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WOMEN IN GORKY'S PROSE FICTION 1892 - 1911

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By

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TO MY PARENTS

whose warm and loving concern

encouraged this effort

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MASTER OF ARTS  
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SCOPE AND CONTENT: An analysis of the portrayal of women in Maxim Gorky's short stories of 1892 - 1899 and some of the novels of 1899 - 1911.

The thesis contains a preface and four chapters. The preface gives a brief introductory sketch of the image of Maxim Gorky presented by Soviet literary criticism. The first chapter discusses some of the female characters in Gorky's early short stories. Chapter II deals with some of the women portrayed in his novels: Foma Gordeev (1899), Troe (1900-1901), and Zhizn' Matveya Kozhemyakina (1911). The third chapter discusses the female personages in his novel Mat' (1907) and Chapter VI summarizes my main findings.



## PREFACE

In the Soviet Union Maxim Gorky has become the object of uncritical devotion. His works receive loud, ritual praise and his position in the history of Soviet literature is assured. The Soviet regime links his name with its policies and hails him as the "perfect revolutionary", "builder of the new Soviet culture" or "pioneer of a new proletarian literature". He is saluted as the epitome of what a Soviet writer should be: a person conscious of the social problems in his environment, employing literature as a weapon in the struggle to overcome them.

The usual preface to a criticism of his works is an ode to the mighty proletarian writer who bridged the two epochs of Russian literature. This is generally followed by an account of his role and work in Soviet society as editor of the Marxist journal Novaya Zhizn', literary editor of Pravda, contributor to Lenin's newspapers, organizer of the First Congress of Soviet Writers and delegate to the Fifth Congress of the Social Democratic Party.

Soviet literary criticism of his works tends to be saturated with idolatry. His works are looked at from the Marxist point of view and within the context of "socialist realism", with emphasis laid on their political content and social message. The personages of his works are discussed mainly as types, representatives of particular classes of society.

A sharp contrast to the vast amount of criticism in the Soviet Union, is the lack of contemporary literary criticism in English on Gorky's works. Surprisingly his reputation outside Russia, while accepted, has not led to many detailed examinations of his works.

This thesis is an investigation into one aspect of Maxim Gorky's early writings -- the portrayal of women. My aim is to delineate the roles played by female characters in the structure of nine of his early short stories (1892-1899) and in some of his novels written during the period 1899-1911.

All quotations from Gorky's works are taken from Sobranie Sochineniy v Vosemnadtsati Tomakh. Moscow: Gosudarstvennoe Izdatel'stvo Khudozhestvennoy Literatury, 1960-1963. The Volume and Page Numbers are given in the footnotes.

The system of transliteration is the one used by D. S. Mirsky in his: A History of Russian Literature. Edited and abridged by Francis J. Whitfield. London: Routledge & Kegan Paul Ltd., n.d. The conventional "Gorky" will be retained throughout rather than "Gor'kiy".

I am most grateful to Dr. L. J. Shein, Chairman of the Department of Russian, for his advice and encouragement during my year in the Faculty of Graduate Studies. My thanks to Dr. C. J. G. Turner, Assistant Professor, for his valuable criticism.

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## CHAPTER I

### A GALAXY OF PORTRAITS

Gorky's short stories from the period 1892-1899 present us with a galaxy of colourful portraits such as vagabonds, gypsies, fishermen, bakers and prostitutes. An important characteristic of Gorky's treatment of women in this period is that he is not content with describing one type; the female characters of the early short stories range from decrepit old women to vivacious, robust young girls, each of whom must be considered in her own right. We have chosen to discuss the following female personages: Izergil' of Starukha Izergil', Natasha of Odnazhdy osen'yu, the widow of Zhenschina s golubymi glazami, the pawnbroker of Idilliya, Varen'ka of Varen'ka Olesova, Tereza of Boles', Matryona of Suprug Orlovy, Mal'va of Mal'va, and Tan'ya of Dvadtsat'shest' i odna. We will examine aspects such as: their significance to the story, their role in the hero's life, the hero's attitudes and reaction to them, as well as recurring character traits and situations that arise. It is difficult to avoid the summarizing quality in the discussion since Gorky rarely gives a complete picture of the female personage or the aspects that we have outlined above at the point when the woman is introduced into the work -- they emerge from a chronological account of events.

\* \* \*

The first female character to be discussed is the heroine of Gorky's autobiographical story, Starukha Izergil'. As the old Moldavian woman sits with the youth and relates to him the adventures that have coloured her life, she acquires living traits of personality. The compatibility between her and the youth establishes an intimacy in which the reader is invited to share. The scene is set with clearness: a beautiful Bessarabian night in the grape-picking-season provides a suitable background for an account of the old woman's romantic escapades.

Through the descriptions of the woman's physical appearance, her lifeless eyes and wrinkled skin, Gorky impresses upon the reader the horror of old age. When we first see Izergil', we see only a withered old woman. But as the story unfolds and we return once more to the days of her youth, she becomes alive and her personality and emotions become so vivid that we forget that it is an old woman reminiscing.

Izergil's personality dominates the account: by describing her former lovers and affairs she reveals aspects of her own nature. Her descriptions of her lovers are in sharp contrast to the initial portrait drawn by Gorky of her as merely a withered woman. By nostalgically recalling the kisses she bestowed, her past happiness and popularity, she shows herself to be of a sensitive, and passionate nature. Izergil's words are full of love and warmth. Emerging as a woman of such deep passions, she reminds us of Maryanka in Leo Tolstoy's The Cossacks.

It is interesting to trace the change in her attraction and attitude to men. The impressionistic pictures of the lovers that she presents us with are indicative of her own personality. At first



Izergil' is easily infatuated by handsome strong men and she recalls each lover's appearance, character and moods. Her first lover, a fisherman, she recalls with all the romance of a young girl's first love. His daring and masculinity are the things which cling to her memory. The mood of the portrait, as she recalls him, smiling at her on a sunlit day, is untinged by sadness: it is rather one of happiness and exhilaration. Her next lover, the red-haired Hutsul, she admired greatly for his strength. But as a young girl is captivated first by physical appearance and later by wealth and position, so Izergil' changes. She now becomes readily attracted by status and mood. Recalling the Turk in whose harem she had lived as a wealthy but pompous man, she shows herself to be more aware of human vices. However, later when she falls in love with a handsome, arrogant nobleman, she is willing to follow him even though she realizes that he is false and cruel. Izergil' is a romantic at heart and she still lives with the memory of her past popularity. The turning-point in her life comes when she, who had conquered men's hearts so easily must face the shame and humiliation of being deceived by her lover. It is to be noted that even after such an encounter she did not become bitter. The details of her subsequent life after her encounter with the nobleman become obscured. It is as if after her disillusionment her life had lost the fire of youth and left few memories.

The portrait of Izergil' that Gorky leaves us with -- an old, shrivelled woman, reminds us of one of the first pages. But now it is much more. Through Izergil's account Gorky has aroused in us feelings of sympathy for a woman who is just as much a shadow now as are her

former lovers. By stressing what she formerly was in contrast to what she is now, Gorky points to the sadness of old age. As previously mentioned it is her own account and the variety of emotions she expresses that makes her cling to our memory as a real live being.

\* \* \*

Izergil' had happy memories of her youth. At one point in her life she became, from necessity, a prostitute. But she dismissed this lightheartedly. In the following two stories: Odnazhdy osen'yu and Zhenschina s golubymi glazami, Gorky examines the question of prostitution which has only been hinted at in Starukha Izergil'. Through the portrayal of Natasha and the widow (she is never referred to by name), Gorky reveals why some women were forced to sell themselves, their attitude to their "profession" and its impact on their lives.

\* \* \*

In Odnazhdy osen'yu Gorky describes a single incident from his youth: his first encounter with a prostitute. A dismal, rainy day forms an appropriate background for the meeting between the lonely and starving youth and an equally lonesome girl, Natasha. Gorky introduces the young girl by focusing on her physical appearance: the picture of a bruised and frightened girl arouses our interest. When Natasha relates to Gorky her experiences with men, the degradation she suffered, she shows her-



self to be like Izergil' in that she is easily fascinated by handsome, strong men. But Izergil's account is devoid of bitterness. Natasha, however, aware of men's baseness, feels only scorn and contempt. But unlike Izergil' she is helpless before their cruel abuse. Natasha's account of the humiliation she had suffered from the man she loved is sharp and resentful and reveals to Gorky a side of life unknown to him. Despite her bitter experiences, however, the girl has not lost all feelings of pity and compassion when she caresses the lonely young boy.

As a fictional character, Natasha does not exist outside of her bitterness toward men and her role as the youth's comforter at a time when he desires human warmth and companionship. The encounter with a woman who bestows kisses and asks nothing in return recurs throughout Gorky's work. Gorky, like his later heroes, is grateful to the woman for her kindness. He later attempts to find her and offer his help in return for her generosity.

The portrait of Natasha, abused and scorned by men, points to the misery of a prostitute's life. And at the same time, as Gorky himself states, it is strange, in view of her reckless, bitter words that she still is willing to love a man. Both Natasha and the youth's circumstances effectively illustrate the loneliness and misery in life. A realization of a prostitute's misery plants seeds of bitterness in Gorky's soul, and he becomes aware of the sordid aspects of life. Just as in the autobiographical Starukha Izergil' Gorky, through a woman's account of her past, became more conscious of the sadness of old age, so here he is awakened by an account of the degradation a prostitute must face, to

a realization of the tragic aspect of life.

\* \* \*

We are never told why Natasha became a prostitute. In the case of the widow of Zhenschina s golubymi glazami we know from her own words that she must become a prostitute to be able to support her two children. Central to this story is the police official's (Podshyblo) reaction to the widow, who comes to his office in order to enquire about the procedure for becoming a prostitute.

We catch only glimpses of the woman throughout the story since the focal point of Gorky's account is Podshyblo, who is both attracted and repelled by the blue-eyed, attractive woman. Throughout the story he struggles to overcome his feelings and only at the end does his attitude toward the woman change completely. At first he is repelled by her, as is evident in his conversation with the widow and immediately antagonized by her matter-of-fact approach, her frank admission that she will become a prostitute. He finds it difficult to believe that she, a mother with two children, has chosen prostitution as the solution to her financial difficulties.

When the widow emerges briefly as a proud, independent woman, the man is further antagonized since to him she is merely another prostitute. But she lacks the customary manner of the streetwalker, carries herself too proudly and treats prostitution with an almost disdainful attitude. Podshyblo's anger and malice is vividly captured after

the scene at the tavern when, seeing the widow quarrelling with another prostitute who had insulted her by calling her an ordinary streetwalker, he desires to break the woman's spirit and hurt her. Gradually, however, his attitude changes, accompanied by the realization that she is too proud and thus cannot be reduced morally to the level of a streetwalker. But the real turning-point in his attitude comes only towards the end, when he sees her at the quayside with her two shabbily dressed children.

Gorky's impressionistic picture of the widow as a gentle, tender mother recalls the old woman in Idilliya. Underlying the widow's portrait, we sense the author's great respect and admiration for a woman who devotes her life to the welfare of her children. As yet, however, we catch merely a glimpse of these maternal instincts. They are further developed and culminate in the portrait of Pelageya Nilovna (Mat') whose feelings are dominated by maternal love.

\* \* \*

In Idilliya Gorky once more looks at life in retrospect this time now through the eyes of an old couple who own a pawnbrokers business. Like Izergil', they are surrounded by memories of the past and live their lives almost over, as an old couple would, recalling this past. The setting that Gorky paints, a stifling, overcrowded room, is appropriate to their dull, routine life. The point of interest in the story is the couple's deep love and devotion to their children, whose photographs are for them the most valuable objects in the room, their sole comfort, and

topic of conversation. When the business of the day is over, they turn to fond recollections of their children and express pleasure that they have lived up to their parent's expectations.

The portrait of the wife makes a much more definite impression on us than that of the husband. The initial picture of her, taking care that her husband is accurate with the accounts, is that of a shrewd, business-minded woman. Later this is confirmed in her own words revealing her attitude to their business and customers. Although she is tolerant and understanding with her clients (she often extends their credit), she is equally aware of human treachery and therefore keeps herself well-informed of the financial circumstances and whereabouts of each client. It is to be noted that Gorky lets the old woman speak for herself, thereby emerging as a vivid and credible person.

The initial picture of the old woman disappears, when we see her attention focused on the photographs of her children. Just as Izergil' becomes alive when she recounts her youthful adventures, so the old woman becomes transformed when she glances at the photographs of her children. In place of the business-minded woman emerges a tender, loving mother whose sole concern is her children's welfare. Even in the face of her husband's anxieties that their business is suspected of being conducted in an illicit fashion, she rationalizes that such suspicions are more than balanced by their children. Declaring that their lives have been spent in rearing children who will serve God and the tsar, she states her argument in simple words:

«Ну, ради них мы и согрешим,  
 так, чай, не во грех будет зачтено.  
 Ведь и птичка божия, птенчиков своих  
 выкармливая, жучков да божьих коровок  
 клюет, - так-тося...<sup>1</sup>

The final picture of the woman that Gorky draws kneeling before the icons, and praying for her children's happiness is vivid and credible in view of what we know of her devotion to her children. Gorky captures her anxiety and concern briefly but poignantly:

«Стоя на коленях перед  
 божницей, закинув голову назад, так  
 что затылок почти ложился на горб,  
 старуха с влажными глазами, как бы  
 задыхаясь, прерывисто шептала слова  
 своих молитв:

-- Помоги ей, господи, сохрани  
 ее, милостивый!»<sup>2</sup>

It is noteworthy, for purposes of later comparison to marriages depicted in Suprugi Orlovy or the novels which will be discussed in Chapter Two, that the pawnbrokers' marriage is devoid of malice or abuse. The wife is definitely the dominating personality. Her husband, full of respect and admiration for her, holds all her suggestions and decisions in

<sup>1</sup>M. Gorky, "Idilliya." In Sobranie Sochineniy v Vosemnadtsati Tomakh. Moscow: Gosudarstvennoe Izdatel'stvo Khudozhestvennoy Literatury, 1960-1963, Vol. I, p. 303.

<sup>2</sup>Ibid., p. 304.

high esteem. Having a common interest, (their children) and a purpose in life, working to support them, unlike the marriages in his later novels, theirs is indeed an idyllic one, based on mutual trust and respect. Gorky's vivid impressionistic picture of the tender mother kneeling before the icons and praying for her children contributes to the gentle and melancholy tone that permeates the story.

\* \* \*

Different in tone from any of the previous stories and certainly from the melancholy Idilliya is Gorky's story, Varen'ka Olesova, Gorky tells of a strange and interesting incident. While visiting his sister's summer cottage, a middle-aged professor, Ippolit Polkanov falls in love with a young coquette, Varen'ka Olesova. The hero's feelings, the doubts and anxieties of his first encounter with love, are central to the story. Varen'ka, in turn, is portrayed as she is seen by Polkanov who views her with the exhilaration and passion of first love. It is to be noted that Varen'ka's personality does not undergo any significant change, whereas Ippolit's attitude toward her changes radically (cf. Podshyblo's attitude toward the widow.)

Varen'ka is described before her appearance in the novel by Polkanov's sister, Elizaveta as an extremely charming, vivacious and popular girl. Polkanov immediately places himself on guard, determined not to succumb to her charms. At the same time, he builds up his own image of Varen'ka, as that of a crude and vulgar coquette. Gorky stresses

this wary mood so that we too are led to expect Varen'ka to be a seductive, passionate woman. The first impressionistic picture of the pretty and good-natured girl is effectively drawn against a romantic background of sunlit days and the beauty of the forest. Varen'ka emerges (in her initial conversation with the professor) as a friendly and light-hearted girl. He is immediately drawn to her, but his attraction is mingled with shame and guilt. Also Varen'ka's lighthearted and egotistical approach to life as she states that she is concerned only for her own welfare shocks him. Yet he is captivated by this very naive simplicity and naturalness, a welcome contrast to his sister's artificiality and philosophizing.

Varen'ka has a strange, complex effect on Polkanov. She makes him feel young and alive, but as the formerly conservative professor takes in every detail of her physical appearance with delight, he feels embarrassed and ashamed of his feelings, which makes this first love all the more realistic. Her moods are changing and unpredictable; he is never sure of her real feelings. In an attempt to conceal his passion for her, the professor engages in lengthy discussions on life, justice and equality. Varen'ka's attitude to life appeals to him and soon he begins to see himself as her teacher and guardian. The thought of taming the girl's impulsive nature and molding her into a mature individual becomes his goal. However, Varen'ka's words, as for example her dislike of Russian literature and disdain for the Russian peasant as expressed in the following words:

«Но я не люблю их -- скучные!

И пишут всё такое, что я сама знаю не хуже их. Они не умеют выдумывать ничего интересного, и у них почти все правда... Я не люблю читать о мужиках: что интересного в их жизни? Я знаю их, живу с ними и вижу, что о них пишут неверно, неправду. Они такими жалкими описываются, а они просто подлые, ни совсем не за что жалеть. Они только одного и хотят -- надуть вас, украсть у вас что-нибудь. Клянчат всегда, ноют, гадкие, грязные...»<sup>3</sup>

and her actions, her teasing, playful behaviour during their canoe trips characterize her as an immature, naive girl. She does not once give an indication that she is interested in Polkanov's attentions. Varen'ka merely regards him as a refreshing novelty after the many boring suitors whom she had encountered.

When, in the final scene, the professor, seeing her naked body, battles with his instincts but dares to approach her, her reaction appears to be one of surprise and confusion. Somehow we feel that even if she were aware that he was attracted to her, she did not realize the

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<sup>3</sup> M. Gorky, "Varen'ka Olesova". Vol. II, p. 18-19.



serious consequences her flirtation would bring.

Gorky ends the story abruptly with her angry outburst, followed by gentler rebukes as Polkanov is left to suffer the fate of unrequited love. In the light of what we know of her egocentric nature and naivety, we think of her as an immature, but natural person. Her outstanding traits appear to be vivacity and a light-hearted approach to life. Therefore, we find it difficult to think of her (on the basis of Gorky's presentation) as anything but a carefree and immature girl and certainly we do not see her, as Filia Holtzmann does, as a woman of exceptional integrity who towers above her environment.

\* \* \*

The popular twentieth-century theme in literature of "illusion and reality" (for example Tennessee Williams' play The Glass Menagerie) is found in Gorky's short story Boles'. Once more Gorky portrays a prostitute, only now the woman, Tereza, seeks refuge for her misery and loneliness in a world of illusion as she invents an imaginary lover, Boles', and asks a young student to write letters to him for her, as well as replies from him. The student's feelings and reactions to the encounter with this prostitute are central to the story. As in many of Gorky's stories, the man's attitude to the woman undergoes a radical change.

In painting an initial brief sketch of the woman's physical appearance as with Izergil', Natasha, and Varen'ka, Gorky concentrates

on the man's reaction to her. Tereza's harsh facial features and, her passionate glance frightens the young student. When we are first introduced to Tereza, we see her as he does -- an ordinary streetwalker. Agreeing to write the letters to Boles', inwardly he mocks her endearing words. The letters are not those he would expect of a streetwalker: they betray feelings of tenderness that he can hardly credit in a prostitute. It is noteworthy that the student from the beginning finds it hard to believe that she can have a real lover. Therefore he writes the letters with an amused air of smugness and condescension.

Tereza, who emerges through the dialogue as a gentle and sensitive person, is engrossed in her world of fictitious correspondence. Boles' for her is more than a figment of her imagination. Thus, when the world she had come to believe as existing is shattered by the student, she is numb and helpless before his accusations. Tereza, like Laura of Tennessee William's play The Glass Menagerie, is presented suddenly with the ugly truth. She is left to face reality -- there is no Boles'; there are no letters from him.

Tereza's awakening to reality arouses compassion in the student who begins to see the woman in a different light: she is a lonely and miserable human being. And indeed, as she states, her dream, although unrealizable, harms no-one. It would have been interesting to see more emphasis placed on developing Tereza's personality, giving the reader a view of her feelings and emotions. The impression we are left with is that Gorky is interested not so much in Tereza herself, as in the general effect the encounter had on the student -- who became aware not only of

his opinionated attitude toward women of loose morals, but also of the misery and loneliness that prostitutes are faced with, a side of life unknown to him; cf. Odnazhdy osen'yu.

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In the following story, Suprug Orlovy, we are presented once more with a woman who leads a sad, miserable existence. Matryona Orlova, the heroine of the story, has a dreary, monotonous life as the wife of a young shoe-maker who, driven to alcohol by the futility (the couple is childless and has no common interest or goal) and poverty of their life, finds an outlet for his frustration in beating his wife.

Matryona is characterized through her words and actions. When we first meet her, she is a miserable and suffering woman who seems to exist only as a target for her husband's anger and abuse. Unlike the previous stories, Gorky does not focus in detail on her physical appearance. It is rather her emotions (first as she apprehensively awaits her husband's return from the tavern and later as she rebukes him gently) that are stressed and give us the first clear picture of her as a loving, obedient wife. Gorky portrays her at first merely in relation to her husband, as existing solely as the object of his lust. Matryona, strangely enough, becomes so accustomed to her husband's cruelty that for her it is a part of the weekly routine and that she anticipates the abuse, knowing that the beatings will be followed by apologies and kisses. It is noteworthy that once again as an escape from reality, the woman seeks solace

in a world of dreams. Matryona finds refuge for her misery in reminiscences of the past and dreams of a better life in the future. But whereas Tereza's dream was unrealizable Matryona's does come true when the couple moves to the hospital and begin a new life as medical aides.

Both Orlov and his wife change, as does their relationship. The initial and significant change in Matryona, as we see in her attitude toward her husband, is that now in addition to loving him she respects him. The relationship between them for a while recalls the harmony of Idilliya. It appears that a common interest, their hospital work, has given them a goal and purpose. Gorky captures this change in the Orlovs' life by contrasting the harmony and trust characterizing the present relationship to Matryona's recollections of the chaotic, miserable past.

The change that Gorky portrays in Matryona, however, is too abrupt. The portrait of the new Matryona, who emerges as a determined woman when she angrily curses her husband's past cruelty, is in sharp contrast to the initial one of her as a loving, meek wife. Presumably the outburst has been motivated by the independence acquired in working at the hospital, and, looking at her as a woman, we can sympathize with her fear that Orlov will revert to his former behaviour, but we wonder if perhaps the change from the weak, passive wife to an independent strong woman, would not have been more convincing had it been motivated in the story by a longer passage of time. Toward the end of the story it appears that Gorky is interested in the effect that Matryona's final decision to leave her husband had on Orlov. In contrast to Matryona who becomes established as a respected member of the community, Orlov falls into

anguish and despair as he continues to drown his sorrows in alcohol. Matryona's departure increases the already existing feelings of dissatisfaction and frustration. This situation, where the woman's departure leaves the man depressed and bitter appears to be the pattern for Gorky's later novels: Foma Gordeev, Troe, and Zhizn' Matveya Kozhemyakina.

\* \* \*

In contrast to the drabness and futility of Suprug Orlov is the optimistic, colourful tone of Mal'va. Gorky tells of a woman's (Mal'va) visits to her lover (Vasiliy) who had abandoned his wife and children for the carefree life of a guard, (караульщик). An interesting situation arises when Mal'va arrives with his son, and the father and son become rivals for her attention.

Mal'va character emerges from her reactions to this situation, the various attitudes that the men have toward her and the effect she has on them. The setting is important to the general tone of the story, and it enriches Mal'va's portrait. Delineated against the background of a limitless, restless sea, this moody, freedom-loving woman seems to blend into the colourful atmosphere. As in Varen'ka Olesova, the heroine is introduced before her actual appearance in the story. But here it is the woman's personality -- her wild and passionate nature that is stressed. The sketch of the vivacious woman as she is awaited by her lover, arouses the reader's interest:

«Прищуривая глаза от яркой

игры солнечных лучей на волнах, он  
довольно улыбался: это едет Мадьва.  
Она приедет, захохочет, грудь ее  
станет соблазнительно колыхаться,  
обнимет его мягкими руками, расцелует,  
и звонко, вспугивая чаек, заговорит о  
новостях там, на берегу»<sup>4</sup>

From the above quoted passage we see that Vasiliy has become very dependent on Mal'va's presence. She is his sole interest in life and this is to be noted if we are to understand his later disillusionment. Mal'va, on the other hand, shows herself to be heedless of public opinion and remains oblivious to the fact that Vasiliy is embarrassed when his son, Yakov, arrives. In fact, she treats the situation in an amused, slightly mocking manner as if well aware of the fact that she is needed by both men. From her conversation with the father and son it appears that Mal'va views Yakov's infatuation and Vasiliy's attempts to quell her independent spirit with an air of indifference. Neither can tame her wild nature, for, as she proudly states, she belongs to no-one.

Her carefree spirit and her extremes of exhilaration and melancholy also attract the tramp, Seryozhka. However, his attitude toward Mal'va is very different from the passion of Vasiliy and his son. Seryozhka can understand Mal'va's desire to maintain her independence since he

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<sup>4</sup>М. Gorky, "Mal'va", Vol. II, p. 407.

also is a vagabond at heart. He respects her as a woman of integrity. Strangely enough, Mal'va leaves the men who need her and follows the vagabond, who is also bound to no-one. Vasiliy is overwhelmed by guilt, his son's presence reminds him of his wife and family and, perhaps realizing that there is indeed no way to tame the proud, self-willed Mal'va, he decides to return home to a life of assured stability. When, at the end of the story, we see Yakov ignored by Mal'va we recall the fate of unrequited love suffered by Polkanov in Varen'ka Olesova.

As for Mal'va, even though she goes with Seryozhka she remains in our mind as a woman who is bound to no-one but the sea. She has shown herself to be too independent to form any sort of permanent ties. There is a melancholy and sadness in Gorky's description of her parting with Vasiliy. As she retraces her lover's footsteps, she seems to be closing a chapter of her life. This is captured briefly but poignantly in:

«А Мальва шла и все старалась  
попасть своими ногами в ясные  
глубокие следы ног Василия,  
оттиснутые в песке, и, попав в этот  
след, она старательно затирала его  
своей ногой.»<sup>5</sup>

The portrait of the heroine is all the more colourful when the account is interwoven with vivid descriptions of landscape. It would

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<sup>5</sup>Ibid., p. 281.

have been interesting if Gorky had given us an inside view of Mal'va's thoughts and feelings.

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In Dvadtsat' shest' i odna the woman's personality is subdued in favour of the narrator's thoughts and feelings. In this autobiographical account Gorky paints a realistic picture of the hard, dull life of twenty-six bakers. We are presented with the situation that arises when the lonely men turn all their attentions to a pretty young seamstress, Tanya, whose visits brighten their cheerless days in the dark gloomy cellar. Gorky shows how the men come to worship her and how eventually their exalted idealization merely brings unhappiness.

We know of Tanya only indirectly from the narrator's description of her, as a happy, good-natured girl. Gorky focuses not so much on her personality as on the effect her visits have on the men. Tan'ya's visits to the bakery are brief: her words are few and she appears and disappears unaware of the effect her presence has on the men. In order to understand, however, why the bakers place Tan'ya on a pedestal and worship her, we must also take into account their feelings. These men are lonely, and desperately want to love and adore someone. This solidarity of desire is stated by them with simplicity and force:

«...нам нужно было что-то  
любить: мы нашли себе это и любили,  
а то, что любим мы, двадцать шесть,



должно быть незыблемо для каждого,  
как наша святыня, и всякий, кто  
идет против нас в этом, -- враг  
наш. Мы любим, может быть, и не  
то, что действительно хорошо, но  
ведь хотим дорогое нам -- видеть  
священным для других.»<sup>6</sup>

It is noteworthy that this adoration and idealization of Tan'ya is in sharp contrast to the men's general attitude toward women. Ignored by their neighbours, the seamstresses, they are bitter and resentful of all the women except Tan'ya. She acknowledges their presence with a smile and a friendly word and for this, they are grateful.

Tan'ya becomes a personification of the beauty, love and happiness that they desire. They too, like Tereza of Boles' live in a world of illusion. Into Tan'ya they place all their cherished hopes and dreams -- they consider her to be a paragon of virtue. A picture of the twenty-six men who build up an image of the young girl and proceed then to test their idol's faithfulness and strength, her resistance to a soldier's charms is a pathetic one. When Tan'ya succumbs to the soldier, and thus fails to live up to their idealization of her, the men are faced with the truth: they have been worshipping an idol.

Tan'ya emerges briefly in the final scene as a proud girl, when she retorts angrily to their curses and crudeness. This is the only time

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<sup>6</sup> M. Gorky. "Dvadtsat shest' i odna". Vol. II, p. 407.

we are shown her feelings, and it is rather unfortunate that Gorky did not delineate her feelings and reaction to the men's adoration of her. This situation, in which a woman is adored and worshipped by a man, looked to for solace and comfort, is further developed and recurs throughout the novels which will be discussed in the following chapter.

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In his early short stories from the period 1892-1899 Gorky blends realistic observation with romantic elements. "Realism" according to Gorky's definition in his series of articles on Soviet literature, is a truthful and unvarnished presentation of people and their conditions of life. The works which we have discussed are more than this -- they are naturalistic in that they present the sordid aspects of life: poverty (Suprugi Orlovy), malice (Zhenschina s golubymi glazami, Boles'), and prostitution (Odnazhdy osen'yu, Boles', Zhenschina s golubymi glazami). However, they are also romantic in that they are colourful (esp. Mal'va, and Starukha Izergil'), rich in descriptive detail (Varen'ka Olesova) lyrical in tone (Boles'), and present us with a range of emotions, as for example in Mal'va where we have feelings of happiness and exhilaration mingling with melancholy and sadness.

It is noteworthy that in the portrayal of the female characters there are definite recurring motifs and patterns. The motif of a woman's suffering, misery, and loneliness runs throughout Suprugi Orlovy, Odnazhdy osen'yu, and Zhenschina s golubymi glazami. In delineating the

woman Gorky often presents static, impressionistic paintings of her at the beginning and end of the story. In Suprug Orlovy, and Zhenschina s golubymi glazami the two portraits, at the beginning and end, are considerably different. In such cases the change is paralleled by a change in the man's relationship with or attitude to the woman. Encounters with streetwalkers leave men sadder but wiser. Love for an independent, proud woman is never realized (Mal'va, Varen'ka Olesova) and (Dvadtsat' shest' i odna).

The sad note on which all of these stories end, also permeates Gorky's novels: Foma Gordeev, Troe and Zhizn' Matveya Kozhemyakina. We now turn to consider the role of the woman in these works.

## CHAPTER II

### WOMEN IN SUPPORTING ROLES

Gorky's novels: Foma Gordeev, Troe and Zhizn' Matveya Kozhemyakina are similar, in that the protagonists of these works are sensitive, lonely men who search for a meaning and purpose to their life. Foma Gordeev, the hero of Gorky's first novel, feels alienated from the merchant class into which he was born. The protagonist of Troe is a pedlar, Il'ya Lunev, who aspires to rise above the poverty of his environment. In Zhizn' Matveya Kozhemyakina a wealthy merchant is bored by an inactive life in a remote town. Gorky skillfully recreates the character of the Russian merchant in his decay.

Both Foma Gordeev and Troe end on a sad note, as the struggling misfit is eventually crushed by his environment. Gordeev is declared insane and, after several years in a mental asylum, wanders about aimlessly, mocked by all as the village idiot. Il'ya Lunev had committed a murder in order to achieve his goal in life. When, in the final scene, he confesses his guilt, he is pronounced insane by the very society of which he had longed to be a part. Lunev dies in a desperate attempt to escape the punishment he dreads. Zhizn' Matveya Kozhemyakina, however, ends on an optimistic note as Matvey Kozhemyakina, before his death, finally finds happiness and peace of mind.

It is noteworthy that the childhood of these men was devoid of a mother's love and affection. Foma's mother had died shortly after giving birth to the boy, and the orphaned lad had been raised, even during his father's life, by his god-father, Mayakin. Il'ya Lunev had been taken away from his widowed mother at an early age, and his childhood and adolescent days were spent under the supervision first of his uncle Terentiy and later of an old rag-picker, Yeremey. Matvey's mother had disappeared without trace when the boy was seven years old. Presumably, the loneliness and dissatisfaction that plague the heroes throughout their lives are due to the absence of motherly love. This, at least is what would appear from the way in which they turn to women for comfort and sympathy. In fact their mood varies according to the amount of solace they receive.

The female characters that we are about to discuss serve to illuminate the personality of the protagonist. Although their portraits tend to cling to our memory as, on the one hand, the women who love and comfort the hero and, on the other hand, those whom he admires and desires but is unable to approach, we will consider each of the women as individuals rather than as types. Each of the female characters selected for discussion will be considered according to her relation to the protagonist and the role that she plays in his life. Gorky develops the individuality of the protagonists and shows aspects of their personality by exposing them to a series of women. In these works there is an almost automatic sequence of encounters with women.

We have chosen to focus discussion on nine women: Pelageya, Sasha, Sof'ya Medynskaya and Lyubov' Mayakina of Foma Gordeev; Olimpiyada, Tat'yana Avtonomova and Sof'ya Medvedeva of Troe; and the stepmother Palaga, and Evgeniya Mansurova of Zhizn' Matveya Kozhemyakina.

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Foma Gordeev's first encounter with a woman recalls the incident in Gorky's autobiographical short story Odnazhdy osen'yu. Once more a prostitute approaches a lonely youth, offers him her love and then disappears from his life. As in the short story, the incident awakens the youth to an awareness of sex, but the feelings and emotions which are merely hinted at in the story are presented in greater detail in this novel.

As in the short story, the youth meets the prostitute by chance at a time when he is lonely and starved of affection. In addition to this Foma wants to assert his strength and his superiority over the crew of his father's ship. The prostitute Pelageya seems to be the solution. We are not told if she is aware of the change in Foma as he becomes aware of his physical passions. The initial lust is mingled with shame and guilt. But at the same time Foma's timidity dissipates and the realization of his virility fills the youth with confidence. As we see in his smug assertions of superiority in a conversation with the ship's captain, his confidence borders on arrogance.

Pelageya emerges as a gentle and tender woman, as she breaks

the initial awkwardness of their meeting with words to soothe the lad's loneliness. She shows herself to be sensitive to any signs of rejection. When, Foma, overwhelmed with shame, orders her to leave, she obeys him. The prostitute is hurt by his angry outburst, but she accepts his apologies and justifies her tears by stating simply that she is saddened by the thought that her youth is over.

Reminiscing about her youth, Pelageya recalls old Izergil' relating to Gorky her youthful adventures. In fact, her despondency resembles that of an old, weary woman who has nothing to live for. But the boy's passionate love makes her young and alive. Like Foma, Pelageya changes as the sensitive, companionless youth arouses her maternal instincts.

Gorky describes her emotions of passion and motherly concern:

«Пелагая относилась к нему со  
всей страстью любовницы, с той силой  
чувства, которую влагают в свои  
увлечения женщины ее лет, допевая  
последние капли из чаши жизни. Но  
порой в ней пробуждалось иное чувство,  
не менее сильное и еще более привязывающее  
к ней Фому, -- чувство, сходное со  
стремлением матери оберечь своего  
любимого сына от ошибок, научить  
его мудрости жить.»<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>7</sup>М. Gorky, "Foma Gordeev". Vol., III, p. 56.

The newly aroused maternal instincts appear in her concern for the boy's future. Advising him to be cautious of human sincerity, Pelageya also warns him to avoid greedy and false women. She classifies herself as a good, light-hearted woman who loves and asks nothing in return. And yet she is aware of the fact that for a woman like herself marriage and happiness are improbable. Pelageya realizes that Foma's passion and infatuation will pass and dismisses his proposal of marriage gently but firmly. However, her refusal plants the seeds of bitterness and resentment in Foma's soul. For him, Pelageya had come as a blessing, a gift of fate; her departure leaves the youth resentful and confused.

Pelageya's prediction that Foma would be attracted to several women proves to be true. Soon after the encounter with the prostitute, he becomes attracted to an older, married woman -- Sof'ya Medynskaya. As in the short story, Varen'ka Olesova, the woman is described before her appearance in the novel. Mayakin resents her influence on Ignat Gordeev, Foma's father, and consequently curses her as a vulgar coquette, yet in her presence he is charming and flattering.

Foma is immediately attracted by Sof'ya's charm and grace. Her warm, sympathetic words at the time of his father's death comfort and reassure the lonely boy. The idealized image he builds around her as a paragon of virtue, grace and wisdom becomes for Foma a means of escape from his own alienation and insecurity. He feels awkward and inferior in her presence, but through her he hopes to acquire confidence and a sense of dignity. These emotions experienced by Foma recall his initial awkwardness in the encounter with Pelageya.



As he admits later, he looked to Sof'ya for guidance and hoped to better himself by associating with her. Sof'ya, on the other hand, admits to Foma that she finds his naivety and sincerity a refreshing change. But her feelings are devoid of passion and she proves to be unattainable. Antagonized by her rejection of his love, Foma tries to hurt her with slander. Her reaction, a cold frank admission that she does deceive her husband, surprises him. He had expected her to plead to be forgiven and had in fact visualized himself as her saviour.

It is noteworthy that Sof'ya, like Pelageya, feels it necessary to offer the boy her advice. She urges Foma to enjoy life to the fullest, and advises him to be more confident of himself and heedless of public opinion. Yet her rejection of his love dissipates what little confidence he has. His image of Medynskaya as the stronghold in his life crumbles when she, like the majority of the people in his environment, laments the cruelty of fate. Foma was tired of hearing the endless complaints about the boredom of life. Irritated by her rejection and frustrated by his inability to approach her, Foma finds solace in a prostitute by the name of Sasha.

We are not told of their meeting nor of his initial reactions to the woman. When we see them together, we are immediately aware of the contrast between her and the other two women, Pelageya and Sof'ya. Sasha emerges as an egocentric woman, whose proud and independent nature immediately attracts Foma to her. Her haughtiness is in sharp contrast to Pelageya's tenderness and Sof'ya Medynskaya's gentle, refined manner. We expect Foma to be antagonized by her biting, sarcastic remarks. But

Sasha is abrupt and rude only with others; with Foma she is friendly and pleasant. It is to be noted that her pride, self-confidence and independence -- the qualities he admires, are the ones he himself lacks. For Foma, Sasha becomes a symbol of stability in a world of uncertainty and chaos.

Foma had not questioned the other women about their past. When he asks Sasha to relate the story of her life, she refuses to do so, retorting angrily that there is nothing to tell. When the question of her morals arises, she is quick to defend herself. Her angry words, revealing bitterness against men, recall those spoken by Natasha in Odnazhdy osen'yu.

To Foma's disappointment, Sasha, unlike the other women, neither pities him nor comforts him. He has changed, and now his mind is occupied with metaphysical problems. Sasha, he had hoped, would help him to reason out the problems, and reach a definite solution. But she has learned to accept life without questioning its meaning, and Foma's endless questions depress her. She remains indifferent to his pleas to comfort him, and therefore when she leaves him Foma is not sad. The escapades with Sasha have offered him only temporary relief -- now he is lonelier than ever.

Sasha, like the other women, offers Foma her advice. Although she encourages him to acquire self-confidence, she is familiar with his moody nature and therefore warns him not to allow himself to be over-ruled by his emotions.

The moody and restless nature that Sasha detects in him prevents Foma from becoming friends with Lyubov' Mayakina. He is attracted to her, but at the same time he is antagonized by her condescending manner. Lyubov' is a part of the society to which Foma is unable to adapt and which he therefore resents. His awkwardness in her presence parallels his embarrassment in Sof'ya Medynskaya's company.

Lyubov' is like Foma, in that she too is striving to find a purpose to her life. Bored and oppressed by the inactive life she leads, she finds refuge for her loneliness in the world of literature. But this relief is only temporary, for she soon becomes aware of the contrast between fiction and reality. Foma's continual questions and his restlessness make her aware of her own instability and misery. Foma, on the other hand, enjoys seeing Lyubov' dejected -- it gives him satisfaction to know that someone else is unhappy. But unexpectedly Lyubov's fortune changes, when she finds sympathy and attention, the things she has yearned for, in the journalist Ezhov. And, furthermore, her brother's return home and reconciliation with their father give Lyubov' reason to be optimistic. With her withdrawal into the now closely-knit family circle, Foma, feeling himself excluded from their household, has no-one to turn to.

Women in whom he had placed his trust, to whom he had gone for solace, had appeared and disappeared from his life, merely leaving him more bitter and dissatisfied.

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In Troe we are presented with the aspirations and dreams of a man who, depressed by the poverty of his environment, looks to women for confidence and assistance in achieving his goal. When Il'ya Lunev meets the prostitute Olimpiyada, he is in low spirits. Once more, as in Odnazhdy osen'yu and Foma Gordeev, we are presented with a situation where a prostitute approaches the man and loves him without asking anything in return. Once more the man admires the woman and is grateful for her selfless love. As in Foma Gordeev, the man is attracted to the woman by the very qualities which he himself lacks. Il'ya is attracted not only by Olimpiyada's physical beauty, but also by her proud and independent manner.

The prostitute is frank with him, admitting to him that it was the desire for money that had driven her to prostitution. Her hopes of starting a respectable life are admired by Il'ya, who himself dreams of someday becoming a respectable shopkeeper. It would seem that this common bond of striving to attain something better, would serve as the basis for a stable relationship. However, Olimpiyada continues to benefit from the generosity of a wealthy merchant, Poluektov, whereas Lunev remains faithful to her. Resenting the merchant's wealth and security and overwhelmed with anger at Olimpiyada, Lunev murders the merchant.

It is interesting to note that the situation changes after the murder. Up to now, Olimpiyada has been the stronger, domineering personality and Lunev has been very dependent on her. Now, afraid for herself and dreading the thought of becoming involved in a murder case, she becomes dependent on Il'ya. Her fear gives him the satisfaction of

being her master. It is Olimpiyada who needs constant reassurance that she is loved and needed. Their affair becomes tumultuous, alternating between mutual accusations, rebukes and passion.

Il'ya, tormented by the instability of his relationship with Olimpiyada, finds comfort in the attentions of his landlady -- a married woman, Tat'yana Avtonomova. He sees her as the epitome of a faithful, devoted wife and admires what appears to be an idyllic marriage. He considers it a privilege to converse with an educated and refined lady. Once more we are presented with gratitude on the man's part for the woman's attentiveness. But Tat'yana is subtle, and only after she wins Il'ya's admiration for her does she approach him and provoke him to lust.

We find the airs of modesty and humility that she assumes for the purpose of attracting attention amusing. Her eloquent claims of devotion to lofty ideals are a sharp contrast to the vain flippant tone in which they are spoken. For example, when asked how she would spend a large sum of money, she tries desperately to camouflage her vanity, by saying:

«--А я бы тогда ездила в Крым,  
на Кавказ, а зимой заседала бы в  
обществе попечения о бедных.  
Сшила бы себе черное суконное платье,  
самое скромное и никаких украшений,  
кроме броши с рубином и сережек из  
жемчуга. Я читала в «Ниве» стихи,  
в которых было сказано, что кровь  
и слезы бедных обратятся на том

свете в жемчуг и рубины.

--И, тихонько вздохнув, она  
заклучала:

--Рубины удивительно идут брюнеткам...»<sup>8</sup>

Il'ya admires Tat'yana's husband, and the thought of being dishonest with him torments him all the more because he has accepted his offer of financial assistance. The thought of his passionate affair with Tat'yana arouses shame and guilt. Tat'yana, however, treats the situation very lightly, justifying herself by the fact that many married women in town carry on affairs.

Consequently, Lunev's image of Tat'yana changes, and he sees he for what she really is a flippant and shameless coquette. At this time he becomes interested in another woman, Sof'ya Medvedeva, his errand -- boy's sister. In contrast to the passion that he felt for Olimpiyada and later Tat'yana, his feelings for Sof'ya are devoid of lust. In fact, the serious, aloof woman is a welcome relief to the aggressive and shameless Tat'yana. Again it is an admiration for the woman's pride that attracts Il'ya to her.

Sof'ya is unlike any of the above-mentioned women. She ignores the man, and it is this aloof and withdrawn manner that interests him. Il'ya hopes to find in her a friend and confidante. But she lives in a world of her own and, saturated with literary heroes such as Don Quixote, she is preoccupied with notions of self-sacrifice and devotion to

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<sup>8</sup> M. Gorky. "Troie", Vol. III, p. 364.

the welfare of mankind. Il'ya, himself an avid reader, is eager to discuss his views with her, but Sof'ya's attitude to his eagerness is abrupt and cold.

When Il'ya sees her kind and gentle attitude toward the prostitute Masha, his hopes rise, and they are further strengthened when she apologises for her rudeness. However, it appears that Sof'ya is not interested in his feelings and thoughts. Masha's case (she had been sold into marriage and has fled from her crude and drunken husband) interests her, as does the prostitute Verka's situation (she is to stand trial for theft). Awakened by these situations to a realization of the corruption and injustice in life, Sof'ya uses Il'ya as a target for her bitterness and anger, denouncing him as a representative of the merchant class that, according to her, is to blame for the evil and sordid conditions in life.

Helpless before her accusations, Lunev still attempts to establish friendly relations with her. Although she does apologize for the second time for her abruptness, she does not appear to be interested in establishing any kind of friendship. Il'ya, repelled by Tat'yana's shameless advances and resentful of Sof'ya's indifference to him, is, like Foma Gordeev, overwhelmed with a desire to revenge himself for the humiliation he has suffered. Tat'yana becomes his victim, as in the final scene Il'ya reveals to her husband and friends the truth about their relationship.

Troe ends on a pathetic note as Il'ya admits to his guilt and in an attempt to escape kills himself. Women, to whom he had looked for stability, had disappointed him: Olimpiyada had left him; Tat'yana

proved to be shallow and hypocritical, and Sof'ya had rejected even his friendship.

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Zhizn' Matveya Kozhemyakina focuses on the feeling and thoughts of a man who like Foma and Lunev searches for happiness. The narrative is interwoven with passages from Kozhemyakin's diary, making his personality and his inner conflicts all the more vivid and realistic.

The memory of two women haunts the man to the end of his life. Once again we are presented first with an incident that awakens the youth to an awareness of sex. Whereas in Foma Gordeev it was through a prostitute that the youth became aware of physical passion, here the youth's step-mother, Palaga, is the object of his desire.

We find their relationship unusual and sad. Loneliness draws them together and mutual pity becomes the basis of the friendship. Matvey feels compassion for the timid girl and she in turn pities the lonely boy who is starved for affection.

The youth is not repelled when he discovers his step-mother's affairs with Sozont and Savka. Palaga admits to the boy that the other men are an escape from her loneliness and misery. As she states, Sozont appeals to her because his imaginative stories colour her otherwise drab life; Savka's passionate devotion also brightens her days. Matvey, feeling an obligation to protect her, even helps Savka to escape his father's punishment.



Gradually his admiration for Palaga becomes mingled with passion. Yielding to her love, the youth, unlike Foma Gordeev does not acquire self-confidence. Fear lest his father should discover the relationship between Palaga and his son only accentuates his bashfulness and humility. He fears primarily for Palaga's welfare: she has become his sole comfort in life and her motherly love has become more valuable to him than his father's affection. Consequently his father's death does not grieve him as much as Palaga's illness. His feelings of devotion to Palaga are poignantly captured in his last tribute to her; the planting of five birch trees at her grave.

«Зарыли ее, как хотелось Матвею,  
далеко от могилы старого Кожемякина,  
в пустынном углу кладбища, около  
ограды, где густо росла жимолость,  
побегушка и темно - зеленый лопух.  
На девятый день Матвей сам выкосил  
вокруг могилы сорные травы, вырубил  
цепкие кусты и посадил на расчищенном  
месте пять молодых берез: две в  
головах, за крестом, по одной с  
боков могилы и одну в ногах.»<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>9</sup>М. Gorky. "Zhizn' Matveya Kozhemyakina." Vol. VI, p. 172.

Her grave acquires a symbolic significance in his life -- in times of sorrow and anguish the deserted spot becomes his refuge and comfort. Unlike Foma and Il'ya, Matvey is rejected and mocked by women and, unable to find even temporary solace in prostitutes Matvey withdraws from women and leads a lonely, isolated life. When, many years later, a widow, Evgeniya Mansurova, becomes a tenant in his home, the man is warmed by a hope that perhaps she will be a friend in whom he can confide his sorrow.

As in the short stories, Mal'va and Varen'ka Olesova, the woman is described before her appearance in the work. Matvey's friend, the Tartar Shakir, and his housekeeper, Natal'ya, are impressed with Mansurova's politeness. When Matvey himself meets her, he is immediately antagonized, finding her to be cold and withdrawn. But as in Troe Lunev is interested in the serious and independent Medvedeva, so here, Matvey becomes attracted by Mansurova's severe, independent manner.

Mansurova, unlike Matvey, is interested in the political life of the time. Immediately this sets up a barrier which Matvey finds difficult to penetrate. The woman's constant references to politics, the fact that she had spend several years in Siberia (her husband had been exiled), and her inattentiveness to him -- all this irritates Matvey, who feels awkward in her presence. Inwardly he curses himself for not being able to comprehend her words. Yet he admires her, and soon his admiration turns to love. Her aloofness makes her all the more desirable. His hopes of securing her love rise when she listens attentively to his diary notes. But he is mistaken, for to Evgeniya, his notes are primarily of sociological interest. Emerging as a narodnik when she

declares her faith in the masses, the Russian peasants; as the country's only hope for a better future, Mansurova is continually engaged in conversations revolving around topics such as: the purpose of life, the significance of fate, the need for a belief in God, or the necessity of inspiring the people to fight to attain freedom. Her lofty aims and aspirations, as we are told by Uncle Mark, also a narodnik, subsequently dissipated as she became more aware of the cruelty and bestiality in life. But, at the time when we see her, Mansurova is devoted to the cause of urging the people on to fight for their rights.

When Matvey approaches her with declarations of his love, Mansurova states that anything beyond a mere platonic friendship is impossible. She had foreseen that Matvey might become infatuated with her, and now blames herself for not warning him beforehand. Strangely enough, when Matvey plays on her sympathy and begs for her love, Evgeniya, caught up in the fervency of his passion, yields for one moment to kiss him. Yet her inherent dignity and integrity do not permit her to be dishonest with herself. Mansurova's refusal increases his sense of alienation, and as the following passage indicates, the thought of a future without her overwhelms Matvey with a sense of hopelessness:

«С невыносимой очевидностью он  
ощущал, что эта женщина необходима  
ему и что пропадет он без нее теперь,  
когда душа его вся поколеблена. Придется  
пьянствовать, гулять, возиться с продаж-  
ными бабами и всячески обманывать себя

чтобы хоть как-нибудь укрыться от  
страшного одиночества, вновь и  
с новой силой идущего на него.» <sup>10</sup>

Realizing that she will never yield to him, Matvey nevertheless does not give up hope and visits her. Mansurova had left the town soon after her refusal of his love. After the final parting he finds temporary solace from his misery not by seeking refuge with prostitutes as Il'ya of Troe but by attending meetings of the narodnik group. Given the opportunity here to express his views, Matvey for a while believes that he has at last found warmth and companionship. However, he becomes dissillusioned again, and once more women are the reason for his dejection. At first, when he is encouraged by the priest's wife to court the pretty widow, Avdotya Goryushina, Matvey's hopes rise, as he visualizes marriage with the placid, gentle woman. Hurt by her refusal, Matvey seeks refuge for his frustration in an affair with an attractive, passionate married woman, Marfa Posulova. But he is deeply hurt when as he discovers that she is not interested in him. The affair had been part of a plot devised by her husband whereby he could acquire a portion of Matvey's wealth.

The last woman to come into Matvey's life, the young and pretty Lyubov Matushkina, proves to be a great help in nursing Kozhemyakin back to health and out of his gloomy depression. Through her, he estab-

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<sup>10</sup>Ibid., p. 290.

lishes contact with the outer world, acquires faith in the young generation which is full of hope and optimism for a better future. It is indeed ironic that the gloom and dejection that had plagued Matvey throughout his life and had been increased by his unhappy encounters with women, dissipate only a few moments before his death.

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The female personages of the novels discussed above have been treated by us only in relation to the heroes, since the nature of their portrayal imposes this approach on us. As we have illustrated, the centre of interest in these works is a male character whose personality and fate engages the reader's interest. In the early short stories, Varen'ka Olesova, Boles', Dvadtsat' shest' i odna, or Zhenschina s golubymi glazami although Gorky focused on a man's feelings, a woman was important and central to the plot. In these novels, Gorky enhances the portraits of his gloomy, alienated heroes by bringing in women, encounters with whom merely serve to increase the frustration and dissatisfaction overwhelming the men. These men have no purpose in life, and therefore find it difficult to find satisfaction and happiness in relationships with women.

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It is to be noted that in these works there is an absence of older women; we recognise, however, traits of Izergil's personality in

some of the younger women. Her lust for life appears in both Sasha and Olimpiyada. The nostalgic reminiscing tone in which she recalls her youth, is very similar to the sentimentality with which the prostitute Pelageya recalls her past popularity.

The prostitutes Pelageya, Sasha and Olimjiyada, like Natasha of Odnazhdy osen'yu, approach the hero, and offer him their love, asking nothing in return. The motherly, sympathetic Pelageya reminds us of the kind and gentle Natasha. But Pelageya, unlike Natasha, is free of bitterness toward men. Sasha's curses remind us of Natasha's bitterness and resentment. Maternal instincts and the desire to protect the man from disillusionment in life appear not only in the prostitutes, but also in Sof'ya Medynskaya and Evgeniya Mansurova, whom the hero desire but finds unapproachable.

As in the short stories Varen'ka Olesova so in the novels, the man is attracted to the woman but fears her. The protagonists of the novels do not resemble the rational-minded professor, Ippolit Polkanov, but they are all equally awkward in the presence of the women they admire (cf. Foma's feeling for Sof'ya Medynskaya, Lunev's attraction to Sof'ya Medvedeva, and Matvey's confusion in Mansurova's presence). The women who are worshipped by the men (Dvadtsat' shest' i odna, Varen'ka Olesova) bring only disillusionment and unhappiness.

Like the short stories, the novels are permeated with a sadness and futility. They are realistic in that we are presented with a picture of the sordid aspects of life like prostitution, drunkenness, human malice and cruelty. A sense of despair is particularly noticeable in

the novel Troe where through the brief glimpses of women who are not intimately involved with the protagonist, we are shown the grim side of life. Verka, at first a light-hearted prostitute, changes into a reckless and indifferent woman. Financial circumstances drive her to sell herself and gradually prostitution becomes an obsession with her, leading her to theft. She is a tragic figure when, in the final court scene, she can no longer conceal her anguish and breaks into sobs. The crippled prostitute, Matitsa, seeks refuge for her loneliness in alcohol. Masha, the shoe-maker's daughter, becomes the victim of Matitsa's recklessness: the orphaned girl is sold into marriage by the prostitute who squanders the money on alcohol.

In the novels we are presented with several marriages. In contrast to the idyllic relationship of the old couple in Idilliya and even to the devotion of the Orlov couple to each other, we have deceitful, shallow relationships. Tat'yana Avtonomova, Marfa Posulova, and Masha Revyakina deceive their husbands shamelessly. Physical passions play an important part in almost all of the relationships discussed above. In contrast to this is the love-relationship between the revolutionaries Pavel and Sasha in Gorky's novel Mat' (1907).

In fact, Mat' is very different from any of the novels we have so far discussed in that its protagonist is a woman: her thoughts and feelings are central to the plot. Mat', the prototype of socialist realism, also introduces a new female personage: the revolutionary. We turn now to a discussion of this heroine, Pelageya Nilovna, and her fellow - revolutionaries.

### CHAPTER III

#### NILOVNA AND THE REVOLUTIONARIES

The prototype of the heroine in Gorky's novel Mat' was an illiterate peasant woman, Anna Zalomov, whom the author knew personally. The novel is based on real events that took place in 1902 in Nizhniy-Novgorod and the factories of its suburb, Sormov. A young worker, Pavel Zalomov, began to think for himself and became involved in socialist revolutionary activity. His mother, Anna, volunteering for the task of distributing pamphlets, helped in her son's revolutionary activity. In Mat' Gorky portrays a devoted mother, Pelageya Nilovna, who realizing her son's courage and integrity comes to side with him and helps him in his revolutionary work.

Nilovna's personality emerges from a chronological account of events starting with her son's revolutionary awakening and culminating in his trial and exile. Gorky shows how the mother's personality develops under the influence of the events to which she is subjected and the people with whom she becomes acquainted. Discussing this development, we will focus on Nilovna's relation and reaction to the events and people in her life. On the basis of these there emerges a clear, vivid picture of the protagonist.

Gorky does not give a full description of Nilovna at the point



when she is introduced into the novel. In fact, at the beginning she is a shadowy and indeterminate personage. Her personality is subdued in favour of a sketch of her drunken braggart of a husband, Mikhail Vlasov. Only after her husband's death does she emerge as a living personality, within the context of her relationship with her son. An initial glimpse of her personality is given through Pavel's image of her, based on his recollections of the past, as a meek and passive woman. When Gorky lets Nilovna speak for herself she emerges indeed as a timid woman as she accepts her son's abruptness, just as she had accepted her husband's cruelty and abuse. But whereas we know nothing of Nilovna's feelings for her husband, we see that she is fond of her son and concerned for his welfare.

Pavel is one of the few personages in Mat' (also Nilovna, Rybin Vesovschikov) who is a dynamic character. The main change in Pavel comes about when he joins the revolutionary movement. We are shown how it affected Nilovna. The order of the change is presented as it is perceived by the mother and not as it exists in the minds of Gorky or Pavel. The outward phenomena are perceived by the uncomprehending and frightened eyes of a mother who, unaware of the fact that the change in her son corresponds to his newly acquired interest in the Russian socialist movement, views it at first as merely a sign of maturity, a transformation from recklessness and irresponsibility to serious, adult behaviour. Of prime importance to her, however, and by this she shows herself to be sensitive and desiring his attention and respect, is the change in Pavel's attitude toward her. When his abrupt manner disappears and he becomes

gentle, the mother sees the change in her son as a positive one and is overjoyed by it.

If we are to understand Nilovna's later "conversion" to socialism and have a clear picture of the relationship between mother and son, it is important to note that in the conversation in which Pavel informs her of his newly acquired interests he speaks first not of socialism, its aims and tactics, but rather of evil and injustice in life, phenomena seen and experienced by her. He indicates thereby that he is aware that, in order to introduce her to the revolutionary movement and to explain his role in it, he must first win her attention by focusing on something she knows and understands, her own hard, cheerless past. Nilovna on the other hand, encouraged by her son's sympathy and interest in her life, becomes caught up in his youthful enthusiasm and dreams of a better life. It is noteworthy that, even though she is frightened and confused by Pavel's mention of censored literature and the probability of an arrest, Nilovna is fascinated by the promises of a better life which Pavel claims that socialists will fulfil. Socialism, as he expounds it to her, is a complex and profound subject. As we are informed by Gorky himself, the mother is unable to grasp all of his ideas but she begins to worship her son's wisdom and eloquence.

Gorky adds life and colour to the mother's portrait by describing her moods and emotions against and in harmony with a background of nature. For example, after the conversation in which Nilovna is first introduced to the strange new world of which her son is a part, Gorky presents a vivid picture of her apprehensive mood against the background of restless

and hostile phenomena in nature. A dark, dismal foggy day blends into and increases the tension that overwhelms the mother when she fears that her son's life is in danger. Through his laconic description of the gloomy day and the chaotic state of Nilovna's mind, the author manages to grip our imagination and to impress upon our mind Nilovna's anxiety. She is as yet unfamiliar with the revolutionaries but has already placed herself on the defensive before them and imagines evil people creeping around her home. This is described briefly but clearly:

«Днем на мерзлую землю выпал  
сухой, мелкий снег, и теперь было,  
слышно как он скрипит под ногами  
уходившего сына. К стеклам окна  
неподвижно прислонилась густая  
тьма, враждебно подстерегая что-  
то. Мать, упираясь руками в лавку,  
сидела и, глядя на дверь, ждала.

Ей казалось, что во тьме со  
всех сторон к дому осторожно  
крадутся, согнувшись и, оглядываясь  
по сторонам, люди странно одетые,  
недобрые. Вот кто-то уже ходит вок-  
руг дома, шарит руками по стене.»<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> М. Gorky. "Mat'". Vol. IV, p. 164.

Nilovna's fear of the unknown continues to grow and in fact is responsible for her initial attitude of hostility toward Pavel's friends. Her attitude toward them and her relationship with the other revolutionaries are interesting in that they further illuminate her personality. Bringing the other personages into the novel, Gorky concentrates on the mother's reaction to them. For example, as evidenced first by Gorky's words and later by Nilovna's suspicious, cold manner, we see that she definitely dislikes the two revolutionaries, Rybin and Vesovschikov.

Gorky captures her dislike of Rybin in a passage in which he describes the mother's reaction to a conversation between Pavel and Rybin. It is indicative also of Nilovna's attitude toward her son. When Rybin speaks, her attention wanders, what he says is unimportant to her and consequently for her Rybin's voice is drowned out even by the smallest sounds like the cracking frost. On the other hand, Pavel's voice sounds loud and clear, all other noises seem to dissipate when her son speaks. It is clear that Nilovna worships her son and dislikes and fears anything that might be harmful and dangerous to his life. Rybin's and Vesovschikov's views do not wholly coincide with those of her son and their restless cynicism frightens her, since she fears that it will harm Pavel. Only later, when they prove themselves to be dedicated revolutionaries and when their outlook on revolutionary tactics no longer differs from her son's, does Nilovna's attitude change to one of admiration and respect.

When she first meets the revolutionary, Andrey Nakhodka, as her abrupt words and suspicious manner indicate, she is antagonized by his inquisitiveness and frankness. Unaccustomed to being among frank and

friendly people (Nilovna had led a relatively isolated life), she is wary of Nakhodka's motives. However, when he turns out to be a good-natured and polite youth, her attitude changes. It appears that Nakhodka's nostalgic reminiscence of his meek and abused mother helps to win Nilovna's attention and approval. The story reminds her of the miserable life she has led. Having found a topic of conversation she gradually becomes more at ease in Nakhodka's presence and subsequently in the presence of the other revolutionaries. Thus Nakhodka breaks down the initial barrier which the mother had set up between herself and the revolutionaries, for, as we see by her relaxed and friendly manner, after her meeting with Andrey, Nilovna is no longer wary of human motives. She is ready and eager to accept almost all of the revolutionaries, with the exception of Rybin and Vesovschikov. But even toward them she is never rude or abrupt.

Pavel's comrade, Nikolay Ivanovich attracts and fascinates Nilovna from the beginning. His accounts of other lands and people appeal to her imagination. This is significant in so far as it indicates that Nilovna is easily captivated by that which to her is novel and strange. We see a similar curiosity in her fascination with the ideas that the socialists promulgate.

This reappears in her reaction and attitude to the revolutionary, Natasha Vasil'evna. When Natasha reads accounts of the workers' uprisings in various parts of the world, Nilovna listens attentively and although it is all relatively new and strange to her she is fascinated by the readings and is favourably impressed by Natasha. Also the very

fact that Natasha, as Pavel informs us, has been cast off by her middle-class family because of her involvement in the revolution is sufficient to arouse Nilovna's interest and admiration for the woman.

Natasha Vasil'evna, as a fictional personage, is constructed schematically around a single aspect, her dedication to the revolution. We see her only in the revolutionary milieu, at the socialist meetings. There are no idiosyncrasies to make her a vivid and interesting personage. What we do know of her past life comes from Pavel's account. Later, when Gorky lets her speak for herself, she merely confirms what we have learned from Pavel, reassuring Nilovna that she is happy and content with her revolutionary work. Making a favourable impression on Nilovna, Natasha's enthusiasm and self-sacrifice add to the mother's growing respect and admiration for the revolutionaries.

If we trace the development of Nilovna's interest in the revolutionary milieu, which eventually leads to her so-called revolutionary awakening, we see that it parallels a mother's strong desire to please and help her son. In order to see how Nilovna's conversion to socialism stems from her devotion to Pavel, we must take into account not only her words and actions but also what the author himself says. Gorky explicitly states that the assignment, taking a message about the workers' strike to the newspaper offices which initiates Nilovna's revolutionary activity is important to Nilovna as having been given to her by her son. This is stated briefly:

«Это было первое поручение,  
данное ей сыном. Она обрадовалась,

что он открыто сказал ей, в  
чем дело.»<sup>12</sup>

Nilovna herself confirms this in a conversation with Nakhodka, saying that her maternal devotion is the underlying motive in her revolutionary work. Admiring the revolutionaries for their dedication to their work and their willingness to sacrifice themselves to an ideal at the expense of personal love and happiness, the mother admits that she is unable to do this -- her love is a selfish one. Thus, it is not a concern for the welfare of the masses that brings her to the workers' strike initiated by her son but rather a desire to be with Pavel and give him moral encouragement.

It is noteworthy that during the strike Nilovna's attention is once more on her son, rather than on the event as such. Gorky draws a vivid picture of the determined mother as she makes her way through the crowds to be with her son:

«Мать видела, что лицо у него  
побледнело и губы дрожат: она  
невольно двинулась вперед,  
расталкивая толпу. Ей говорили  
раздраженно: -- Куда лезешь?

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<sup>12</sup>Ibid., p. 193.

Толкали ее. Но это не  
останавливало мать: раздвигая  
людей плечами и локтями, она  
медленно протискивалась к сыну,  
повинуясь желанию встать рядом  
с ним.»<sup>13</sup>

Equally vivid and indicative of Nilovna's personality is Gorky's presentation of the first police investigation which results in Pavel's arrest. The mother's abrupt attitude toward the police seems natural in the light of what we already know of her deep devotion and concern for her son's welfare. Nilovna undergoes a change, her former fear dissipates and in place of it, as her abrupt, hostile manner reveals, comes an intense hatred for those who oppose and arrest her son. It is to be noted that after Pavel's arrest Nilovna's revolutionary activity increases. She agrees to the revolutionaries' plan to continue distributing the pamphlets, encouraged by the hope that her work will contribute to her son's release from prison.

Even after the arrest, her socialist outlook remains at the primitive level. Nilovna rejoices at having been able to grasp the essence of the socialists' sermons: injustice and misery are a result of the rich man's greed. Her declaration of faith and her affirmation of

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<sup>13</sup>Ibid., p. 194.



solidarity with the socialist movement is devoid of psychological complexity as she states:

«...Но вижу -- хорошие вы люди,  
да! И обрекли себя на жизнь трудную  
за народ, на тяжелую жизнь за правду.  
Правду вашу я тоже поняла: покуда  
будут богатые -- ничего на добьется  
народ, ни правды, ни радости,  
ничего!»<sup>14</sup>

Fortunately, Gorky's vivid descriptions of Nilovna's emotions prevent the speeches and declarations made by the other personages from overwhelming the novel. One of the more interesting descriptions illustrating Nilovna's sensitive and determined nature is that of Nilovna's relearning to read. Realistically captured is the semiliterate peasant woman's embarrassment and fear of mockery and ridicule. The picture of her, fatigued by the effort to recall the alphabet but at the same time tense and anxious to master it and thus to win Nakhodka's praise is realistic and credible in the light of what we know of the mother's basic sensitivity and her strong desire to be admired by Pavel and his friends. She shows herself to be determined when, after Nakhodka's departure, having closed the door and drawn the curtain, she continues to

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<sup>14</sup> Ibid., p. 213.

read alone. As she later reveals in a conversation with Pavel, this determination to learn to read stemmed from the desire to be praised and respected by him.

When Pavel is finally released from prison the reader experiences with Nilovna her intense joy, since Gorky has previously shown us prison life through her uncomprehending eyes as a terrible and inexplicable routine. The cold, harsh reality is frightening. Both prisoners and visitors appear to be following a pre-arranged pattern. Gorky achieves the desired effect by a laconic description of the mother's reactions to prison life, enhanced by a terse dialogue between Nilovna and Pavel.

In contrast to Nilovna who reveals her feelings for Pavel, is his beloved Sasha who takes care to conceal her emotions for Pavel. Their love-relationship is different from any of those delineated in the novels Foma Gordeev and Troe, where candid, aggressive women approach the man, offering their love.

At the beginning of the novel Nilovna's restrained manner indicates that she does not feel at ease in Sasha's presence. Sasha in turn is at first severe and aloof toward the mother. It is only later, when the revolutionary, Egor, informs Nilovna that Sasha has left her family for revolutionary work that her attitude begins to change. When Egor tells her that Sasha carried out the threat of going on a hunger-strike after she had been insulted by a prison guard, the mother is filled with respect and admiration for the proud and determined girl. Seeing the sacrifices that they are willing to make, Nilovna's respect for the socialists increases.

Sasha, as a fictional personage, remains in the background until just before the May uprising, appearing like Natasha at the meetings, and schematically drawn by Gorky as another dedicated revolutionary. In a conversation with Pavel just before the planned uprising, she emerges as a girl in love, when, concerned about his welfare she asks Pavel to decline from carrying the flag at the demonstration, fearing that he is endangering his life. But somehow her words are overpowered by Pavel's declaration of dedication to the revolution and it is noteworthy that Sasha accepts his decision as final. Later, when Pavel is in prison, she appears to be ashamed of revealing her feelings for him. Having indicated in the presence of her comrades an interest in the plan of escape from prison thus, we are to assume that her major concern was really for Pavel's safety, she hastens to assure them that she has no personal interest in the plan. We would like to have seen the relationship between Sasha and Pavel developed on a more personal level. The impression that we are left with is that, as Egor says, love is of secondary importance to the ideal of dedication to the revolution.

Gorky's treatment of the May uprising is interesting in so far as it is presented as it is seen through Nilovna's eyes and as it is significant to her life. Gorky introduces the event by first focusing on a description of a phenomenon in nature; the thaw and birth of spring. Only later does the focus shift to the emotions of happiness experienced by Pavel and Nakhodka and subsequently by the mother. Seeing her son happy and enthusiastic Nilovna rejoices and is caught up in the heightened excitement.

The day which begins simply with an increase of household chores becomes for Nilovna a memorable occasion of her son's success as a leader of the masses. It is to be noted that at the uprising Nilovna's attention is once more centered on her son. In view of what we have already seen of her maternal devotion and admiration for her son's courage, the scene in which after the arrest Nilovna publically urges the people to follow the young revolutionaries is vivid and credible. It also prepares us for a later similar scene: Nilovna's outburst after the trial and the final sentence.

When, after the May uprising, Nilovna begins a new life, in accordance with Pavel's wishes at the home of the revolutionary Nikolay Ivanovich, she completely loses her timidity and also becomes more involved in her work. The initial gloom that overwhelms her immediately after Pavel's arrest, captured poignantly by contrasting the emptiness of life without Pavel to reminiscences of former happiness, dissipates as she becomes more active in distributing pamphlets. It is noteworthy that she volunteers for the work with the hope of pleasing Pavel and winning his admiration.

Sof'ya Ivanovna, her co-worker, helps to brighten the mother's days during Pavel's imprisonment. Nilovna's first impression of the woman is a favourable one. Sof'ya is sketched before her appearance in the novel. Her brother, Nikolay Ivanovich, informs us that she is a widow who has been in exile and is at present an active member of the socialist party. Contrary to our expectations (we expect someone like Sasha), Sof'ya shows herself to be a friendly and light-hearted person.

Her humorous accounts of her escapades and adventures with spies add a light touch to revolutionary activity. When later Gorky presents her on her travels round the country as an ardent lover of nature and a romantic heart, as she sings love-songs and recites romantic poetry, Sof'ya becomes for a moment vivid and live human being. However, she fades as an individual the moment that Gorky delineates her as a "preacher" among the peasants, instilling into them faith in the future of the revolution. The hackneyed clichés that Gorky was never able to rid himself of make uninteresting reading, add nothing to Sof'ya's portrait and could well be attributed to any of the other optimistic revolutionaries.

We are surprised to read that the friendship between the mother and Sof'ya ends so abruptly: Gorky gives us no hint or warning. It appears that Sof'ya and Nilovna trust each other and enjoy travelling together. Thus Gorky's statement that Nilovna become antagonized by Sof'ya's inconsistent behaviour is insufficient in view of what we have been shown of their close relationship and compatibility.

The revolutionary, Lyudmila, replaces Sof'ya as Nilovna's companion and co-worker. At first Nilovna is antagonized by Lyudmila's domineering and abrupt manner. But, upon seeing that Lyudmila, in addition to sacrificing her personal happiness for the revolutionary work, has taken it upon herself to nurse Egor during his illness, Nilovna's attitude changes to one of respect. Also, Lyudmila's praise of Pavel's integrity and courage gives Nilovna reassurance just at the time when it is needed, during her son's imprisonment.

Once more a brief sketch is given of the woman's past, now however it is Lyudmila herself who informs us of her past experiences. Like the other women she at the expense of her personal happiness has dedicated herself to the revolution. Unfortunately, she is presented only in the revolutionary milieu and consequently we tend to remember her as merely an exemplary revolutionary. The discussion of the female personages other than Nilovna may appear repetitious but this is largely because the personages are repetitious, constructed by Gorky as self-sacrificing and enthusiastic model revolutionaries. It would have been interesting to see the revolutionaries' attitude and reaction to Nilovna's so-called re-awakening. For example, we wonder how they reacted to her speech after the trial.

The workers' trial is described as it is seen through Nilovna's uncomprehending and terrified eyes. Gorky exposes the injustice and corruption of the court and yet the picture of the aggravated mother, for whom the atmosphere in the room is stifling, the judge and jury appear to be inattentive and uninterested and everything in general seems hopeless and gloomy until her son appears, is realistically and effectively drawn as Gorky focuses on Nilovna's reactions to the trial. This scene serves as a prelude to the anger and frustration that later overwhelms Nilovna and culminates in her address to the people.

In the final scene, where Nilovna, urges the crowds to follow the youths' example and praises the revolutionaries' dedication to their cause we are aware that Gorky is trying to impress upon our minds the figure of her as a dedicated revolutionary. However, the picture we see is that of a frightened woman, helpless before human cruelty. Vividly

drawn against a background of spies and police, it is much more convincing than the sketch of Nilovna, the revolutionary, strengthened by her spiritual ties with the proletariat. Her assurance that she has finally grasped "the truth" (this word, which also appears in Gorky's polemical plays, is never defined) does not convince us that she is a rational convert to socialism. We have seen her as a woman whose being is dominated by maternal love and affection and we think of her conversion as stemming from these feelings. Had we been presented with a woman who meditated on the ideology and tactics of the socialists, rationalized and only subsequently came to believe in them, the picture of a "staunch revolutionary" would have been convincing and credible. But Gorky himself states that Nilovna's maternal instincts surpassed any lofty idea of service and dedication to mankind. For example, he speaks of her anxiety and concern for her son's welfare as overwhelming the desire to sacrifice herself in order to help mankind:

«Ее любовь -- любовь матери --  
разгоралась сжимая сердце почти до  
боли, потом материнское мешало  
росту человеческого, сжигало его,  
и на месте великого чувства, в  
сером пепле тревоги, робко билась  
унылая мысль:

«Погибнет...пропадет!...»<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> Ibid., p. 326.

Nilovna, a woman capable of fear, at times even overwhelmed by it, plagued by loneliness and craving human companionship, stands out from the other females as a live human being. This is not to say that the other women are emotionless. Sasha does show concern for Pavel's welfare. After the trial she is gentle toward the mother and even speaks of Pavel with tenderness. Natasha at one time recalls her mother with nostalgia. Sof'ya's artistic nature reveals itself in her love of music and poetry. Lyudmila admits to loneliness, when she states sadly that her only visitors are those involved in revolutionary activity. But all these human emotions, which we would have liked to see developed, are sublimated in favour of the desired image of these women as staunch and dedicated revolutionaries.

If these right-thinking and right-acting women had been presented as more human and capable of emotions like those which dominate Nilovna, they would cling to our memory not merely as revolutionaries but also as interesting individuals. In his eagerness to play up the characteristic of the good revolutionary, Gorky's characterization becomes too schematic with the result that these personages appear to us to be repetitious.

On the other hand, the failure to make Nilovna convincing as a revolutionary and political agitator, since she is much too involved in personal life and emotions to be a revolutionary whose dedication should transcend personal feelings and sympathies, saves the novel from being merely an affirmation of socialist ideals. Although, as Gorky writes in a letter to his wife, Ekaterina Pavlovna, Nilovna does in her "speeches" express the author's admiration and faith in the revolution, she seems



to exist as an individual in her own right and is a sufficiently vivid character to be more than simply a representative of the author, an illustration of his ideas and theories. Gorky achieves this vividness through heightening the readers' emotions: we pity and admire Nilovna, we experience her fears and anxieties. He succeeds in portraying a mother whose love for her son, linked with a concern for his welfare, is the dominant aspect of her nature. Without Nilovna's personality, Mat would be remembered by us merely as a series of dialogues on freedom, justice, the aims of socialism.

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Mat is considered to be the prototype of the Soviet novel: the forebear of the literary method of socialist realism<sup>16</sup> (since 1932 the governing school in Soviet letters has been designated by this term). Gorky is regarded as the founder and theoretician of socialist realism.

In his address of August 17, 1934 to the first National Congress of Soviet Writers, sharply denouncing writers whose works criticized society but offered no hope for improvement, Gorky, as an ideological answer to the various literary groups that were proposing their theories, expounded the notion of socialist realism.

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<sup>16</sup>There have been various definitions and interpretations of the term 'socialist realism'. For the purposes of this discussion, we are confining ourselves to the definition as outlined by Maxim Gorky at the First National Congress of Soviet Writers (1934).

Gorky stated that in a socialist state literature could, by depicting the noble aims and events of the revolution, offer hopes for bettering society: Socialist realism was to develop the revolutionary self-consciousness of the masses and reform human beings by emphasizing the triumphs of socialism. The writer was to give a truthful and unvarnished picture of people and the conditions of their life. Realism was to incorporate elements of romanticism by idealizing those who dedicated themselves to the welfare of mankind. Gorky stated.

"Socialist realism proclaims that life is action, creativity whose aim is the unfettered development of man's most individual abilities for his victories over the sources of Nature, for his health and longevity, for the great happiness of living on earth which he in conformity with the constant growth of his requirements wishes to cultivate as a magnificent habitation of a mankind united in one family."<sup>17</sup>

Mat', the first example of socialist realism, focuses primarily on the positive aspects of the revolution and glorifies a revolt of the proletariat as the only way of bettering social conditions and attaining the justice and equality that man desires. As such, it was bound to attract the attention of Lenin who wrote to him that it was a "necessary book".

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<sup>17</sup> Maxim Gorky, "Soviet Literature" (Address delivered to the First All-Union Congress of Soviet Writers, August 17, 1934) in On Literature Selected Articles. Moscow: Foreign Languages Publishing House, n.d. p. 264.

"Many workers took part in the revolutionary movement unconsciously, spontaneously, and now they are reading "The Mother" with great benefit to themselves."<sup>18</sup>

According to Lenin, books like Mat' could advance the cause of socialism by making the revolutionary workers conscious of the immediate work to be done. Lenin considered Gorky's novel to be a true presentation of reality. Gorky's work, however, is far from being an unvarnished picture of life. On the contrary the picture of life during the socialist revolution is one-sided and exaggerated and a sharp contrast to the life depicted in the short stories and novels which we have previously discussed. In Mat' the basic problems of wickedness and abomination, that Gorky usually exposes with force and bitterness, are subdued in favour of fine and noble human motives. In place of corrupt merchants, lecherous men and deceitful women with vices like greed and malice, he shows us noble men, flawless and content to sacrifice themselves to the revolution. Human relations are now characterized by mutual trust and respect. The right-thinking and right-acting socialists, unmarred by human weaknesses, unlike the characters of the novels Foma Gordeev, Troe and Zhizn' Matveya Kozhemyakina are not concerned for their own welfare, only for the good of mankind.

Women, who so far have been looked to for comfort and solace or

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<sup>18</sup>Quoted by Henry Gifford, "Socialist Realism" The Novel in Russia. London: Hutchinson University Library (1964) p. 138.

merely used by men as objects of pleasure, are now admired from a distance, but never approached. Nakhodka confides in Pavel his admiration for Natasha, but hesitates to tell her about it. The only love-relationship portrayed (Pavel and Sasha) is idealized, as being based on respect and strengthened by a common goal, namely revolutionary activity. There is no mention of the lovers' yearning for physical love: it appears that their dedication to the revolution transcends their emotions. In contrast to the marriages of Tat'yana (Troe) or Sof'ya Medynskaya (Foma Gordeev), where there is no respect, only shameless deception, we are presented in this work with an ideal future marriage (Pavel and Sasha) bound by trust and a common interest in the revolution.

Maternal instincts hinted at in the portrayals of the widow (Zhenschina s golubymi glazami), the old woman of Idilliya, or the prostitutes whom we have discussed, are further developed in this novel and culminate in the portrait of a woman whose dominant motive is maternal love.

In none of the more significant works written by Gorky during the period (1892 - 1911) to which we have referred is a female personage so central to the plot as in Mat'. In the polemical plays of this period we are presented with a wide range of female characters, from bitter hunchbacks (Lyubov' of Poslednie) to deceitful, flippant wives (Ol'ga Borisovna of Yakov Bogomolov). In the novels Leto and Ispoved' the protagonist is once more a man and women are portrayed in relation to him.

Thus Mat' is unique not only in its acutely social orientation but also in being Gorky's first and last attempt at a full-length portrayal of a female character.

## CHAPTER IV

### CONCLUSION

In discussing and evaluating Gorky's treatment of women in the works discussed above, we will first take into account the author's views on the nature and purpose of literature, illustrate how he adhered to them in these particular works of 1892 - 1911, and then discuss briefly the impact of his personal life and experiences on his portrayal of female characters.

Gorky's short story, Chitatel' (1895), indicates that as early as the time when he was writing his early short stories the author was occupied with the age-long debate about the purpose of literature and the writer's role in society. In this first-person narrative Gorky is awakened by one of his readers to the realization that literature should aim not only at pleasing the audience, but also at teaching man to become more aware of life and conditions about him and consequently strive toward bettering them. The didactic role of literature, its morally instructive aspect and the writer's moral obligation to fulfil it is stated thus:

«цель литературы помогать человеку  
понимать себя самого, поднять его веру  
в себя и развить в нем стремление к истине,  
бороться с пошлостью в людях, уметь найти

хорошее в них, возбуждать в их душах  
стыд, гнев, мужество, делать все для  
того, чтоб люди стали благородно силь-  
ными и могли одухотворить свою жизнь  
святым духом красоты. Вот моя формула:  
она, разумеется, неполна, схематична...  
Дополняйте ее всем, что может одухотво-  
рить жизнь...»<sup>19</sup>

In the first part of his trilogy, Gorky expresses a strong desire to be a writer who could inspire people through his art to work toward achieving a better society which would be free from the evil and injustice that plague mankind, and not merely an exposé of the grim and seamy side of life. He expresses his enthusiasm in the following passage:

«Вспоминая эти свинцовые мерзости  
дикой русской жизни, я минутами спраши-  
ваю себя: да стоит ли говорить об этом?  
И, с обновленной уверенностью, отвечаю себе--  
стоит: ибо это -- живучая, подлая правда,  
она не издохла и по сей день. Это та правда,  
которую необходимо знать до корня, чтобы с  
корнем же и выдрать ее из памяти, из души

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<sup>19</sup>Maxim Gorky, "Chitatel" in Sobranie Sochineniy v Vosemnadtsati Tomakh. Moscow: Gosudarstvennoe Izdatel'stvo Khudozhestvennoy Literatury, 1960-1963. Vol. I, p. 247.

человека, из всей жизни нашей, тяжелой  
и позорной.»<sup>20</sup>

Further evidence of Gorky's firm belief that art is to be an important and public service to mankind may be found in his personal correspondence with Chekhov, Lev Tolstoy, H. G. Wells and Romain Rolland. For example, in a letter to Chekhov (written on January 17, 1900) Gorky, praises Chekhov's short stories and expresses his views on literature thus:

"It is essential that present-day literature should begin to embellish life for as soon as it does that life becomes beautified, that is to say, people will live richer and more vigorous lives. Through your short stories you are doing work of the utmost importance, evoking in people, as you do, disgust in a drab and humdrum life..."<sup>21</sup>

It was only later, in the 1930's and under the pressure of the Soviet regime that Gorky formulated his ideas on literature in such a way as to produce a definition of what is called "socialist realism."

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<sup>20</sup> Maxim Gorky, "Detstvo" in Sobranie Sochineniy v Vosemnadtsati Tomakh. Moscow: Gosudarstvennoe Izdatel'stvo Khudozhestvennoy Literatury, 1960-1963. Vol. IX, p. 152.

<sup>21</sup> Maxim Gorky, "Letters About Literature". Translated by Julius Katzer. On Literature. Selected Articles. Moscow: Foreign Languages Publishing House, n.d., p. 360.



In 1934 at the First Congress of Soviet Writers Gorky was able to state clearly that literature must help to develop the revolutionary self-consciousness of the masses and strive to reform human beings by emphasizing the triumphs of socialism. The writer's duty according to Gorky was to help build a better life:

"This practically attainable goal imposes on us, writers, a strict responsibility for our work and social behaviour. That not only places us in the position, traditional for realistic literature, of "judges of the world and of people" and "critics of life", but also entitles us to a direct participation in the construction of a new life and the process of "changing the world".

Possession of that right should inculcate in each writer a consciousness of his duty and responsibility for the whole of literature and for the things that should not be found in it."<sup>22</sup>

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From the early short stories to which we have referred in Chapter I, we gain the impression that Gorky is using his female characters to

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<sup>22</sup>Ibid., p. 265.

illustrate certain ideas. Several stories (eg. Boles', Odnazhdy o sen'yu and Suprug Orlovy) end with evaluative, moralizing commentary. On the basis of these and other stories the reader feels that despite the emphasis that is laid by literary critics on Gorky's intense and deep interest in human nature, Gorky is interested not so much in the individual person and his personality as in the impact that the encounter with the character has on him, the aspect of life it reveals to him. He wishes to share this impression with the reader, hoping thereby to influence him. We hesitate on the basis of this impression to conclude, as Lev Tolstoy did, that Gorky did not understand women, and prefer to conclude that Gorky's women are never really independent of the author, since his presence and control of them can be felt in every story.

The works which we have discussed form three distinct phases of Gorky's portrayal of women. The female characters in the stories of 1892-1899 appear to illustrate various aspects of a woman's life, such as the sadness of old age (Izergil'); the humiliation suffered by prostitutes (Natasha, and the widow); the possibility of happiness and contentment in old age (the old pawnbroker); the innocence and naivety of youth (Varen'ka); the loneliness experienced by streetwalkers (Tereza); the maltreatment of women (Matryona); a woman's desire to maintain her independence in all love affairs (Mal'va) and, finally, man's tendency to idealize women (Tan'ya), which brings only unhappiness and disillusionment.

It is noteworthy that during the period to which we have referred Gorky was writing many articles, published in the Samara Gazette, in which he protested strongly against the maltreatment of women in Russia and also urged society to take a stand and correct the negative and

abusive attitude toward women which was prevalent at the time. Gorky blamed society for creating conditions of dire poverty which were responsible for turning women to prostitution. Expressing in an early poem deep sympathy for an unfortunate streetwalker called Tereza (she seems to be a model for the heroine of Boles), he denounces the use of women merely as objects of pleasure and calls for greater respect and courtesy toward them. As we have previously shown, a recurring situation in Gorky's stories is one in which the man's initial attitude of scorn and contempt toward a prostitute gradually changes to one of admiration and respect. We wonder if perhaps this parallels a similar development and change in Gorky's attitude toward prostitutes.

The brief glimpses of women in the early stories (as for example: the old pawnbroker praying before the icons, the widow with two children standing at the quayside, or the passionate Mal'va sadly retracing her lover's footsteps) cling to our memory, and upon closer examination we see that the portraits of these women are greatly enriched by the author's colourful descriptions of nature. Delineating Varen'ka's gay, fearless manner during a storm, Mal'va's passionate nature against the background of a wild and restless sea or Izergil's lust for life against a romantic background, Gorky succeeds in painting series of colourful pictures. In the early stories he skillfully combines a romantic flavour of lyrical overtones, picturesque descriptions and a wide range of emotions with critical realism, which censures contemporary society without indicating any positive alternative whereas the socialist realism of Mat' on the other hand, by painting an optimistic picture of life under the socialist regime, seeks

to arouse hope in the people, encourage them to overcome the misery and injustice surrounding them and attain a way of life in which good and equity prevail.

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The portrayal of women in the novels Foma Gordeev, Troe and Zhizn' Matveya Kozhemyakina is necessarily dependent on Gorky's aim in writing the works, that is with the author's desire to expose through the portrayals of Gordeev, Lunev and Kozhemyakin the chaotic and senseless existence of the decaying Russian merchant class. Some of the women portrayed soothe the frustrated and lonely merchants, others are admired but prove unattainable. Neither bring the men the desired happiness and contentment. Each female personage of these novels, as we have previously shown, illuminates the personality of the protagonist.

It is in these three novels that we see the greatest impact of Gorky's personal experiences, his attitude and relation to women, on his work. The heroes of the novels are motherless and throughout their lives yearn for maternal love and affection. There is a clear and definite parallel here between these motherless men and the author himself who, as he himself says in his Autobiography, looked to women for maternal love, solace and self-confidence. Gorky's mother had died when the boy was nine years old and the motherly affection he lacked was responsible for his fervent desire to win women's love and devotion. In his Autobiography. Gorky mentions that upon his acquaintance with a neighbour, a fine lady whom he named Queen Margot, he began to worship women.

Encouraged by the tender and gentle lady to read and educate himself, Gorky soon became very dependent on women for comfort and solace. He idealized women, stating fervently that man's wisest achievement is his ability to love a woman and worship her beauty since everything that is beautiful on earth is born out of love for a woman.

He yearned to find a woman who would be both mistress and mother to him, who like Leonid Andreev's wife would be tolerant and understanding, love her husband deeply, and encourage his literary endeavours. In his reminiscences of her husband Gorky writes that:

« Она прекрасно поняла необходимость материнского, бережного отношения к Андрееву, сразу и глубоко почувствовала значение его таланта и мучительные колебания его настроений.

Она из тех редких женщин, которые умея быть страстными любовницами, не теряют способности любить любовью матери: эта двойная любовь вооружила ее тонким чутьем, и она прекрасно разбиралась в подлинных жалобах его души и звонких словах капризного настроения минуты.»

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<sup>23</sup> Maxim Gorky, "Andreev" in Sobranie Sochineniy v Vosemnadtsati Tomakh. Moscow: Gosudarstvennoe Izdatel'stvo Khudozhestvennoy Literatury, 1960-1963, Vol. XVIII, p. 131.

As a result of such high expectations and extreme idealization of women in general, Gorky's first love-affair brought him only unhappiness. His mistress, Ol'ga Kaminskaya, at first seemed to be the ideal understanding and undemanding companion. Gorky, like his heroes, thought he had found a stronghold in life. However, when Ol'ga proved to be fickle and uninterested in his literary endeavours, Gorky, like the heroes of his novels when their hopes and expectations were unrealized, became sad and disillusioned. With the substitution of the words "help me to find stability in life" for "rouse my creative power" the following passage could well be attributed to either Foma Gordeev, Il'ya Lunev or Matvey Kozhemyakin:

"I had taken this woman into my heart, in the place of a mother -- I had looked to her to nourish me with rich honey, which would rouse my creative power. I expected her to soften the brutality which had been instilled into my life."<sup>24</sup>

Just as Foma in the presence of Sof'ya Medynskaya, Lunev in the company of Medvedeva; or Kozhemyakin in Mansurova's presence all feel awkward and ill at ease, so Gorky feels uncomfortable with people in general and most of all with women. This awareness of his clumsy behaviour, mingled with fear of women, is briefly but vividly captured in the following frank admission written by Gorky as a result of his re-

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<sup>24</sup>Quoted by Nina Gourfinkel. Gorky. Translated by Anna Feshbach. New York: Grove Press Inc., (1960) p. 145.

flections on his own manner and behaviour at a gathering of the intelligentsia:

"I don't know how to move with the adroitness of the others, my long gnarled body is astonishingly clumsy, my arms are my enemies, they are always catching on someone or something. I am especially afraid of women and this fear adds to my awkwardness."<sup>25</sup>

It appears that the unhappiness and dissatisfaction that permeate the love-relationships in Gorky's works are a result of the man's idealization of the woman and his extreme dependence on her for self-awareness and self-confidence (with the exception of Mat'). Matryona Orlova leaves her husband and disappoints him just at the time when he needs her moral support; Mal'va is needed by both Yakov and Vasiliy, yet she chooses to ignore them and follows instead a carefree vagabond; Polkanov suffers the fate of unrequited love, as do the three heroes, Gordeev, Lunev and Kozhemyakin. It is dangerous to draw conclusions about literary works from the biography of the author but the parallels drawn above indicate that at least certain features in the works discussed reflect Gorky's personal experiences.

Mat', on this hypothesis, seems to be Gorky's effort at compensating for the lack of maternal love and stability in human relationships that prevails in the stories and other novels. In his portrait of the heroine,

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<sup>25</sup>Ibid., p. 146.

Pelageya Nilovna, Gorky delineates an almost unbelievable maternal love and anxiety and he succeeds in his attempt to bring across these feelings and create a picture of a woman whose maternal instincts dominate her personality.

The progressive-minded and self-sacrificing young woman mentioned in the short story Ma-alen'kaya appears to be the prototype of the female revolutionaries in Mat'. As we have previously mentioned, Natasha Sof'ya, Sasha and Lyudmila have all left their families, dedicated themselves to the revolution and firmly believe in the victory of the proletariat. As fictional characters they are monotonous and repetitious and merge in our memory, just as initially they did in Nilovna's mind, into one staunch revolutionary who braves storms to deliver messages and whose duty is to convince people that socialism will eventually triumph.

Gorky, whose youth coincided with the preliminaries to the Bolshevik revolution, knew many female revolutionaries and deportees personally. In his attempt to play up these right-thinking and right-acting women, Gorky subdues human qualities in favour of social virtues with the result that his treatment of women here is flat and very schematic, employing only one colour, white, in delineating the socialists and thus emerging as one-sided and exaggerated, as is the whole picture of life in Mat'. The humane and vivid portrait of Pelageya Nilovna, however, overcomes the tendentiousness of the novel and adds life to a work which would otherwise be a monotonous picture of flawless and righteous revolutionaries. Despite Gorky's attempt to impress upon our minds Nilovna as a staunch revolutionary we are left rather with a picture



of a woman whose dominant motive in life is a tender devotion to her son.

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In sharp contrast to our initial impression and evaluation of Gorky's treatment of female personages and even of his characters in general, which we had formulated merely on first reading and under the influence of literary criticism that repeatedly stresses Maxim Gorky's intense interest in human nature, we have now, on the basis of the works which we have discussed, arrived at the conclusion that Gorky through his character-portrayal aimed primarily at recording and thus sharing with the reader the reality of which he was a part, the social conditions in Russia of that time, and thereby indicating the need for a change. Thus it is the event or situation itself which is of prime importance.

In his last novel, Zhizn' Klime Samgina, Gorky indicates that he is dissatisfied with his own portrayal of women when one of the fictional personages commenting on Gorky's talent as a writer specifically underlines the fact that, despite his desire and effort to succeed, Gorky failed to portray women successfully.

«--А Горький?

--Этот, иногда, иногда, ничего,  
интересный, но тоже очень кричит. Тоже  
должно быть злой. И женщин не умеет писать.

Видно, что любит, но не умеет...»

This is neither specified nor explained and therefore we can only surmise that Gorky's awareness of a defect in his presentation of women stemmed from the realization that he was not giving a full portrait of a woman nor was he able, in order to represent a woman's innermost thoughts and feelings, to penetrate into a woman's soul, and to create an interesting, vivid and independent female personage. As we have stated previously, the closest that Gorky came to presenting a full and vivid portrait of a woman is oddly enough in his socially orientated work Mat which we expected to be merely an affirmation of socialist ideals.

Generally speaking, the journalistic flair in Gorky dominates his characters and, although he was interested in portraying female personages, he could not create characters that were independent of his presence or concentrate on a woman's thoughts and feelings in any detail as, for example, could Lev Tolstoy (Anna Karenina), Thomas Hardy (Return of the Native), Daniel Defoe (Moll Flanders), François Mauriac (Therese) or John Steinbeck (Cannery Row), writers who are so skilful and subtle in delineating a woman's personality that we tend to forget that the author is a man who is, of necessity, able to observe women only from the outside.

It would appear that Gorky subdivides the human species into two

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<sup>26</sup> Maxim Gorky "Zhizn' Klime Samgina" in Sobranie Sochineniy v Vosemnadtsati Tomakh. Moscow: Gosudarstvennoe Izdatel'stvo Khudozhestvennoy Literatury, 1960-1963, Vol. XV, p. 143.

categories, men and women, but whereas his male characters (for example Gordeev, Kozhemyakin, Podshyblo) are whole individuals, his female personages are always and only women and form a separate class, "the other" class as seen from a man's point of view. In short, Gorky's male personages (Lunev, Makar Chudra, Chelkash) are presented in more aspects, more facets of their personality are revealed and consequently they are more fully integrated into the novelistic medium than are his female characters.

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