing in English and writing in Russian. “Finally I’m free, utterly free...,” he tells the author. “I am finally living the life I have always dreamed about.”<sup>[35]</sup> Arbatova, on the other hand, chooses to stay and fight to make Russian society a better place for everyone. And herein lies the difference between the two. Like an adolescent, A. runs from his brief loves, because he basically is incapable of loving anyone, including himself. “You’re telling me that in this country [Russia] someone needs me?” the author recounts him saying in the bar of the Actors’ Club in Moscow. “But just look at these people. They do not even need themselves; just like me by the

way.”<sup>[36]</sup> Conversely, Arbatova holds herself in high self-esteem and appreciates her value as a human being; she also loves her fellow man, and sincerely wants to implement change that will benefit not only her, but all members of society (men as well as women).

In conclusion, “My Last Letter to A.” is a remarkable and liberating work both for its time and context (the early years of post-Soviet Russia); it is also a work that provides ample evidence as to where Arbatova’s feminist beliefs are positioned in terms of psychoanalytic theory. While Arbatova clearly embraces Freud’s fundamental concepts—especially his ideas pertaining to the unconscious mind (e.g., liberating the id from the control of the ego through psychoanalytical therapy)—her views, ultimately, are far more aligned to the ideas of Cixious, Irigaray, and Kristeva. Indeed, through her critique of Soviet patriarchal society, her endorsement of a feminist philosophy that is deeply grounded in psychoanalytic theory, and her representation of ‘l’écriture féminine,’ it can safely be said that Arbatova looked to the teachings of French psychoanalytic feminism as a model for the development of her own feminist ideas.

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<sup>[1]</sup>These activities included, among others, the establishment of the first state-supported psychoanalytic institute in the world and a government-funded children’s school that functioned on psychoanalytic principles. See Martin Miller, *Psychoanalysis in Imperial Russia and the Soviet Union* (New Haven & London: Yale University Press, 1998), pp. 63-67.

<sup>[2]</sup>Ibid, pp. 67-68.

<sup>[3]</sup><https://www.nytimes.com/1996/12/11/world/freud-in-russia-return-of-the-repressed.html>.

<sup>[4]</sup> Over the years, Arbatova has garnered several national and international awards for her contributions to Russia’s feminist movement, including a Gold medal from the Cambridge Bibliographical Society for “Contributions to Glory to Heroes” (2003); a special social honorary badge from the Congress “The Image of Women in the 21<sup>st</sup> century” for her contributions to the formation of the modern woman’s image (2014); and the order of “Honorary Citizen of Russia” (2015).

<sup>[5]</sup>In the mid-1990s, Arbatova became co-host of the popular women’s television show *Я, сама (I, Myself)*, a program in which she was given complete freedom to expound on her feminist views. The talk show, which ran for almost a decade, was so successful that it received Russia’s most coveted television prize Teffi. It also turned Arbatova into a celebrity and household name.

<sup>[6]</sup>In the 1990s, Arbatova was recruited by Yeltsin’s camp to work with other experts on human rights issues, such as maternity and paternity, the rights of women and children, and the protection of invalids. She also oversaw the non-governmental organization Клуб женщин, вмешивающихся в политику (The Club of Women Meddling in Politics), joined the liberal Союз правых сил (Union of Right Forces), and made a bid for election to the State Duma in 1999 (albeit unsuccessfully).

<sup>[7]</sup> <https://plato.Stanford.edu/archives/sum2011/entries/feminism-psychoanalysis>.

[8] Maria Arbatova, "My Last Letter to A.," in Nataliia Perova and Joanne Turnbull (eds.), *War and Peace: Contemporary Russian Prose* (Moscow: Glas, 2006), p. 323.

[9] *Ibid*, pp. 323-24.

[10] *Ibid*, p. 324.

[11] *Ibid*, p. 324.

[12] Ann Rosalind Jones, "Writing the Body: Toward an Understanding of 'L'écriture Feminine,'" *Feminist Studies*, Vol. 7, No. 2 (Summer, 1981), p. 248. Also see Luce Irigaray, (Gillian C. Gill, trans.), *Speculum of the Other Woman* (Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press, 1985); Hélène Cixous (Keith Cohen and Paula Cohen, trans.), "The Laugh of the Medusa," *Signs*, Vol. 1, No. 4 (1976); Toril Moi (ed.), "Women's Time," in *The Kristeva Reader* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1986).

[13] Birgit Schippers, *Julia Kristeva and Feminist Thought* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2011), pp. 25-26.

[14] Arbatova (2006), p. 324.

[15] *Ibid*, p. 331.

[16] Sigmund Freud, in James Strachey (ed.) and Joan Riviere (trans.), *On the History of the Psycho-Analytic Movement* (New York and London: W.W. Norton & Company, 1966), p. 14.

[17] Arbatova (2006), p. 325.

[18] *Ibid*, p. 324.

[19] *Ibid*, p. 331.

[20] *Ibid*, p. 326.

[21] *Ibid*, p. 327.

[22] See Freud's writings on femininity, including "On the Psychological Consequences of the Anatomical Distinction Between the Sexes," "Female Sexuality," and "Femininity," in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, ed. and trans. James Strachey (London: The Hogarth Press, 1968).

[23] *Ibid*, p. 331.

[24] Jones (1981), p. 248.

[25] See Julia Kristeva; Margaret Waller (trans.), *Revolution in Poetic Language* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1984).

[26]Cixous (1976), p. 875.

[27]Arbatova (2006), p. 337

[28]Ibid, p. 331.

[29]Ibid, p. 331.

[30]Ibid, p. 334.

[31]Ibid, p. 337.

[32]Ibid, p. 323.

[33]Ibid, p. 323.

[34]Ibid, p. 332.

[35]Ibid, p. 329.

[36]Ibid, p. 329.

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