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## Introduction to Viktoria Tokareva's Life and Works

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## **Introduction to Viktoria Tokareva's Life and Works**

**Lyubov Popov and Radha Balasubramanian, University of Nebraska Lincoln**

Viktoria Tokareva, a well-known screenwriter, is also a famous contemporary short story writer in Russia. She began writing short stories and screenplays in the late 1960s and she has distinguished herself as a writer not only in Russia, but also worldwide. Her films have won awards, and her stories have been widely read and translated. She wrote before the break-up of the Soviet Union, when there was tight censorship and after “glasnost”, when the writers began to enjoy greater freedom. The country's social and political turmoil is set as a vivid background to Tokareva's portrayal of human beings and their basic need for love and relationship.

Tokareva was born on November 20, 1937 in Leningrad. From childhood Tokareva was interested in music and writing and was planning to make a successful career in music. She went to a music conservatory in Leningrad. After she began teaching singing, she discovered that it was frustrating for her to be a music teacher. In an interview, she explains: “nothing is as hopeless, as trying to teach music to people with no ear for music.”<sup>1</sup> She gives a lot of weight to talent and specifically mentions the importance of being talented in many of her short stories. As a writer Tokareva condones her characters' faults if they have an innate talent to do well in something. Writing has been her hobby since childhood. She was eleven when she got inspired by Chekhov's “Rothschild's Fiddle.” Tokareva recalls that moment in an interview:

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<sup>1</sup> Dmitriy Bykov, *Viktoria Tokareva: Chelovek bez kompleksov mne neinteresen*, [www.vor.ru/culture/cultarch239\\_eng.html](http://www.vor.ru/culture/cultarch239_eng.html) (Mar. 2005).

My mother read the story “Rothschild’s Fiddle” and I remember that I was thunderstruck [...] I didn’t really know myself then, but when I heard that story, I felt the prompting. I can’t describe it – in one sense it was a natural phenomenon, but in another it was unusual.<sup>2</sup>

From then on, it seemed that Tokareva found an inner urge to write. While writing was her first love, she was also dabbling in other expressions of visual arts. She was naturally drawn to cinema. In 1963, Tokareva enrolled at the State Institute of Cinematography in Moscow with the hope of becoming an actress. But given her talent to write, it was not surprising that she found her place not in acting, but in screenwriting. In an interview with Richard Chapple, Tokareva confesses that being involved in cinema was a fashionable and prestigious thing to do in the 1960’s, 70’s and 80’s.<sup>3</sup>

Tokareva wrote fourteen screenplays altogether, out of which, three films: “Mimino” (1977), “Gentlemen of Fortune” (1972), and “A Dog was Walking on the Piano” (1978), became very successful. She won an international gold medal for her work in “Mimino.” She worked with various Russian film directors starting in the late 1960s and continued to work with films, the latest released in 2001. She often adapted her short stories for films. For example, “100 Grams for Bravery” (1976), “Talisman” (1983), “About That, Which Didn’t Happen” (1986), “Melodrama with an Attempt of Murder”(1992), “I Am. You are. He is.”(1995) and “Lavina” (2001) have all been

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<sup>2</sup> Chapple, Richard, Critical Essays on the Prose and Poetry of Slavic Women. (Lewiston: The Edwin Mellen Press, 1998), p. 21. The elliptical dots had been added by me.

<sup>3</sup> Chapple, Richard, Critical Essays on the Prose and Poetry of Slavic Women. (Lewiston: The Edwin Mellen Press, 1998), p. 18

adapted from her own fictional works. Just as with her stories, Tokareva's films range in genre from drama and romance to comedy and crime.

In her sophomore year at the Institute Tokareva published her first short story. She was twenty seven at the time. "A Day without Lying" made Tokareva known to the public as a writer for the first time. It was a success and fiction writing became her second career. Moscow is still the city where Viktoria Tokareva lives with her family and continues her work.

Through out the last four decades, Tokareva's list of fiction has kept growing at a steady pace. She published nine collected editions and a few novellas. Tokareva's short stories are usually thirty to forty pages in length. Her novellas range up to seventy pages in length (for ex. "First Try").

Tokareva's fame is not limited to her own county. European countries such a Germany, Italy, and Poland have invested in translating her collections, but only a few translations exist in English speaking countries. Here we chose to translate three short stories: "Korrída" (1993), "Nothing Special" (1983) and "To Tell or Not to Tell" (1991).<sup>4</sup> Of these "Nothing Special" has been translated once before, but the others are being translated into English for the first time.

Tokareva's work has lived through different generations of readers, but her popularity has not declined. Her subject matter remains contemporary and relevant to readers of various ages. Readers often find personal connection or an association and can easily identify with her characters. Tokareva takes on the question of how one should live

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<sup>4</sup> These stories came selected from two of Tokareva's collections titled Loshadi s krilyami: povesti i rasskazy and Happy End: povesti i rasskazy.

in order to achieve one's dreams. Her stories become subtle examples of what constitutes failure and success through character portrayal, without being didactic. She has a wonderful ability to convince the reader that what she has written is not fiction and to some extent may be realistic enough to nudge the reader to the simple problems faced in real life.<sup>5</sup> For example, the story of "To Tell or Not To Tell" is about a college student Artamonova who falls in love with fellow student Kireev. Although she finds her love unrequited, she lets herself get exploited by him. This changes the course of her entire life.

Viktoria Tokareva's writing style is often compared to that of Anton Chekhov.<sup>6</sup> According to Bykov, Tokareva uses vocabulary in way that differs from other contemporary Russian writers. She has a rare ability to clearly express her thoughts and to formulate her stories with genuine attention towards her own characters and evoke interest in readers.<sup>7</sup> Her sentences are brief and concise, the content of her stories – distilled. She rewrites her stories several times until she is able to remove the unnecessary details, but retain the crux and embellish it.

Her admiration of Chekhov is noticed in interviews when she often refers back to him, even if the question asked does not relate to Chekhov directly. This statement is taken from an interview with Tokareva:

I think that literature must compel a person, despite his or her passions. That is what literature must do. That is what Chekhov wrote about [...] He didn't need to show

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<sup>5</sup> L.B. Savenkova, "Vziat i dodumat do samogo kontsa: o rasskaze Viktorii Tokarevoi " Koshka na doroge" *Russkaia Rech': Nauchno populiarnyi zhurnal* 2 (2000): 25

<sup>6</sup> For further studies please refer to an article by Richard Chapple, "A Note on Viktoria Tokareva and Anton Chekhov." *Journal of the Australian and New Zealand Slavists' Association and of the Australasian Association*. 6 (1992)

<sup>7</sup> Dmitriy Bykov, *Viktoria Tokareva: Chelovek bez kompleksov mne neinteresen*, [www.vor.ru/culture/cultarch239\\_eng.html](http://www.vor.ru/culture/cultarch239_eng.html) (Mar. 2005).

solutions, though, it was sufficient for him to pose the question. And then the person becomes human.<sup>8</sup>

In her stories Tokareva attempts to pose the question of what choice should be made by her characters. She avoids giving a solution but rather presents what choices exist and the likely consequences of them.

Tokareva occasionally even includes Chekhov's name or his quotes directly in her short stories. In "To Tell or Not to Tell" we come across a reference to Chekhov's statement that: "Everything should be beautiful in a person: face, clothing, soul, and thoughts."<sup>9</sup> Chekhov's influence is not limited to quotes, but is also visible in the length of her short stories, in the choice of themes and in the use of satirical humor.

Like Chekhov, Tokareva emphasizes the individual and personal world of her characters, rather than focusing on character's accomplishments. Her themes are similar to Chekhov's in that they show the miseries in people's lives, character's interpersonal failings, naïve hopes for love, and how human solutions can not surpass the virtue of nature's flow of events.<sup>10</sup> Both of these authors present dreams and reality, and consequently the dissonance between the two. Tokareva depicts difficult situations and contrasts them to other possibilities. Tokareva's stance on this is evident in her comment:

"But what if a writer writes about, let's say, eternal happiness? What results is not a work of art. If Anna Karenina married Vronsky, and Vronsky was madly in love

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<sup>8</sup> Chapple, Richard, Critical Essays on the Prose and Poetry of Slavic Women. (Lewiston: The Edwin Mellen Press, 1998), p. 14. The quote is taken from Chapple's interview with Tokareva.

<sup>9</sup> Quote taken from my English translation of "To Tell of Not to Tell" p.23

<sup>10</sup> Richard Chapple, "A Note on Viktoriya Tokareva and Anton Chekhov." *Journal of the Australian and New Zealand Slavists' Association and of the Australasian Association*. 6 (1992): 117

with her, and they had seven children, there would be no *Anna Karenina*. Impossible. She must fling herself under the train, and then you have *Anna Karenina*.”<sup>11</sup>

To both Tokareva and Chekhov, it is important to juxtapose misery with happiness. In a way, she continues the tradition of nineteenth century great Russian writers such Tolstoy, Turgenev and Chekhov.

In spite of the grim themes in her short stories, Tokareva manages to write with humor, similar to that of Chekhov’s. She characterizes that type of humor as “subtle, Russian, and pleasant.”<sup>12</sup> In an article featuring Tokareva’s interview, we start to see how much she esteems Chekhov: “I see highest achievement in Chekhov: [his stories have] humor, brevity, sadness, even to the extent of tragedy. He has everything”.<sup>13</sup> Therefore it is not surprising that Tokareva uses humor when describing relationships, political situations, and people. For example, in “To Tell or Not to Tell”, Artamonova’s first husband has a missing front tooth or as Tokareva describes: “his fence had a hole and everything inside became visible”.<sup>14</sup> Her humor may sometimes seem contrary to the seriousness of a given situation, but in her stories always works out appropriately. The occasional subtle use of humor reminds the reader of the ironies that exist in life.

Tokareva’s basic descriptions of characters also allow the readers to personalize the characters. She sometimes focuses on the character’s most prominent feature such as color of eyes, weight, type hair or overall appearance (ex. handsome, pretty, pale).

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<sup>11</sup> Chapple, Richard, Critical Essays on the Prose and Poetry of Slavic Women. (Lewiston: The Edwin Mellen Press, 1998), p. 12

<sup>12</sup> Chapple, Richard, Critical Essays on the Prose and Poetry of Slavic Women. (Lewiston: The Edwin Mellen Press, 1998), p. 20

<sup>13</sup> Olga Ryabinina, *Viktoria Tokareva: Xodit' nalevo možhno, tol'ko ostorozhno*, <<http://www.peoples.ru/art/cinema/scenario/tokareva/index1.html>>. (Mar. 2005).

<sup>14</sup> Quotes taken from our English translation of “To Tell or Not to Tell”

Tokareva's descriptions are selective and allow the readers to complete the image as the inner psychology of the characters is revealed.

Tokareva's heroines are usually females, occasionally males (ex. "Pasha and Pavlusha", "Gruda Kamnei Golubih"). Women are portrayed as strong, while males are shown as insecure. Personalities of her characters are all very different and how they handle relationship problems differ from story to story. Often times we come across females who seek out males who are in search of a "mother." Often the female characters do not leave their alcoholic mates, even though the alcoholism is ruining their lives. Even if a wonderful opportunity for a better future with another, more respectable man comes up, we see that these female "martyrs" choose to go back to their alcoholic husbands, like in the story "Five Figures on a Pedestal." In Tokareva's stories, female characters seek happiness with a chance to escape the hopeless relationship, but do not always do so.

In Tokareva's stories, ordinary experiences are interrupted by turning points such as an infidelity, tragic accidents, death, unrequited love, divorce, rape and abortion.

Relationships, especially marital ones, in Tokareva's world are characterized by a pervasive lack of communication, dissatisfaction with the present, and an implicit trust, or at least hope, in love as evidenced by an eagerness to seek other relationships.<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>15</sup>Richard Chapple, "A Note on Viktoriya Tokareva and Anton Chekhov." *Journal of the Australian and New Zealand Slavists' Association and of the Australasian Association*. 6 (1992): 116



It is precisely in those types of stressful moments that we find Tokareva's characters making some of the most crucial decisions of their lives which impact everyone around them.

Her characters are often educated and have successful careers. There are doctors, teachers, surgeons, film directors, designers, artists, musicians, singers, newspaper editors and many others. Most often the characters are middle aged or older, and most of the time the characters are married and have children; occasionally there are characters who are single parents.

Even though a lot of Tokareva's characters are accomplished people, their achievements only show the extent of the void in their personal world. In "To Tell or Not to Tell," after investing her life into her music career, Artamonova realizes: "...she was married to her work. She didn't need a husband, her work fed her, clothed her, entertained her, took her on trips, gave her new friends, and a place in the society."<sup>16</sup> It is as if Tokareva is saying that even though accomplishments can bring some recognition, fame and happiness, they will not define the character's ultimate goal in life. The subtle contrasts of accomplishments, tragedies, missed opportunities, and search for meaning of life fill her work. As a rule, Tokareva wants to highlight apparent contentment against the backdrop of sorrow and tragedy.

Tokareva stories have a unique dimension to them, involving human psychology. For example, in the story "Korrída" Lil'ka's husband makes a careless remark:

- How much does a she-goat weigh? Sixty kolograms? asked Anikeev

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<sup>16</sup> Quote taken from our English translation of "To Tell or Not to Tell" p. 27

- I don't know, answered Lil'ka.
- No. You weigh sixty. That's like a pig, but a goat weighs less. About thirty kilograms. I'll have to ask Granny Panya about that. Granny Panya! – Anikeev called out.<sup>17</sup>

Anikeev's remark underscores the difference in the psychological perception between him and his wife Lil'ka. Her reaction is described as follows:

When he came back, he saw that Lilka was standing in jeans and wearing a coat. She was pushing the puncho “fieruchello” into a denim backpack. She also shoved the terri-cloth robe and slippers into it.

--Where are you going? –Anikeev was surprised. –To the sauna?

--I am leaving you.

--Where are you going?

-- I am leaving you and never coming back.

After this, the story focuses on how a serious conflict builds between them. The story gives an insight into the different perceptions of both husband and wife of the same conflict. Things eventually get resolved between them, and at the very end of the story we are reminded of what set off the whole ordeal.

Anikeev put his arms around Lilka's knees and under her arms. Picked her up and grunted.

-Don't... --Lilka became frightened. –I am heavy. Like a pig. Fifty kilograms.

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<sup>17</sup> Passage taken from our English translation of “Korrída”

This is when Tokareva makes it obvious that Anikeev made two blunders: he overestimated his wife's weight and compared her to a pig. Through these subtle details, Tokareva is able to portray the inherent differences between how men and women think.

Although relationship and infidelity issues between men and women are often the main attention of her stories, Tokareva touches upon other contemporary issues that are faced by the Russian people: for example, alcoholism (ex. "Five Figures on a Pedestal"), teenage drug use (ex. "A Pile of Blue Stones"), abortion (ex. "To Tell or Not To Tell"), effect of divorce on children (ex. "Happy End"), parent/child relationships (ex. "I am. You are. He is"), poverty, housing problems, migration out of former Soviet Union, and politics.

Sometimes children are given an important secondary role in Tokareva's stories. We discover that Artamonova carried the memory of her lost child through the rest of her life, the regret intensified when she found out about her infertility. To compensate for that void Artamonova invested her energies into writing music and teaching music to children. Tokareva addresses the importance of mothers nurturing their children, in spite of their busy career schedule. She also shows the consequence of a father being physically present but emotionally absent from the lives of his kids. Tokareva's stories have characters who exhibit different levels of attachment to their children, going from one of indifference to dependence. For example, in "Nothing Special" the heroine ignores her child's existence, while in "I am. You are. He is" the mother is extremely possessive about her grown son to the extent that he has to secretly marry the woman he loves

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Even though children are not usually described much, they are mentioned in the stories in relationship to the parent characters. Usually children's emotions are left in the background during the turmoil of a divorce as adults search for their own happiness. For example, in "To Tell or Not To Tell" Artamonova's father abandoned her and her mother before Artamonova was even born. The story maybe reiterates that one of the reasons Artamonova chose abortion was because she did not want to burden her mother with another fatherless child.

Tokareva's themes emphasize the importance of facing the consequences. The "Law of Compensation" is mentioned in several of her stories. In the story "Korrída", she simply quotes from the Bible: "whatever a man sows, that he will also reap."<sup>18</sup> As an example, Tokareva portrays different people to show how their actions brought the consequences they had to face. In "To Tell or Not to Tell" we see how Artamonova faced the facts she could not change. She was responsible for her actions of loving a married man and not being brave enough to tell him the truth about her pregnancy. Kireev's insecurities prevented him from facing the consequences of his actions, which would explain his oblivious behavior after he raped Artamonova.

Tokareva shows how people are constantly faced with choices and it is up to them to act or not to act. Although to the reader, it becomes clear that none of the possible choices are perfect, still at the end of the narration, Tokareva either reveals which choice would have been better of the two or leaves it up to the reader to make the conclusion.

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<sup>18</sup> Quote taken from our English translation of "Korrída", referring to Galatians 6:7 in the Bible.

Tokareva's stories have a stark reality to them. It is true that her themes are usually sad and tragic, but through them Tokareva manages to bring out the humanness in her stories. The endings to her stories vary, she sometimes affords the heroes more than one chance at finding fulfillment in their lives and sometimes ends the stories with hope or leaves them open. Tokareva's main objective is to make the reader remember that they are not alone in the world. It seems like she would like people to realize that happiness should not be egocentric. One should listen to one's conscience and if mistakes are made, either the consequences have to be faced, or changes have to be made to rectify the mistakes.<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>19</sup> L.B. Savenkova, "Vziat i dodumat do samogo kontsa: o rasskaze Viktorii Tokarevoi " Koshka na doroge" *Russkaia Rech': Nauchno populiarnyi zhurnal* 2 (2000): 31

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