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## THE PURSUIT OF FREEDOM IN PRIVATE LIFE AS REFLECTED IN CONTEMPORARY RUSSIAN COMICS<sup>2</sup>

Abstract

This article reviews how *My Sex*, the Russian autobiographical graphic novel by Alyona Kamyshevskaya, reflects public-private relationships in the USSR and contemporary Russia. In particular, the focus is on how the Soviet state tabooed sexuality, leaving its people unaware of basic physiological information and causing them to make harmful uninformed decisions. *My Sex* is seen as an example of the consequences of public intrusion into the private sphere regarding aspects that should stay untouched.

Key words: comics, graphic novel, freedom, private life, public life, USSR, communist state, sexuality

### INTRODUCTION

Comics, as a literary genre, constitute a relatively young and rapidly evolving phenomenon with a growing audience and increasing number of production techniques and varieties. In fact, the art of combining pictures with text goes back to the 12<sup>th</sup> century when a Buddhist monk drew a scroll of what would later become the first comics. However, contemporary comics emerged much later in the early 19<sup>th</sup> century through the skill of Rodolphe Töpffer, a Swiss teacher who produced his renowned *Les Amours de M. Vieuxbois* (Rodolphe Töpffer, n.d.). Since then, in many parts of the

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world, comics has developed into a tradition with rules and laws to be followed and broken.

Despite this, in other parts of the world, such as the Soviet Union, the “bourgeois” art of comics was condemned and mocked as primitive. Paradoxically, the country had its own popular comics for children (e.g. *Murzilka* and *Tramvai*) which were hardly different from western examples. However, most people in the USSR believed in the inferiority of comics, even if they knew what they were. Surprisingly, the fall of the Iron Curtain further undermined the reputation of comics as expensive and high-quality comics were out of reach for Russian publishing houses which often found it difficult to make ends meet, while the market was flooded with cheap and badly translated low-quality comics, only convincing readers further that comics were worthless (Zimina, 2006).

It was not until the 2010s that the first quality comics were translated and introduced to the general public: the Amphora Publishing House pioneered this development with Alan Moore’s *Watchmen* and was followed by other publishers (Serebryansky, 2014). Hollywood movie franchises made a major contribution to the industry leading to the expansion of the comics market (Ivanov & Gabrelyanov, 2014). This also coincided with the establishment of Bubble, a comics producer which grew into the industry leader by coming up with new Russian comic characters. Despite comics in Russia being still looked down upon, all the above-mentioned developments combined have led to the rapid growth of a domestic comics culture, a wider readership of comics in Russia, and the increasing role of comics in the publishing industry.

The concept of a “graphic novel” is understood according to the definition by Rothschild (1995) as “original sequential art stories done especially for the graphic novel format” (p. xiii), it being used in this paper as a synonym for “comics”. The latter is defined as “juxtaposed pictorial and other images in deliberate sequence, intended to convey information and/or produce an aesthetic response in the viewer” (McCloud, 1994, p. 9). According to guidelines of the famous artist and theoretician, Scott McCloud, comics should be used with a singular verb despite its grammatically plural form as a noun (ibid.).

## MOTIVATION AND AIM

The insignificant role of comics as literary genre in Russia, as well as the condescending approach and little attention given to it, allows its authors to address topics commonly avoided in domestic fiction. One such example is the recent graphic novel *My Sex* by Alyona Kamyshevskaya which has inspired this research. This comic is the story of the author from childhood to adulthood with an emphasis on how she discovered her sexuality and uncovered the mystery of male-female relationships. Apart from the personal feelings of the main character, the comic offers reflections on the social and cultural background of the story, as well as the attitude to sex and the private sphere in the Soviet Union and contemporary Russia, namely the environment in which the protagonist grew up. Among other things, the comic addresses the approach to sexuality in the given society and the implications of this for those who grew up in it.

In the light of its setting, the comic becomes particularly important as it shows the relationship between the private and public spheres in the USSR and how the former depended on the latter. Therefore, this article aims to use the examples given in *My Sex* to demonstrate the adverse effects of public and state influence on one's private life. In particular, the focus of this paper is on the consequences of silencing the role of sexuality and the lack of sex education in Soviet society. One important aspect of the comic being discussed is that it is an autobiographical story which gives more credibility to the narrator.

The main hypothesis of this paper is that sexuality, as an aspect of private life, cannot thrive when it is considered socially unacceptable and unacknowledged. Therefore, the state model whereby the public intrudes and controls one's private life is destructive to itself and the individuals living in it and has to give way to a model whereby the public sphere promotes private life, scientifically informs it, and liberates it.

## PRIVATE-PUBLIC LIFE IN THE USSR

"There is no sex in the USSR" is a popular joke which reflects the practice of tabooing anything referring to the private life of the Soviet people. This does not seem uncommon in other countries also. According to Drucilla

Cornell (1998), “most societies impose upon their citizens a conception of good, or normal, sexuality as a mandated way of life, thus refusing them the freedom to personalize who they are sexually” (p. x). As a result, it “stifles our choices of how we want to live out our sexuality and express our love” (ibid.). The influence of a society on the private life of individuals can manifest itself in the guidelines of churches or healthcare professionals: “Through its [the state’s] symbiosis with the forces of moral regulation (from the churches to the medical profession) it [the state] can shape the climate of sexual opinion” (Weeks, 1990, p. 40) and, therefore, “determine the patterns of marriage, child-bearing, child-rearing” (ibid.). As Lynn Jamieson and Helen Corr (1990) framed it in their introduction to *State, Private Life and Political Change*, it is hard to imagine “how bound up the development of the state and our personal lives are” (p. 1).

Though public control over private life is a common practice in many societies, it is in communist states that the degree of intrusion into private lives is visibly higher. Orlando Figes in his book *The Whisperers: Private Life in Stalin’s Russia* (2007) tells the stories of a few Soviet people who had to hide their private lives in order to live under a communist regime. He contends that the Soviet population had “learned to whisper” (p. 40) and “keep to themselves” (ibid.) in fear that the state would learn something it could punish them for. Even children were “taught to hold their tongues, not to speak about their families to anyone, not to judge or criticize anything they saw outside the home” (ibid., p. 39). By using the example of Antonina Golovina, the author demonstrates how secretive and conformist the population came to be. Golovina kept it to herself that she came from a family of kulaks (rich peasants): “Antonina concealed the truth about her past from both her husbands, each of whom she lived with for over twenty years” (ibid., p. 35). It was only after the fall of the Iron Curtain that she learned that her husband had been doing the same. Apparently, this duality of the public and private lives people lived formed a lasting legacy across the nation: “A silent and conformist population is one lasting consequence of Stalin’s reign” (ibid., p. 39). In fact, even the term “private” was so hostile to the authorities that the “official Soviet documents usually operate with such terms as ‘individual’ and ‘personal property’ instead of ‘private property,’ and ‘individual labour activity’ instead of ‘private labour activity’” (Shlapentokh, 1989, p. 4).

One of the key areas of private life the Soviet state paid attention to was sexuality. As a term, sexuality includes “the condition of having sex”,

“sexual activity”, and the “expression of sexual receptivity or interest” (Sexuality, n.d.). Understood in this way, sexuality was attacked and tabooed in the Soviet Russia. It was replaced with the notion of the family as a societal unit and a positive institution. The propaganda of family had its positive outcomes: “For instance, the Soviet state protects children and women against abuse, sometimes takes measures against adultery” (Shlapentokh, 1989, p. 11). However, this care concerning the family had its own reasons and purposes, namely to control activities within the family: “The Soviet state also persecutes illegal family business, as well as other activities in culture, education, sex, and so on not approved by the state” (ibid.). Therefore, one’s understanding of sexuality was sourced from unreliable sources or family (seldom), which caused frustration and mere sexual illiteracy among the greatest part of the population.

It is worth mentioning that after a brief period of attempting to liberate private life in the 1990s, contemporary Russian society has returned to the notion of the strong family unit and to imposing opinions on how the family should be established and what values should dominate in it. Thus, State Duma deputy Yelena Mizulina drew up a bill to control the dating of young people and issued recommendations about how their relationships should develop, including when the couple would be allowed intimacy:

Can a strong and healthy family emerge from a couple if, after a few hours after getting to know each other, they do what only people very close to each other can do? . . . Usually such behaviour is a result of alcohol abuse or dissoluteness and lack of any moral norms (Doterpi do desyatogo raza, 2016).

Pavel Astakhov, Children’s Rights Commissioner for the President of the Russian Federation, finds it equally important to teach children the *Ethics and Psychology of Family Life* while sex education should be banned by law (Astakhov, 2013). Moreover, public organisations, such as conservative parents’ committees, are equally against the liberation of private life and the introduction of sex education in schools (Dudkina, 2017, para. 24).

In the Soviet system where the role of family was reinforced by the public sphere, women and their interests, including sexual pleasure and health, were sacrificed: “women’s sexuality was tightly controlled because women were primarily to serve as the ‘people’s’ reproducers” (Cornell, 1998, p. XI). Even if any benefits were provided, there would be reasons for this: “benefits were provided because women were necessary both as reproducers and as workers” (ibid., p. x).

This environment, in which Soviet society intruded in private life, regulated the family, and eliminated sexuality, resulted in the complete lack of awareness and dissatisfaction of women as depicted in Alyona Kamyshenskaya's *My Sex*, the material on which the present research is based. It would not be incorrect to say that the entire plot of the comic stems from the conflict between the attempts of the protagonist to find out about sex and sexuality and to build personal life of her own, on the one hand, and the societal norms, public intrusion into private life, and ensuing insecurity of the character on the other. Frustration arises when Alyona realises she is trapped by social opinions and completely lacks information about sex. The next part of this article is devoted to the analysis of this comic with an emphasis on the protagonist's intentions to discover her sexuality.

## SEXUALITY IN THE USSR AS DEPICTED IN *MY SEX*

This section of the article is devoted to the graphic novel *My Sex* as an example of what happens to privacy and sexual freedom if the public sphere intrudes into the private. Since the comic portrays a range of adverse effects of such intrusion, the section is subdivided into several parts to address various aspects of the difficulties Alyona (the protagonist) faces in her private life.

### LACK OF BASIC INFORMATION ABOUT PHYSIOLOGY AND SEX

The description of the protagonist's sexual life in the comic contains a statement that her parents never took any part in her sexual education: "My parents never took part in my sexual education . . . Instead, they put a lock on the door of their room"<sup>3</sup> (Kamyshevskaya, 2014, p. 29). The inability to explain one's physiology, as well as shame, prevented many parents from educating their children on the most intimate issues; adolescents were left wondering about their bodies and relationships with the opposite sex. The sources of Alyona's knowledge were other children, a few books, and unpleasant experiences which caused disgust towards the physiological aspect of love. To compensate for the lack of proper information, the main character replaced education and experience with sentimental love

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<sup>3</sup> All translations come from the author of the article unless indicated otherwise.

novels. Later, the protagonist would regret this: “Now I regret a lot that I spent so many years of my life on it [sentimental literature], since what I did lack was the real world. Real friends and relationships” (ibid., p. 37).

Not only was the sexual part of the life in the USSR denied but so was one’s physiology; and Alyona knew very little about the female body. Even her first period was perceived as something hostile and unnatural: “I kept feeling my new unknown and unpleasant smell, and I was afraid to move and produce a new portion of it” (ibid., p. 30). Even the physical reaction to her first experience of sexual intercourse was a surprise to her (ibid., p. 57).

Insufficient information about the physiological part of growing up and having sex was not only unwise but also dangerous to the health of females, especially those who were younger. The sexologist, Amina Nazaralieva, gives examples of outrageous ignorance concerning physiology and sex (Dudkina, 2017, para. 4), while Igor Kon in *Sexual Culture in Russia* adds that not only families but also schools were not ready to speak about sexuality: “It is impossible to make female teachers, many of whom were dissatisfied themselves, to say such indecent words as ‘genitals’” (Kon, 2010).

This lack of experience in relationships jeopardised Alyona’s health. Because she could not distinguish an indecent man from a decent one, she was raped, an event which further undermined her confidence and instilled fear and disgust: “It stayed with me for a long time. I drowned in hatred, fear . . . and loneliness. I did not get pregnant or infected, but . . . life did not make me happy any longer” (Kamyshevskaya, 2014, p. 105).

#### OPINIONS MATTER IN THE USSR

One of the key features of a communist state is the power of social opinion. In the USSR, it was common for people to judge others and to be afraid of being judged. Interestingly, the opinions of this society often meant more than solid facts or good judgment. In comics, this feature is exemplified with a “sex scandal” which occurred to the protagonist when she was a small girl. Her neighbours believed the story of another small girl that the protagonist, Alyona, who was 4–5 years old, had a sexual intercourse with another boy of her age. Despite how absurd this accusation was, since then she felt constantly observed: “the entire yard was following our actions” (Kamyshevskaya, 2014, p. 14). The children were not allowed to see

each other: “My mother put up another restriction by saying ‘you must not’ and ‘what will everyone think’” (ibid.).

Such an attitude was characteristic of the society at the time. It could be part of the larger fear that neighbours could report on them any time. As with the subjects of Figes’s *The Whisperers* who could not tell the truth even to their family, the characters of *My Sex* are fearful of looking different from others and therefore comply with the societal norms, even at the cost of common sense.

In addition to lacking common sense, Alyona’s parents were capable of sacrificing her health and safety in favour of the interests of the state. The main character belonged to the family of a Soviet ambassador of a far-away country, which meant that her father was serving his country, and sometimes the matters of the state prevailed over the best interests of the family.

In particular, the protagonist gives an example of a paedophile who once kissed her. He traumatised Alyona, back then a child, so much that she could not build relationships with members of the male sex. However, when she tried to reveal the truth about the man, her mother only advised to “keep away from him” (Kamyshevskaya, 2014, p. 26) and some years later added “your father needed him for some reason” (ibid.). This put her mother’s indifference to what had happened in a different context: “Does it mean I was suffering for the cause of my motherland?” (ibid.). Apparently, the cause of the motherland was above the health and safety of a child.

#### INSECURITY AND INFERIORITY COMPLEX

The lack of knowledge about sex combined with illusions about relationships led to the main character possessing feelings of insecurity and inferiority, as well as an inability to have relationships. This is how she describes one of her attempts to build relationships:

First, I was afraid someone could see us. Second, I had not had a man until then, and I was afraid I would not live up to the expectations of my friend. Third, I still dreamt of a knight of my life. Four, I just did not know what do I do with his physiology and mine (Kamyshevskaya, 2014, p. 48).

It was the “complete uncertainty, fear, stress, and quirks and twists” (ibid., p. 66) that did not allow Alyona to enjoy her life and build a proper attitude to her sexuality. The repeated failures to know more about herself as a woman turned her to despair and extreme measures: “I started



to deny my womanhood and tend to asexuality” (ibid., p. 71). As if deciding that private life is something beyond her understanding and necessity, Alyona “almost turned into a regular woman with avoska mesh bags” (ibid., p. 74), which is the Russian high point of ordinariness and mediocrity.

#### FINDING INDIVIDUAL FREEDOM

Alyona’s story could have ended like many other stories of people in a society where the private sphere is considered taboo and controlled. She could have abandoned any hopes for a happy life and reconciled herself to continuous anger and dissatisfaction with life. However, the protagonist was stubborn enough to keep fighting for her happiness, and after numerous attempts to find love, Alyona concluded that love and harmony can be achieved through proper relationships which, in the end, make her closer to God (Kamyshevskaya, 2014, p. 136). Although the comic has an open ending, and the main character never finds love, she is determined to continue looking for happiness.

#### DISCUSSION

The analysis given above has provided an example of the consequences when state policy interferes with the private life of ordinary citizens – in particular, those who grow up in such society. Thus, the author demonstrated that a reluctance to acknowledge privacy can lead to its neglect by one’s own parents and a lack of relevant information about one’s physiology, as well as interpersonal relationships. As a result, the lack of real relationships is compensated with illusions and fruitless aspirations. Insufficient experience results in disappointment and frustration leading to asexuality and abandonment of any attempts to acknowledge one’s femininity.

Despite the example analysed in this paper being a result of the subjective opinion of the author represented in an artistic form, facts and statistics show that tabooing private life or regulating it cannot bring good results. The stifling of private life and “shyness” about sex are detrimental to the entire country. Facts show that the higher the level of sex awareness, the healthier the society, since its members – in particular, those who are immature – are capable of defending themselves from bad decisions in private life.

As Drucilla Cornell (1998) contends, in the past, western countries were not very different from those which were communist or socialist:

The Western democracies have not been much better than the socialist societies in recognizing the right of women, let alone gays and lesbians, to represent their own sexuality. Sexual privacy has been almost exclusively limited within the parameters of “normal” heterosexuality, so significant social equality is often deemed unnecessary because heterosexual women can always turn to their husbands for support (p. XII).

Today, it seems that the situation has changed for the better. However, the USA, for example, is still deficient concerning sex education. The evidence suggests that, more often than not, religious education in America attacks personal liberty in one’s private life, as well as diminishing sexuality. This is argued, both by researchers and in works of art, such as the famous American graphic novel *Blankets* by Craig Thomson. For example, scientific investigations suggest that “abstinence-only education as a state policy is ineffective in preventing teenage pregnancy and may actually be contributing to the high teenage pregnancy rates in the U.S.” (Stanger-Hall & Hall, 2011). Nevertheless, despite the ineffectiveness of sex education in the USA, the country has managed to make significant achievements since the 1960s when it started introducing sexual awareness lessons in schools: comparing with 1960, by 2016 the number of teenage pregnancies was reduced from 82 to 21 per 1,000 females aged 15–19, respectively (Adolescent fertility rate, n.d.).

The experience of European countries concerning sex education is even more fascinating. For example, Sweden pioneered sex education back in the 1950s, while the Netherlands has shown the most spectacular results in this area. This country introduces the basics of sexual education at the age of 4–7, which has led to one of the world’s lowest adolescent fertility rates in the world (ibid.).

One would have to admit that in contemporary Russia the attitude to sex education and public-private dichotomy has not changed much comparing with that of the USSR which was vividly described in *My Sex*. With the main authorities opposing sex education in schools, it is now prohibited to depict or describe sexual intercourse to children under 16. Indeed, the Minister of Education, Olga Vasilyeva, has claimed that sexual education should be limited to the family (Kochetkova, 2017, para. 2).

However, data show that such a strategy is less than successful. UNFPA (United Nations Population Fund) reports rather high rates of adolescent pregnancy in Russia (30 females aged 15–19 out of 1,000), as well as abortions (8 abortions per 10 childbirths). Moreover, despite schools not discussing sex with adolescents, research says that over 60% of females in Russia have sex before the age of 19 while 70% wish to know how to protect themselves (United Nations Population Fund, 2013).

In this way, the artistic representation in *My Sex* constitutes real-world proof and serves as a vivid example of what happens when private life is stifled by the state. Instead of dry statistics, Alyona Kamyshevskaya shows the effect of a detrimental state policy on the individual life of a typical Soviet child and woman.

## CONCLUSION

*My Sex* is an entertaining and clever way of depicting the consequences of public intrusion into the private sphere. In line with the aim of this paper, we have provided an example of a protagonist of a comic (the author herself) who experiences insecurity and dissatisfaction due to a social environment in which awareness of sex is undesirable and sexuality is tabooed. Even though the article is limited to a single example, it is supported with solid facts and statistics, which show how this artistic view reflects real-world indicators. The examples and data provided in the article support the initial hypothesis that both public control over the private sphere and silencing sexuality lead to frustration.

Despite being looked down on by society and critics, comics in Russia constitute one of the bravest genres addressing taboo topics, namely: people with disabilities as in *Me, Elephant* by Rudak; undesirable themes, such as homosexuality, referred to in some comics by Bubble (*Red Fury, Major Grom, Club*); or translating and publishing those that had been banned, such as the *Death of Stalin* by Fabien Nury and Thierry Robin. In the same fashion, *My Sex* addresses the lack of sexual awareness in Russia, which is also an unpopular topic. Without trying to promote sex education or blame communism for removing physiology from the agenda, the author shows the consequences of both and provides a reason for one to rethink existing policies and social norms.

In conclusion, this study could be expanded with a comparative investigation of how comics reflect public-private relationships in other cultures and societies. One such example could be such a comparison with the American graphic novel *Blankets* by Craig Thomson, in order to see what societal obstacles the protagonists of US and Russian comics overcame in discovering their sexuality and experiencing love, as well as how these comics reflect their respective societies.

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