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# An Interview with Viktoria Tokareva

BY SIGRID MCLAUGHLIN



*A Leningrader by birth (November 20, 1937), Viktoria Tokareva studied the piano at music school, attended the Moscow Institute of Cinematography, and graduated from the script department in 1969. She published her first story called "A Day Without Lies" in 1964. It made her instantly famous and marked the beginning of a very successful career as author of stories and film and television scripts. Collections of her stories appeared in 1969, 1972, 1978, 1983, and she continues to be productive. Three of her films have won international prizes. Prose is her love, cinematography her trade, as she puts it. She likes Chekhov, and sees herself as taking up his form and themes.*

*Which of your stories do you like best and why?*

*"The Happiest Day of My Life" and "The Old Dog."*

*Isn't the latter about how a woman finds herself?*

You know, I used to think that a woman can find herself only if she is with a man, but I now no longer believe that. Self-realization, to have your "self," your own dignity, is important. Of course you must find yourself interacting with men and women; it's a process of emergence. My own realization occurs when I am able to write without thinking of the reader. Afterwards I get lots of letters...

*Do you pursue a goal when you write? Do you want to express something specific, let's say social criticism?*

No, I just write. But at the same time I am also a preacher; I advocate by intuition, not reason. By preaching I mean that certain processes that take place in my country don't pass me by; I respond to them, and this response enters my narrative automatically, not overtly and consciously. I am not a politician; I am an artist.

*How about your novella "A Long Day;" did you not want to be socially critical?*

I wrote it before *glasnost*; it could only be published now. I am not a time-server. ...Now new valves are open; artists no longer need an inner editor.

*Before you wrote with an inner censor?*

No, I just wrote; I didn't care whether it was accepted for publication or not. That's why I have been so popular; I walked a tightrope. But what I write about usually isn't controversial, it doesn't bother anyone. It's valid at all times and under all social conditions, even for the USA. If you'd translate it, American readers would understand. Of course, the context in the USA is different — the events of the story "A Long Day" were my personal experiences and made a deep impression on me. Life here is full of incongruities. But as far as personal relations between people are concerned, we aren't different.

*How do you feel as a woman writer?*

It is no disadvantage that I am a woman. I am different because I write with humour. Humour is rare, even with male writers. I prefer male prose, though; often women's prose is overloaded with attention to detail. If the woman is talented this is delightful. But I like terse literature, not *babskaya* literature.<sup>1</sup>

*Is it harder for a woman to get into print?*

I don't know about others. I was very lucky. Petrushevskaya was not, but now she is popular.

*Why was she not successful?*

She wrote very gloomy stuff. But she wrote the truth. This is simply the way she writes, an inborn need. She just sees things that way, it's her point of view, her character. I am more optimistic, by birth, not because I am a conformist. I feel that the world is not created for us. It is created by a much larger force, has a global purpose. God or nature is so much more knowledgeable. There's no point in protesting and rebelling against it.

*But many circumstances are conditioned by society. Don't you think Petrushevskaya reacts to certain aspects of society?*

Of course, society has a terrible influence. But the terrible times in our life happened before me.<sup>2</sup> They didn't touch me. I don't know whether I'm talented or not, but I do know that my life developed relatively fortunately only because I live and write here. Our country is more spiritual. People are more interested in reading, in talent — in thinking. This is extremely important to me.

*Do you consider yourself an emancipated woman?*

Yes, unfortunately.

Why unfortunately?

Emancipation has many negative sides.

What does it mean to you?

Economic independence which allows other kinds of independence.

That means that Marx is correct when he said that all problems are solved as soon as women can work?

Yes, a person is free when she earns money.

Does a woman feel herself equal in the USSR?

Some women prefer to fulfill themselves only in the family — with husband, kids, and apartment — and this is a big, difficult job, if done well. In this task the man can be her spiritual partner. Some women like public fulfillment. They're all different.

My daughter's husband doesn't want to help; if she forced him to, he'd leave her; that's annoying.

Do people know your own feminist Kollontai?

Yes. Kollontai was necessary in her day and age. But now — emancipation destroys the family. Women by nature are destined to be weaker. Men need to take care — in war men defend women and children. Of course, the Bible played a decisive role in determining women's task of helper and housekeeper for men. When a woman is strong, a weak man is attracted and the other way around. Men are women's major game.

Why do you see the family disintegrating because of emancipation?

The woman takes on burdens a man should carry. Thus she frees him from obligations, the man loses out, and the woman becomes bi-sexual, that is, takes on traits of both sexes.

Why is this connected with emancipation? Why does the man simply give up and not take on responsibility?

There are social causes. Initiative doesn't get rewarded. Why should he work well if he cannot earn more money for better work? I don't like generalizing. There are all sorts of men, passive and active, bad and good. I have been married for twenty-eight years. I can't imagine life without a family. A woman without a family is without a master, like a stray animal. It's a tragedy. In this sense I am patriarchal, traditional. But I am always waiting for perfect love. It keeps me going, makes me dress well; and I wait, hope. That's why I write my stories... draw my male ideal. I am patient. Now women are generally less patient. But what's wiser: to be patient or not? Life is given only once!

<sup>1</sup>*babskaya*, from *baba*, a crude, simple peasant woman.

<sup>2</sup>She refers to Stalin's times, especially the purges of 1936-38.

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