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Deconstruction of the "Good Girl" Concept in Anna Starobinets's Novel *A Land of Good Girls*

Abstract: The author analyzes girlhood regulation in a traditional Russian family as represented in Anna Starobinets' novel *A Land of Good Girls*. The novel depicts how a family controls the behavior of a girl through value constructs of "good" and "bad" girls. Starobinets chooses the genre of dystopia as a tool for portraying girls' position in the social institution of the family. Moreover, the genre of dystopia expresses the pessimistic view of modern Russian reality as well as the contemporary upbringing principles which continue to be based on traditional values. The author of *A Land of Good Girls* encourages adult readers to re-evaluate their attitudes toward the younger generation and to abolish the outdated normative system. Starobinets uses a child's viewpoint, notably one of a "bad," "inconvenient" and insubordinate child, to reveal the hypocrisy and artificiality of the adult world, as well as to argue for the necessity of change.

Keywords: Anna Starobinets, A Land of Good Girls, girlhood, children's dystopia

This article attempts to analyze girlhood regulation in a traditional Russian family as represented in Anna Starobinets' novel *A Land of Good Girls*. A considerable part of the article is devoted to the evaluation of the regulation's sources such as children's literature and folk tales that impose a specific code of behavior on girls. Perceived as a moral foundation, folk tales alongside short stories, written by nineteenth and twentieth century Russian writers, are included in the obligatory reading list for first-third grades in a primary school. This curriculum has remained unchanged for the last twenty years.

In her novel, Starobinets deconstructs the concept of a "good girl," which was formed by Russian folk tales and children's literature for the last two centuries and is still desired in modern Russia. This paper aims to present how this concept is grounded in the historical-cultural context, starting from the sixteenth-century Muscovite set of household rules *The Domostroi*, through folk tales and short stories from the school curriculum. Certainly, the novel addresses two audiences; while children are fascinated by Polina's adventures in the fairy tale otherworld, adult co-readers are invited to re-evaluate

their upbringing principles and think about the need for change in the society that enforces outdated patriarchal values and morals on the young generation. Starobinets sees this as the reason for conformity in Russian society and, using political allusions in her dystopian novel, calls for changes.

Polina, the novel's protagonist, is a rebellious girl who does not fit social expectations. Starobinets, through her young heroine, contests the rules that social institutions impose on Polina. The novel depicts how a family controls the behavior of the daughter through value constructs of "good" and "bad" girls. This is in accordance with Greer Litton Fox's observation, namely that normative restriction, coupled with confinement and protection, is one form of control over a woman:

> This form of control over the social behavior of women is embodied in such value constructs as "good girl," "lady," or "nice girl." As a value construct the latter term connotes chaste, gentle, gracious, ingenuous, good, clean, kind, virtuous, noncontroversial, and above suspicion and reproach. To use Rokeach's terminology, the concept "nice girl" is both an instrumental and a terminal value: both a standard for and goal of behavior. (Fox, 1977: 805)

Fox stresses that the standardization of women's behavior spans their lifetime. Role learning studies postulate that girls are taught to be more passive, quiet, and restrained; for example, they are expected to be "nicer babies" than boys (809). Social constructionism leads to biological determinism, which imposes particular roles and standards on girls (Griffin 1993: 24–25). In Starobinets' novel, the parents are more concerned with their daughter's fulfillment of the "good girl" role than with her personality traits. They neglect the necessity of accepting their child's individuality. From the very beginning, Starobinets portrays the mechanism of biological determinism and the focus on the standards of behavior. She commences the novel as follows: "*Girl* [my cursive – A.B.] Polina Petrova, whom all called just Pola, was not a good girl" (Starobinets, 2021: 7).

Starobinets reconstructs societal expectations of a woman. The author focuses on the nuclear family and its relationships, striving to achieve an accurately generalized depiction of a Russian family. The depicted "normal" household includes a father who holds a full-time job, a mother who is a housewife, four retired grandparents, two children – a boy and a girl, and two pets – a dog and a cat. Starobinets emphasizes the typicality of this family through their surname "Petrovy," which, along with Ivanov and Sidorov, is one of the most common Russian surnames.

The story depicts a typical Russian family living in Moscow at the beginning of the twenty-first century. The protagonist's parents think that she is behaving badly. They make a wish that the "bad" Polina be replaced by a "good girl." The family's wish comes true and Polina ends up in a Land of Good Girls. This totalitarian-dystopian otherworld, based on strict discipline and

obedience, is a place where "bad" children are re-educated. In this very clean, correct and scary place, children eat only healthy food, love cleaning and do everything on schedule. The narration in the novel is divided into two parts: the "real" world and the fairy world of the Land of Good Girls, where Polina is taken for reeducation. The heroine is an outsider in both of these worlds, which are similarly ruled by strict regulations and social roles. Polina does not fit the soulless "holographic" objectified femininity[1] that is desired in both realities.

Objectified femininity and obedience are also desired and broadly promoted outside the Russian family circle. During girlhood, this value construct is empowered at school by children's literature and folk tales from the reading curriculum that aim to reinforce and internalize particular values in children. The next part of the article will investigate folk tales included in the reading list in Russian schools and their impact on forming girls' code of behavior.

FOLK TALES: THE CODE OF GOODNESS

Perceived as the wisdom of generations and a moral foundation, folk tales are on the mandatory reading list of the Russian primary school curriculum. They are taught from first to forth grades, to 6–10 year-olds[2]. Folk tales are continuously published and republished in Russia[3]. In the *Anthology* for the first grade (6–7 year-olds), in the *Oral Folk Creativity* section, we can find rhymes, folk songs, sayings, and proverbs, which are divided into five categories concerning: (1) the motherland, (2) friendship, (3) skills and hard work, (4) sloth

[1] A writer and art critic Olivia Laing accurately depicts the faith of a "good girl," describing the scene from the film *Vertigo* by Alfred Hitchcock, where the main hero tries to transform Judy into Madeleine: "I watched that scene again and again, wanting to drain it of its power. It's the spectacle of a woman being forced to participate in the perpetual, harrowing, non-consensual beauty pageant of femininity, of being made to confront her status as an object that might or might not be deemed acceptable, capable of arousing the eye. In the next scene, in a shoe shop, Judy is expressionless. She's absented herself, withdrawing from that place of siege, her body. (…) That embrace is one of the loneliest things I've ever seen, though it's hard to tell who's worse off: the man who can only love a hologram, a figment, or the woman who can only be loved by dressing up as someone else – someone who barely exists at all, who is traveling from the moment we first see her towards death. Never mind meat-making: this is corpse making, objectification taken to its logical extreme" (Laing, 2016: 96).

[2] Russian folk tales are included in three of the most popular school curriculums for primary schools: "Russian School," "Primary School of the 21st Century," and "Perspektiva." These curriculums were developed at the beginning of the 2000s. Since that time, they were republished several times without any significant change; the reading list has not been changed.

[3] Russkiye narodnyye skazki. (2021) Moskva: Malysh; Russkiye narodnyyes kazki. (2020). Moskva: Knizhnyy dom; Afanas'yev, A. (2020), Narodnyye russkiye skazki. Moskva: Al'fa-kniga; Afanas'yev, A. (2015). Narodnyye russkiye skazki. Moskva: Olmamediagrupp/Prosveshcheniye.

and negligence, and (5) nature (*Polnaya khrestomatiya dlya nachal'noy shkoly,* 2020: 12–14).

Falling into the morality tale genre, Russian folktales are considered to be didactic allegories that define standards of good and bad behavior. Often, they feature a protagonist who, having experienced many setbacks, overcomes a series of trials and obstacles to finally attain a well-deserved reward and rest. Vladimir Propp defines the range of hero's actions as follows: the act of searching (initiation journey), a reaction to the demands of the Donor (a creature or an object who offers their magical support or advice), and wedding (Propp, 2021: 86). In Propp's system of a folk tale character archetypes, the act of searching (activeness) is the characteristic feature of the Hero-Seeker; while passiveness is a domain of the Hero-Victim. The latter's role is to react to the Hero-Seeker's action or to become his prize (the Princess) (86). For example, in folk tales about Ivan the Fool or Ivan Tsarevich, the Hero-Seeker at the end of the story wins a beautiful wife (Hero-Victim), wealth, and power.

Girls in Russian folk tales often repeat the fate of another social construct – the "good woman." A girl's proper behavior, which entails obedience to adult characters, or other representatives of authority, is likewise rewarded. Regarding the passiveness of a "good girl" in folk tales, in Propp's *dramatis personae* system, she can be identified as the Hero-Victim who fulfills the authority's demands. However, if a girl behaves like the Hero-Seekers, then, unlike her male counterpart, she does not receive a reward. If a girl disobeys an authority figure, she is punished. Such characteristics as obedience, acquiescence, submission to the elders, and dedication to the interests of the family are thus marked as positive and desirable.

It is worth comparing the virtues of a "good child" in Russian fairy tales with those imposed in *The Domostroi*, the monument of literature written during the Muscovite period. It teaches children obedience to their parents and respect for their elders, while forewarning of a premature and painful death that may befall disobedient, "bad" children. *The Domostroi* lacks specific advice for girls, demonstrating the patriarchal culture's negligence of prepubescent girls. In the Muscovite era, a girl was groomed to become a "good wife"; "A wife should be kind, and hardworking, and obedient – to be a crown to her husband (*Domostroi* 1992: 20–21). The author of *The Domostroi* believes that wives should respect the code and remain submissive to their husbands; they should willingly agree with their spouses and follow their guidance (*Domostroi* 1992: 20–21). Thus, the desired good wife would have been a weak-willed, silent, un-opinionated, and obedient woman. In exchange for this behavior, she is promised to find a "respectable husband" (*Domostroi* 1992: 21).

Femininity virtues and family order promoted in *The Domostroi* are very similar to those found in Russian folk tales. In such tales as *Father Frost*, *Kroshechka-Khavroshechka*, *About the Lazy and the Hardworking*, *Daughter and Stepdaughter*, a "good girl" is forced to overwork and be obedient to her el-

ders (parents and stepsisters). She is then rewarded and perceived as a future "good wife." Significantly, the rewards she receives are usually material assets, which have little to do with the protagonist's character arc. Instead, they pertain to outer beauty and wealth and include clothing items[4], herds of horses, household items[5], rich husbands (The Master (the Barin) marries Kroshechka-Khavroshechka), fur coats, and presents[6]. In folk tales, good girls receive rewards that reinforce their feminine appeal and dowry for the benefit of their potential, future husbands. Their fathers are happy to see them return with a dowry, while their stepmothers and sisters become jealous of this fact. A featured husband will appreciate the external beauty, wealth, and obedience of his wife. All of the above reflects patriarchal values: "good girls," in accordance with *The Domostroi* and folk tales, act like obedient servants, rather than strong girls capable of overcoming life's obstacles. According to Jack Zipes, tales involve gender appropriation and serve "the hegemonic interest of males" (Zipes, 2002: XX).

In folk tales, active girls who act independently in pursuit of their personal goals are punished. In the tale *Geese-Swans*, the protagonist is punished for the desire for freedom and separation from her family. The girl fails to fulfill her parents' request. Instead of babysitting her younger brother, she takes the opportunity of her parents' absence to go for a lonely walk. After her brother is kidnapped by the titular geese-swans, she attempts to rescue him. She does so, however, not out of a sense of responsibility, but rather out of her fear of punishment, "She cried, burst into tears, lamented that she will hear from her father and mother" (*Gusi-lebedi*, 2020: 120). The success of her rescue journey depends on her loyalty to the Donors – trees and the river. They are ready to help the girl only after she, unwillingly, submits to their demands. Put simply, the tale suggests that an older sister must obey her parents, otherwise, she will face severe punishment.

Snow Maiden and *Kolobok* are based on a similar premise. These tales concern disobedient children and their attempt to gain independence from their parents. Kolobok escapes from his home to search for new adventures ("Kolobok lay down, lay down, and suddenly rolled" (*Kolobok*, 2008: 34)). In *Snow Maiden*, the heroine wishes to play with her peers against the will of her par-

[4] "The father and mother and the younger sister are looking at her with all their eyes, and cannot believe it. – Oh, priests! What a beauty you have become!" Said the mother. The Hardworking told as she was a guest of the Green Old Man and showed the wooden box he gave her. (…) In the box, there was a brocade coat, trimmed with sables, and a satin sundress, and shoes with silver buckles, and pitched pearls, and a wallet with gold" (*Pro lenivuyu i radivuyu*, 2012).

[5] "Here the gate creaked, the horses run into the yard, and the daughter and her father are sitting on the cart: the cart is full of goodness" (*Doch' i padcheritsa*, 2008).

[6] "Father Frost took pity on her and wrapped the girl in the fur coat. (…) The old man drove up to his daughter and found her alive, she was wearing a good fur coat, an expensive veil, and had a box with rich gifts" (*Morozko*, 2008).

ents. The girl eventually attempts to jump over a fire, which brings about her death. This is a common fate for naughty children in folktales. Feelings of curiosity and the desire for acceptance by their peers are punished. Thus, the Snow Maiden, being a snow nymph, melts, while Kolobok is eaten by a fox. The same fate, as several tales suggest, awaits lazy children: the half-sister of the heroine in *Daughter and Stepdaughter* is eaten by a bear, the half-sister in *Father Frost* dies of cold, the lazy sister from *About the Lazy and the Hardworking* dies of anger. Thus, the naughty, rude and lazy children are punished and most often die. It would be unfair to submit that all Russian folk tales foster a similar moral. Nevertheless, such a tendency is a common feature of those works selected for the primary school curriculum.

Zipes notes that the institutionalization of tales involves a process of production, distribution, reception, and regulation of their perception in the public sphere. This process plays "a significant role in the formation and preservation of the cultural heritage of a nation-state" (Zipes, 2002: XXVIII). Integration into the curriculum makes tales a reference point for the understanding of standards of behavior and gender roles for children and adults. As we can see, in Russian folk tales obedience is represented as girls' most important obligation. A girl has to unquestioningly obey her parents, and later her husband. This is the fate of the obedient "good girl," who later will turn into an invisible and silent woman-hologram, highly desirable in the patriarchal society. The narratives acquaint children with proper models of behavior and the consequences that await those who break the imparted rules.

THE CODE OF GOOD BEHAVIOR IN CHILDREN'S LITERATURE

Alongside folktales, the reading list for the primary school system includes: moral stories by Leo Tolstoy, short stories by Konstantin Ushinsky, Valentin Berestov, Viktor Dragunsky; short stories about nature by Mikhail Prishvin, and Nikolai Sladkov; a poem "What is Good and What is Bad?" by Vladimir Mayakovsky. From the nineteenth-century moral stories by Tolstoy, children learn that they should be honest and obedient to their parents and that they should take responsibility for their actions. Short stories "Bishka," "Curiosity," and "Our Fatherland" by Ushinsky include themes such as the consequences of curiosity, love of reading, and patriotism. Stories by Dragunsky concentrate on friendship, proper behavior, and the necessity of remembering the past. Berestov addresses his stories predominately to boys and ascribes protectiveness as their desirable quality in the family. Being male writers, the authors represent boyhood. Thus, girls and girlhood are either absent or misrepresented in the reading list for children.

Unfortunately, modern authors (e.g. Starobinets) are not represented in the *Anthology* and in the literature classes. Likewise, issues of gender equality and feminism are absent. The foreign children's literature in the Russian *Anthology*

for primary school is represented by Hans Christian Andersen (*The Princess and the Pea, Thumbelina*), the Brothers Grimm (*The Bremen Town Musicians, The Golden Goose, The Two Brothers*), and Charles Perrault (*The Sleeping Beauty, Puss in Boots, Little Red Riding Hood*). Girls represented in these tales are either obedient (as in *Thumbelina*), or disobedient, those who receive punishment (*The Sleeping Beauty*, *Little Red Riding Hood*). Likewise in the folk tales mentioned above, in literary fairy tales "most of the male heroes are dashing, adventurous, and courageous. Most of the female protagonists are beautiful, passive, and industrious" (Zipes, 2002: XXVI). The majority of these fairy tales emphasize male supremacy, male dictates and fantasies.

The curriculum in Russian schools contains no texts widely represented in foreign children's literature, which show a strong-willed heroine (who is often naughty), who independently overcomes many obstacles. Examples of such characters may include the protagonists of *Anne of Green Gables* by Lucy Maud Montgomery, *The Secret Garden* by Frances Burnett, *Pollyanna* by Eleanor Porter, or *Alice in Wonderland* by Lewis Carroll. The "obedient child" from the literature of the nineteenth and the twentieth centuries, whom we meet on the pages of the *Anthology*, does not present a relatable model for its modern child audience.

Such authors as Starobinets deserve special attention because they raise the frequently ignored problem of an "inconvenient" child, to whom the post-Soviet society applies the rules from *The Domostroi*, a sixteenth-century Russian set of household rules. Moreover, the absence of modern writers from the school curriculum reinforces traditional values and neglects the importance of change. Thus, children of the twenty-first century acquire, through literature, outdated norms which they incorrectly perceive as the current standards.

In Starobinet's novel, Polina's parents' generation represents a medium of outdated upbringing principles. They are incapable of accepting a girl who differs from the "norm." In their opinion, the process of upbringing should primarily be concerned with the replication of the previous generations rather than the development of a new individual who will be better adjusted to the new, contemporary realities. Perhaps, among others, children's literature based on the Soviet canon, may be to blame for the indifference of the Russian "generation Z" to politics and political change. The results of sociological research conducted by the Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung (FES) foundation in Russia in 2019 show that the majority of modern Russian youths are not interested in politics. In addition, the research characterizes the young generation as a socially homogeneous community. Sociologists argue that their homogeneity results from the fact that young people tend to adhere to the ideas set by educational institutions. In Russia, the system operates under unified standard training programs that regulate schools, universities, and technical schools (Gudkov, Zorkaya, Kochergina, Pipiya, Rysyeva, 2020: 32). Thus, sociological research confirms the impact of school curriculum on the younger generation.

Starobinets' novel *A Land of Good Girls* aims to reconsider those values and show their artificiality and irrelevance in the modern world. The author suggests that the old norms foster sternness and a lack of empathy in family relationships. The family itself turns into a hologram; a process of preserving schemes, values, and roles becomes an end in itself. Starobinets questions the normality of the "normal family" in Russia.

"REAL" WORLD: IDEOLOGY OF DOMESTICATED FEMININITY

Starobinets' portrayal of predefined family roles in *A Land of Good Girls* is unfailingly clear. Home, and especially the kitchen, are depicted as a female space. Women's main activities are limited to housework and childcare. Meanwhile, the story's men have few domestic responsibilities. Moreover, they can delegate their duties to the women:

> After Vadik, mom and dad woke up, because Polina had got out of her bed, ran into their room, and screamed right above their ears. (…) Then mom, if it was her turn, sighed heavily, got out of bed, and went to the kitchen to pour water for Polina. And if it was dad's turn, he then sighed heavily and turned over on the other side – and mom got out of bed and went to the kitchen to pour water for Polina. (Starobinets, 2021: 8)

Domestic work in Petrovy's family is distributed unequally. Starobinets proposes that such an unfair division of labor is common in a "normal" Russian household. The female characters do not resist. Significantly, the costume designer Anna Chistova, who created costumes for the film adaptation of *A Land of Good Girls* directed by Olga Kaptur in 2013, accentuated Starobinets' vision, by employing the iconic style of the 1950s American housewife (Markalova, 2013).

This visual reference to one of the most recognizable femininity constructs signalizes Chistova's ideological perspective. As Kate Baldwin claims, "Captured in or by the ordinary are relations of power that seem natural, articulated as they are through seemingly banal signs of housewifery" (Baldwin, 2010: 135). Chistova reinforces Starobiets' parallel between American housewives and Russian women. The significant distinction is that while American society "saw a reassertion of woman's 'ideal' role in the home" (Baldwin, 2010: 135) in the 1950s, Russia's house confinement of the female came in the 2000s, almost sixty years later.

In *A Land of Good Girls*, the restriction of female characters to the households is strengthened by the fact that all representations of the mother and the grandmothers are limited to the home setting. This is in contrast to the male characters, the father and the son, who, respectively, go to work and school. What is more, Polina experiences a similar spatial limitation; though her age is not specified, she neither attends preschool nor school. Under such conditions, the girl is raised to believe that domestic work is the only activity that will define her role. She is expected to continue the tradition of sacrificing her own needs and preferences for her family. After rejecting the role of a good girl, the heroine is constantly criticized by her family and is sent to the Land of Good Girls for reeducation. In the subsequent section, let us examine the reason Polina is perceived as an unruly child by her family members (including the cat) and the moral state of the dystopian Land of Good Girls.

NOT A GOOD GIRL

The protagonist of Starobonets' novel travels to the Land of Good Girls to experience, what Mary Pipher describes as "a rigorous training for the female role." As Pipher claims, since childhood "girls are expected to sacrifice the parts of themselves that our culture considers masculine on the altar of social acceptability and to shrink their soils down to a petite size" (Pipher, 2005: 27). Indeed, Polina's rebelliousness, boisterousness, and disobedience are not accepted. Her family members criticize the heroine for refusing to eat proper meals, throwing her toys, refusing to keep bedtime, disturbing her brother at night by crying, watching TV, and for drawing on the wallpaper. Furthermore, Polina does not wash her hands before meals, she steals chocolate, and feeds sausages to the dog. The main complaint about her behavior is that she is inconsiderate of other family members, while good girls should "not bother anyone" (Starobinets, 2021: 9).

The adults, whose natural duty is to help and educate the younger generation, accept only those youths who fulfill their social norms. Only those perceived as "convenient" are accepted by the society. In *A Land of Good Girls*, Starobinets raises the issue of conformity and the problem of the impersonality of the contemporary Russian family. The author shows how girls' characters, as well

as appearances, are shaped by the adults' expectations, resultantly stifling their individualistic features. In the novel, the "normal" family becomes a synonym for artificiality and a lack of conventional human relationships. The huge plastic New Year's tree becomes a metaphor for the emptiness of their family life:

> One night, on the 31st of December, before New Year's Eve, mother, father, two grandmothers, and two grandfathers, the girl Polina and her elder brother Vadik were sitting at the festive table under the huge plastic new year tree and were watching the TV set." (Starobinets, 2021: 12)

In Russian culture, the New Year is considered to be the most important holiday, a time for all family members to gather in celebration. Instead of the warmth of companionship, the intimate family gathering is filled by the official TV broadcast: "The TV broadcasted the hymn and the bell of the chimes" (Starobinets, 2021: 12). This represents the failure of dialog between the family members and, in a broader context, the dissolution of affirmative family bonds; family life is reduced to the fulfilling of social roles.

Polina's behavior stands in contrast to the accepted norms. Starobinets confers on her such features as frankness, emotionality, compassion, determination, stubbornness, desire for freedom, and courageousness. The protagonist's features are neither valued by the conformist world of adults nor by the superintendents of the fairy Land of Good Girls. In both worlds, Polina is an exemplary "bad," inconvenient child. She behaves much like the mentioned "bad girls" of Russian folk tales. In *The Lazy and the Hardworking*, the protagonist's "bad" sister is characterized as arrogant, inhospitable, naughty – a perfect candidate for reeducation in the Land of Good Girls.

LAND OF GOOD GIRLS: PURE OR STERILE GOODNESS?

After her family members make a wish to have Polina replaced by a well-behaved child, a Good Girl arrives at their flat from the Land of Good Girls. Meanwhile, Polina is sent to the fairy otherworld. The newly arrived Good Girl "was very beautiful, her cheeks were rosy, she was wearing the white sportive coat, white leather shoes and white wool hat (…) she had a beautiful white dress, which was clean and spotless" (Starobinets, 2021: 13–14). This Good Girl is reminiscent of the heroines from the folk tales and seems to be a personification of the ideals from *The Domostroi* ("Wear dresses and shirts and shawls with care every day, do not stain, do not smear, do not crumple or pour dirty liquids on it, do not put it on bloody or wet things; when you undress, put clothes away carefully and take care of them tightly" (*Domostroi*, 1992: 18)). The Good Girl obeys the adults ("I will obey you and will behave appropriately" (Starobinets, 2021: 16)). Moreover, when the father offers the Good Girl ten drops of champagne, or when the grandmothers offer her fried sausage or ice cream, she reprimands them for departing from the "rules."

Eventually, the Good Girl becomes the novel's villain, terrorizing the Petrovy family. The two grandmothers become debilitated by cooking, the parents and Polina's brother, Vadik, develop insomnia, while the good girl trains the family dog to exhaustion, and expels the cat from the house to maintain sanitary standards. Her "purity," "whiteness," and "hygiene" are a metaphor for the sterility of her soul.

Polina is the only character that seems to be "alive" both in the post-Soviet reality of her family and in the sterile Land of Good Girls. The protagonist illuminates these two worlds with her frank emotions; her name – Polina – is the colloquial form of the name Apollinaria, which means "solar." Only the heroine can feel compassion for the more helpless and unhappy characters of the Land of Good Girls – Bad Uncle and rubber-schnauzer (a dog breed that is born with the cage in which it spends its whole life). She can smile sincerely (even during a conversation with Mr. Polpred, the ruler of the dystopian fairy world) and feel the entire spectrum of human emotions, including those perceived as "bad" – stubbornness, anger, and disappointment. Starobinets defines Polina as a "strange" (Rus. странная), which in Russian refers to the word with the same root – a "wanderer" (Rus. странник) (Starobinets, p. 38). Polina travels through the two worlds, remaining an outsider to both of them. She is a wanderer, a Hero-Seeker, who is active, brave, and whose soul is alive: she is not afraid to go "into the fog" (Starobinets, 2021: 40) which emphasizes her fearlessness and strong-willed character. It is worth noting that her courage and ability to break rules are characteristics of the male Hero-Seeker from Russian folk tales. These qualities allow the Hero-Seeker to overcome obstacles. However, such features do not help the female protagonist in transcending obstacles. On the contrary, they prevent her from being accepted by her family and society.

As a result, Polina is saved by animals – the cat, Baguette, and the dog, Balbes. In the novel, these representatives of the animal world function much like the Donors of folk tales, who aid the Hero-Seeker. With the help of a magical force – Baguette's purr-lullaby – the girl returns home to her family. In the contemporary Pietrovy's reality, it seems, magical assistance is the only force capable of saving Polina from enslavement in the dystopian world. The author stresses the importance of acceptance for a girl living in the twenty-first century. Starobinets thus argues for the reexamination of the values instilled in females by *The Domostroi*, folktales, and Soviet literature canon and situates the tension between canonic and contemporary children's literature within history.

FROM FAIRY TALE TO DYSTOPIA

The dystopic reality of the Land of Good Girls, is emphasized by the namelessness of its inhabitants, the absolute authority of the president (called "the best of all the best presidents," and the mechanized animals – a special breed of obedient dogs (Starobinets, 2021: 54). Being a typical protagonist of a dysto-

pia, Polina comes into conflict with the ideology of the Land of Good Girls and its society (Mr. Polpred and the manufactured good girls). The protagonist of the Starobinets' novel is a girl who "refuses her role in the ritual [of becoming a good girl] and prefers her own path" (Lanin, 1993: 6).

Polina, with all her originality, courage, desire to help others, and sensitivity, is unable to overcome the border between the Land of Good Girls and the real world without magic's assistance. The novel's happy ending is indebted to the genre of children's literature. However, in the context of dystopian fiction, the ending appears illusory and artificial. It implies that Polina will most likely turn into an obedient "holographic" girl. In addition, the protagonist is alone in her struggle; her only allies are the cat and the dog. In the novel, the adults are incapable of active confrontation. Her family members refuse to confront the Good Girl, who continues to terrorize them. The generations of Polina's parents and grandparents are shown as conformist, loyal to the official norms and regulations. Thus, we understand that the novel's resolution is pessimistic: although the heroine returns home to her loved ones, she remains alienated.

Using the genre of dystopia, Starobinets expresses her pessimistic view of modern Russia. There are numerous political allusions in *A Land of Good Girls*. For example, Mr. Polpred wears a grey overcoat, often associated with agents of the KGB or the FSB – the Russian Federation's security agency. The novel was written in 2009 and ironically represents Dmitry Medvedev's presidency. He served as president from 2008 to 2012, while Vladimir Putin, who was prime minister at the time and previously worked in KGB, remained Russia's *de facto* ruler. The sarcastic description of the president of the dystopian otherworld in the novel is an allusion to President Medvedev, who was known for his short stature (1,63 cm) and his role of being a puppet. In the book, the president of the Land of Good Girls is described as follows: "in the center of the room, there was a gilded chair, on which someone crookedly sat a large rubber baby doll, wrapped for some reason in a real jacket" (Starobinets, 2021: 52).

Starobinets uses a child's viewpoint, notably one of a "bad," "inconvenient" and insubordinate child, to reveal the hypocrisy and artificiality of the adult world. According to the political research laboratory of the Higher School of Economics, the perestroika generation (represented by Polina's parents in the novel) raised a new generation that fully shares their fears and disappointments. Accordingly, their successors dream only of stability and material prosperity. This implies that the contemporary generation Z, does not want change (Filina, 2017). From childhood, they are taught in accordance with Soviet and Post-Soviet normative restrictions, which neglect to foster individuality. Consequently, in children's literature all that is different, personal, is replaced by a collective; the individual "I" is replaced by an indefinite "we" and normative understanding of what is "good" and what is "bad." Such an approach is cultivated in the elementary school curriculum. Therefore, by reshaping the

concepts of "good" and "bad" and questioning the authorities who impose such concepts, Starobinets attempts to revise the prevailing ideology and values. The author depicts a society of universalized happiness, where a girl grows up obedient, and pure to the point of sterility that erases all that is human and unique in a child. The Land of Good Girls manufactures holographic girls that are convenient for a patriarchal society, which, as we can assume, are desired in contemporary Russia.

Along with feminist fairytale writers, such as Anna Sexton, Angela Carter, Olga Broumas, and others, Starobinets questions gender roles and breathes new life into the genre. Indeed, *A Land of Good Girls* shares many features with tales such as their structure, motifs, topoi, and a set of heroes (the Hero-Seeker, the Donors, the magic otherworld). However, the author establishes a new Hero-Seeker – the girl – and changes the subject of transformation. In wonder tales, transformation is the main element of the narrative's structure:

> There is one 'constant' in the structure and theme of the wonder tale that was also passed on the literary fairy tale, it is *transformation* – to be sure, miraculous transformation. Everybody and everything can be transformed in a wonder tale. In particular, there is generally a change in the social status of the protagonist. (Zipes 2002: XVII)

While in canonical folk and fairy tales a protagonist experiences the transformation, in *A Land of Good Girls* Polina remains the same and resists re-education in the dystopian otherworld. Starobinets changes the recipients of the transformation: instead of the wondrous protagonist, she wants the adult readers to be changed. In wonder tales, the Hero-Seeker is banished from their home in order to go through the initiation process that will transform them. Conversely, in the novel, it is the home that should be transformed. Starobinets depicts adult characters raised in Soviet and post-Soviet society as a locus for anxieties and traumas. The author explores the continuation and domination of patriarchal and authoritarian cultural models in modern Russia that remain constant. Starobinets states that the transformation of the older generations will allow the youth to break free from the Soviet phantom.

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