

LIZA AS THE 'OTHER': AN ALTERNATE READING OF NIKOLAI KARAMZIN'S "BEDNAYA LIZA"



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Abstract: *Nikolai Karamzin's Bednaya Liza (Poor Liza), published in the year 1792, and describes the fate of an unfortunate, peasant girl who is seduced by a nobleman and left destitute on the streets of Moscow. It is considered to be one of the most popular works of Russian Sentimentalism. In the story there is a subordination of the element of social conflict to the ethical problem and the avoidance of the negative character in the male protagonist. This paper attempts to read the text from the point of view of the female protagonist, Liza whose presence and voice seems to have been oppressed. The misdeeds of Erast, the nobleman have not been vilified and in a way justified.*

Keywords: *Russian Sentimentalism, female protagonist, social conflict.*

Nikolai Karamzin's *Bednaya Liza* (Poor Liza), published in the year 1792, describes the fate of an unfortunate peasant girl who is seduced by a nobleman and left destitute on the streets of Moscow. It is considered to be one of the most popular works of Russian Sentimentalism. In the story, there is a subordination of the element of social conflict to the ethical problem and the avoidance of the negative character in the male protagonist. This paper attempts to read the text from the point of view of the female protagonist, Liza, whose presence and voice seems to have been oppressed. The misdeeds of Erast, the nobleman, have not been vilified and in a way justified.

Literature of a period either challenges the existing norms and models or it operates as a part of the social control. It reinforces the mechanisms of established social roles. The inequality of sexes is a social construct and the domination of male perspectives has been canonized. As literature is a product of society, it is also produced for a society. Patriarchy

has developed as hegemony and is the sphere of art over the years. This paper tends to stress on the need to radically reinterpret the established literary practices and the necessity to look at literature from the point of view of women.

Liza lived in the countryside on a farm. The countryside appealed to most of the artists and city folks as it was closer to nature and considered the epitome of innocence, beauty and simplicity. The countryside provided the city folk with fresh air to breathe and a space for their imaginations to run wild among the wild flowers where concrete walls and early morning smog didn't pollute their minds. *"The Moscow River is the dividing line where 'nature' and 'culture' meet. Its urban, commercial aspect is evoked by large boats laden with goods for the greedy city; the bucolic aspect of nature is indicated by the light oars of fishermen in rowboats."*¹

Independent Man, Dependent Woman

Liza's introduction by itself describes the importance of a man in the life of a woman. She was born to a rather well-to-do family and the fate of the family hits misfortune after the death of Liza's father. The family was so dependent on him that after his death, along with sorrow, poverty grew upon them. Liza's mother's health grew weaker day by day as she spent most of her time shedding tears and worrying about Liza's future in the absence of a man. Liza's mother's only concern and wish is to find her a good man. Liza, now 17, worked hard to support her family. She hid her emotions and remained strong in order to be supportive to her mother. She worked day and night, gathering flowers, weaving flax and knitting stockings which she would later sell in the city. However, all this does not continue for long. On her trip to the city one day to sell flowers, she meets a young man who takes interest in her immediately. On this first meeting, he buys all the flowers she had carried and tells her, *"I would like to buy flowers from you all the time; I would like you to gather them only for me."*² He asked about her whereabouts to which she promptly replied. Such undue attention was new to her and she was lost in her imagination of the perfect man whose idea her mother had driven into her head from a young age. This was the beginning of Erast making Liza dependent on him. She could not stop dreaming about this new found attention. On her next visit to the city, he didn't turn up to buy flowers. She waited for him all day and was left sad when he didn't come. Instead of selling her flowers to the other people who wanted it, she threw them into the river. If he couldn't have those flowers, no one else could. Liza's fate at the end of the tale is similar. Since he didn't want her anymore, she does not want to give herself to the man who had sought her hand in marriage and drowns herself in the lake near her house. Liza had now become dependent on Erast. He soon visits Liza and her mother at their home. Liza's mother who often spoke about the evil vices of the city, for a moment forgot that Erast was also from the very city she was afraid to send her daughter to. He presented himself to them and requested that Liza sell all her gatherings and hard work only to him. He also convinced her that he would come by and collect the goods and that Liza need not go to the city. Liza's mother happily agreed. Liza and

1 Hammarberg, Gitta. *Poor Liza, Poor Erast, Lucky Narrator*. The Slavic and East European Journal, Vol. 31, No. 3 (Autumn, 1987), P. 309

2 Segel, Harold B. *The Literature of Eighteenth Century Russia: An Anthology of Russian Literary Materials of the Age of Classicism and the Enlightenment from the reign of Peter the Great (1689-1725) to the reign of Alexander I (1801-1825)*. E. P. Dutton and Co. New York: 1967. P. 81

her mother were now completely economically dependent on Erast. His visits increased and were now more in the absence of Liza's mother. Liza was now not only economically dependent but was also beginning to become emotionally dependent on Erast. Erast was in love with this innocent beauty that the city never offered³ him and Liza was in love with this new attention and care that she received. She was aware that there was a river that divided both of them, but the joys of her heart clouded that thought.⁴

For Erast, Liza was everything that the mundane lights of the city didn't offer him. Liza seemed to be that beautiful element of nature, that remained untouched by man. She was the opposite of what the high society of Moscow had to offer. *"Liza steps into his life an image from his books. He eagerly grasps the opportunity to cure his boredom with the more sublime pleasures of nature and its 'pure joys', which he knows only from idylls and novels. He wants to pride himself on Platonic love, pure enjoyment of nature, simple pleasures, good, unselfish deeds, and generosity, all qualities of the idyllic hero. In other words, he wants to live an idyllic fiction, ultimately an egotistic wish to see his own altruism."*⁵ Liza was now both economically and emotionally dependent on Erast.

The Omnipotent Narrator

The narrator repeats the importance of the purity of nature and draws a comparison of Liza's and Erast's relationship to nature. Their meetings were 'pure' and 'sinless' and as long as it remained that way, there seemed to be a balance in nature. This pure and simple love didn't suffice Erast's needs. One evening Erast finds Liza in tears and learns from her that she had got a marriage proposal from a family of rich peasants from a neighboring village. He consoles her and convinces her that he would not let that happen and in an emotional moment, Liza submits herself to Erast. The loss of her chastity is described with so much comparison to nature by the narrator. Nature was no more serene and peaceful. *"She threw herself into his arms-and this was to be the fatal hour for her purity! Erast felt an unusual excitement in his blood-Liza had never seemed so delightful-her caresses had never touched him so strongly-her kisses had never been so inflamed-she knew nothing, suspected nothing, feared nothing-the blackness of the night fed desire- not a single star showed in the sky-no ray of light could illumine the error. Erast felt himself trembling-Liza did too, not knowing the cause-not knowing what was happening to her.... Oh, Liza. Liza! Where is your Guardian Angel? Where is- your innocence!"*⁶

The narrator seems to have decided things for Liza. From what she feels to what she experiences, the narrator takes control over her completely, to an extent, more than Erast. It is Liza's loss of innocence that causes the disturbance in nature. The narrator calls it an 'error'. Erast's attitude towards Liza had now changed. The conquered nature no more appealed to him. But once

3 "All the sparkling amusements of high society appeared worthless in comparison to those pleasures with which the passionate friendship of a pure soul nourished his heart. With revulsion, he thought back to the despicable sensuousness with which he had stated his feelings before. I shall live with Liza as a brother with a sister, he thought; I shall never misuse her love and I will always be happy!" (87)

4 At times Liza wishes that Erast was a shepherd boy or a simple peasant so that she could get married to him (84) and she also once says to Erast that he can never be her husband because there is a big social division between them (87)

5 Op. cit. P. 316

6 Ibid. P. 88

again the narrator attempts to convey to the readers that Erast was not too proud about what had happened (i.e.) the fact that his platonic love had given way to momentary lust. But Erast's sense of regret, according to the author, seems contradictory when he only seeks Liza's physical self during the meetings that followed the 'sinful' night. His visits began to decrease and suddenly he appeared one day to announce that he was going for the war as his regiment was going to campaign. He left her with enough money so that she need not go to the city to sell flowers. He made sure that she stayed back in the countryside. Through this, he made sure he kept her dependent on him in his absence too. Sorrow and grief had once again dawned upon her life.

Erast did not return for almost two months. The money he had left with Liza soon got depleted. She had to go to the city once again in order to support her mother and herself. On her visit to the city, she was surprised to see Erast. But the surprise turned into a shock, when Erast informs her about the changed circumstances and asks her to leave him in peace, forget him also for her own good; after which she was led out of the house by one of Erast's servants. Erast had wasted away all his fortunes by gambling during the war. In order to retain his status and lifestyle, he decided to marry an elderly widow who had a lot of fortune to her name. Erast pushes one hundred roubles into Liza's hands and she is left on the streets. This leaves Liza devastated and she drowns herself. She doesn't reveal Erast's name to anyone. Her secret relationship drowns with her. According to the narrator, Liza feels, "*The sky will not fall, the earth will not tremble! Woe is me!*"⁷ Liza, who had hid her emotions in front of her mother and worked hard to support her family, is now a poor, helpless and hapless soul according to the narrator.

The narrator attempts to justify Erast's actions. According to the narrator, Erast casts a 'sincere sigh' as he asks his servant to show Liza to the streets. It is difficult to understand this attempt to justify the protagonist. The concluding line of the story is as follows, "*Erast was miserable to the end of his life. Having learned of Liza's fate, he could not find any solace, and he considered himself to be her murderer. I made his acquaintance a year before his death. He told me this story himself and led me to Liza's grave- Perhaps now they have become reconciled!*"⁸ The narrator decides to use the word 'fate' to describe Liza's death. The last lines of the story try to strike a note of empathy for Erast after all his cruel misdeeds. Through the entire story, the reader doesn't find at any moment Erast's interest in marrying Liza. She was just a sense of achievement that appealed to him and he had successfully conquered it. And yet the narrator chooses to wish they had reconciled in the afterlife. This also means that the narrator feels that Liza had still been dependent and waiting for Erast to return her 'pure' love. According to this, the female character neither had the strength to resist nor did she have the courage to deny. She remained attainable to man and accepted whatever he imposed upon her, and this in turn was her fate.

*"The distance between the narrator and Erast as teller is smaller, and Erast's subsequent realization that his fiction has been serious reality from Liza's point of view explains why the narrator cannot condemn him outright."*⁹

7 Ibid. P. 92

8 Ibid. P. 93

9 Op. cit. P. 318

Liza as the 'Other': Conclusion

The woman is developed as the binary other of the man. She becomes the insignificant 'other' in the course of a patriarchal narrative and when it comes to art, it is not that she doesn't have words to express, but her voice is muted and silenced. There is a domination of male perspectives as the universal. The narrator in *Bednaia Liza* also refuses to represent her at any point of time and ignores her words. Throughout the story, she never got an opportunity to resist or deny. She had submitted herself to Erast and even at the end of the story, her final words are as follows, "*Take this money to my mother-it isn't stolen-tell her that Liza is guilty before her; that I have hidden from her my love for a certain cruel man-for E... Why know his name? Say that he has deceived me...*"¹⁰The narrator meticulously decides to ignore the words 'cruel man' and 'deceived' when he comes to the conclusion that they might have reconciled in the afterlife. The narrator chooses to sympathize with the male protagonist in his building of the narration. Suicide is the only self-determining action Liza is allowed in the entire narrative. To the narrator, Liza seems to be the other; the silenced other.

*"Liza, like most heroines of this paradigm, has no control over her destiny, which is predetermined by her situation within the patriarchal world in which she is located."*¹¹

References

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