

**Marja Sorvari, *Displacement and (Post)memory in Post-Soviet Women’s Writing*, London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2022, 180 pp., ISBN 978-3030958398.**

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The political, social, and cultural landscape of contemporary Russia bears the scars of a past that has yet to be fully and properly reckoned with by the Russian society. The post-Soviet political system sought to reconstruct the country by manipulating culture, history, and memory. The recent conflict with Ukraine is but the latest and most tragic symptom of an endemic illness within the state, which is increasingly resembling a new dictatorship, blind to both the past and the future of its citizens.

In the light of this scenario, Marja Sorvari’s volume, *Displacement and (Post)memory in Post-Soviet Women’s Writing* (2022), is a fundamental contribution to the fields of memory studies, migration/diaspora, and women’s literature. Sorvari, a professor of Russian Literature and Culture at the University of Eastern Finland, brings a distinguished expertise in post-Soviet Russian literature, with a deep focus on gender, memory, and multilingualism.

In the first chapter, Sorvari introduces “Displacement,” defined as a state “linked to the loss of memory, loss of meaning, and to marginality or placelessness” (2022: 3). This condition, rooted in the Soviet Union’s existence and collapse, encompasses geographical, cultural, and psychological dimensions and permeates the works analyzed. Alongside displacement, Sorvari examines the concept of “Postmemory”, building on Marianne Hirsch’s definition: it refers to the memory of previous generations’ traumas as distinct from direct experiences (2022: 138). This notion of “memory on the move” connects the themes explored throughout the book.

The final section of the first part contextualizes the historical position of women writers during the Soviet and post-Soviet periods, when the idealized notions of body, memory, and history that dominated Soviet discourse began to crumble. Women's literature commenced to emphasize the body in its more vivid and realistic representation together with pain and suffering as a reaction to discrimination during Soviet times (2022: 9).

The author identifies key themes in her analysis, including displacement, marginality, and "lived religion", explored through female subjectivity in relation to historical narratives. She also emphasizes the female body as a vessel of memory, particularly concerning childhood and orphanhood. Body and memory are portrayed as interdependent, evolving from idealization to confrontation with reality

Sorvari's analysis focuses on significant literary works: *Daniel Stein, Interpreter* (2011, *Daniel' Shtain, perevodchik*, 2006), by Lyudmila Ulitskaya (1943, Davlekanovo) is examined in the second chapter; *The Time of Women* (2012, *Vremia zhenshchin* 2009) by Elena Chizhova (1957, Leningrad) in the third; *Secondhand Time: The Last of the Soviets* (2014, *Vremja second-hand* 2013) by Svetlana Alexievich (1948, Stanislav) in the fourth; and *In Memory of Memory* (2021, *Pamiati pamiati* 2017) by Maria Stepanova (1972, Moscow) in the fifth. Furthermore, she refers to other notable Russian authors, including Lyudmila Petrushevskaya, Dina Rubina, and Svetlana Vasilenko.

Sorvari explains her selection of these prominent women writers by highlighting how their works challenge and subvert the dominant "narratives of greatness" promoted in contemporary Russia, particularly amid the resurgence of authoritarian politics and state-controlled memory (2022: I).

The selection of these authors is emblematic. Ulitskaya, Chizhova, and Alexievich experienced the Soviet era in its full swing, with their lives and works directly shaped by war, the suppression of women's rights, and the collapse of an era. These personal and societal struggles reflect broader cultural shifts, as highlighted by Helena Goscilo, who notes that women's literature thrived during the Glasnost Era, experiencing a veritable creative boom. However, this flourishing was soon followed by tremendous turmoil in the aftermath of the Soviet system's collapse and the catastrophic economic transformations that ensued (Goscilo, 2002: 15-17).

Maria Stepanova is a voice from a new generation, which was however marked as well by Brezhnev's "stagnation" period, Gorbachev's era and the fall of the Soviet illusion and stands as a bridge between the past and future of memory.

Ulitskaya's novel *Daniel Stein, Interpreter* opens a deep reflection on memory paving the way for the exploration of memory studies. The novel "deals in many ways with the fates of displaced people and their diasporic experiences during and after the Second World War in Europe" (2022: 41). It is inspired by the life of Oswald Rufeisen (1922-1998), a young Polish-Jewish activist who was displaced among various cultures and religions. He embodies a state of perpetual dislocation and liminality driven by faith. One of the key concepts Sorvari identifies in this novel is that of the "lived religion," which she relates to the concept of "lived body" – the idea that one's body is "the vehicle through which people engage with the world" (2022: 44). The novel's multi-voiced representation of diverse beliefs and convictions reflects the resurgence of religion and spirituality in post-Soviet and post-atheist Russia (2022: 54). Moreover, the protagonist discloses unique maternal qualities that positions him far from the expected patriarchal religious figure. He embodies a sort of "traveling memory" (2022: 65), a memory in constant motion, guided by pure Spirit, in which corporeality, movement, and maternal love become the main agents of history.

In the third chapter, the dimension of memory as listening to lived stories is unveiled. Chizhova's *The Time of Women* explores themes such as orphanhood, the tragedy of Soviet childhood, and the challenges of transmitting memory across generations. The novel tells the vicissitudes of a mute girl, who has not just one but two names: the first one is Suzanna, given by her mother and the second one Sofia, given by *babushkas*, who believe that the name chosen by her mother is more Cristian and less "secular" (2022: 87). These two names symbolize the duality of the protagonist's reality, hinting at the inner conflict she will experience as she grows up immersed in the contrasting narratives and values of the older women surrounding her. As a result, the protagonist experiences two different realities: the one reflecting *babushkas'* stories and the one permeated with the official Soviet narrative (2022: 87). This condition reveals a plural memory, and the girl's liminal existence between two worlds ultimately leads her, through the practice of art, to create a memory space outside the official narrative (2022: 88).

This novel raises the profound question of whether one is merely a passive participant in history or a creator of it. Sorvari's analysis invites readers to consider how female agency not only shapes history, but also serves as a conduit for memories.

In the fourth chapter, the power of voices and memory is brought to the fore through Alexievich's *Secondhand Time: The Last of the Soviets*. Alexievich's

work captures the futility of the Soviet experience, giving voice to the so-called “small” people of history who have been silenced for much of their lives. Displacement, polyphony, and the power of oral history emerge as key themes, helping readers understand the impact of Soviet history on individuals and the pivotal role women play in both experiencing and documenting it. Alexievich collects voices and stories “as she ‘hears’ them, as people speak to her, perceiving this talk as distinct from official, canonical history writing” (2022: 101). Sorvari observes that “Alexievich’s writing represents a bottom-up perception and memory of these events, juxtaposed with the top-down construction of cultural memory in post-Soviet Russia” (2022: 103). These characteristics together form a new genre, often referred to as *roman golosov* “novels in voices” or “collective testimonies” (103). Alexievich’s agency in constructing memories within her books is sophisticated, as she becomes an essential part of these memories, participating in their transmission and exploring various modes of remembering (2022: 114).

Finally, the fifth chapter delves into the future of memory and the fate of postmemory through Maria Stepanova’s *In Memory of Memory*. This work exemplifies the concept of “traveling memory,” encapsulating the fluid and dynamic nature of memory as it moves across generations and geographical contexts. Stepanova’s narrative interweaves personal recollections with broader historical events, creating a complex tapestry of memory that challenges the monolithic narratives promoted by Putin’s regime. Stepanova’s reflective approach, inspired by Hirsch, questions the reliability of memories and the process of remembering, engaging deeply with the concept of postmemory, where the past is not just remembered but actively shaped and reshaped by those who did not directly experience it. Stepanova’s work is both a personal journey and a broader commentary on collective memory in Russia, suggesting that the act of remembering is a form of resistance against the erasure and manipulation of history (2022: 136).

Marja Sorvari’s *Displacement and (Post)memory in Post-Soviet Women’s Writing* is a significant contribution to the study of memory, displacement, and women’s literature in post-Soviet Russia. Through her nuanced analysis of works by Ulitskaya, Chizhova, Alexievich, and Stepanova, the author illuminates the complex strategies through which they resist the dominant historical narratives of Putin’s regime as they do not “conform to reasserting ‘imperial greatness’ but can be seen as heirs of Soviet documentary prose in its form of political resistance” (2022: 15).

By focusing on themes of displacement, lived religion, postmemory and polyphony Sorvari offers rooted insights into how the works of the Russian women writers presented establishes “a living connection” between generations of women and memories (2022: 158).

Sorvari’s book is an essential resource for scholars interested in Russian literature and memory studies, providing valuable perspectives on the ongoing cultural battles over history and memory in Russia and paving the way for future reflections on women’s literature as a breakthrough state ideology.

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