

### Modeling Masculinities in Brothers Strugatsky's *The Snail on the Slope*



RB Lemberg

The brothers Arkady and Boris Strugatsky are considered the most influential writers of science fiction in the Soviet Union in the 1960-1980s (Khagi). Their novel *The Snail on the Slope* (1965) deals with gender and ecology on an alien planet where humans of the Forest Administration supposedly manage and research a mysterious Forest and its indigenous population.<sup>1</sup>

The novel is told in alternating “Administration” and “Forest” chapters, which have different protagonists, and are different in tone and composition. The Forest chapters tell the quest-like story of Kandid, a person from the Administration who is stranded in the Forest after a helicopter crash and, in trying to find his way out, discovers the Forest’s many secrets, as well as his own moral core. The Administration chapters are focused on the workplace dynamics of a Soviet-style bureaucracy, with Perets as the protagonist who unsuccessfully attempts to leave it. Instead of accomplishing often conflicting goals, which include colonization and the preservation of and re-search into the forest, the humans of the Administration bicker, flirt, engage in office gossip, receive mysterious communications from the never-seen director of the Administration, and generally avoid the forest. Many of the characters of the Administration chapters know and discuss Kandid, but they think he perished in the forest. The two strands of the narrative never intersect directly.

The novel faced difficulties on the path to publication. The authors finished the manuscript in 1965, a year when censors were paying increasingly negative attention to their work. After the Strugatskys’ attempts to place the novel in its entirety proved unsuccessful, the authors split the book into two parts. The Forest part was published in 1966 in the anthology *Ellinskij Sbornik*. The Administration part was published in 1968 in the regional *Bajkal* magazine and was almost immediately subjected to significant critique and removed from circulation (Strugatsky, *Kommentarii*). The first full Russian-language edition of the novel was unauthorized, and published in Germany in 1972. While unauthorized foreign translations proliferated, the first Soviet edition of the entire novel appeared only in 1988.

*The Snail on the Slope* is the only Strugatsky novel to foreground issues of gender, and one of the very few works of Soviet speculative fiction to do so. Yet, there is little scholarship focusing on the treatment of gender in this work. A notable exception is Diana Greene’s feminist critique. In this short but impactful article, the author proposes that the Administration is patriarchal while the forest is matriarchal, positing a “literal war of the sexes” between the two (99). Greene examines key female characters in the novel and situates them in the context of Soviet gender

roles, with an emphasis on the inequalities that Soviet women faced despite the professed ideals of gender equality. She then takes the argument further by speculating about the authors' biases about women: "... a careful examination of the connection between women and the forest makes clear that the Strugatskys drew on some of their darkest, perhaps unconscious fears of the former in describing the latter" (102).

It is important to note that *The Snail on the Slope* is not a feminist novel. Western-style feminism did not exist in the 1960s Soviet Union, and the authors were certainly not invested in, or familiar with, feminist issues. Without a doubt, gender equality was not truly achieved under the Soviet regime. Gendered disparities and injustices became unspeakable (Gal and Kligman 46-47). Western feminist literature was not translated and virtually unknown in the Soviet Union. While important and relevant, Greene's critique fails to consider how the Strugatskys modeled gender in the novel. They were writing from the vantage of their own cultural context (the post-WWII Soviet Union) and their own personal positioning as Jewish, male writers who were members of the intelligentsia. In *The Snail on the Slope*, the Strugatskys present three models of gendered society: the bureaucratic, Soviet-like world of the humans of the Administration, where men and women seem to be on equal footing, but men seem to hold leadership positions, and misogyny is commonplace; the society of the Villagers, which resembles Russian village culture with its traditional gender roles; and the biotechnologically advanced society of podrugi ('women comrades'), who exclude men from their society and reproduce by parthenogenesis.<sup>2</sup>

Within these different societies, the Strugatskys showcase differing attitudes to gender through multiple characters. With its diverse lineup of male characters who are juxtaposed to each other, I argue that modeling of Soviet-era masculinity is a key concern of the novel. Masculinity was an important concern in the post-World War II Soviet Union. Losses of life in the Great Patriotic War, as well as in the Stalinist concentration camps, disproportionately involved men, resulting in a demographic crisis. The first Soviet census after WWII showed the population at 94 million men and 114 million women, a difference of about 20 million (Petrov 333). Survivors of WWII and the Stalinist purges were often traumatized, without access to mental health care. The unspeakable gendered inequalities of the Soviet system were exacerbated by the demographic crisis: men were expected to participate less actively, if at all, in the life of the family.<sup>3</sup> Since men were now perceived as a rare and precious resource, society encouraged women to compete for men and to shield them from extra labor in the domestic sphere. In addition, many people (and specifically men) who returned from the front after WWII were impacted by trauma and yet unable to access mental health supports, resulting in maladaptive behaviors, such as alcoholism. Common stereotypes presented men as uninvolved, unmotivated, lazy and alcoholic. This post-WWII demographic crisis was in the public eye and actively discussed in Soviet news outlets (Zdravomyslova and Temkina 44).

Against this background, a juxtaposition between members of the intelligentsia and non-intelligentsia men was the focus of many Strugatsky novels.<sup>4</sup> I argue that *The Snail on the Slope*

introduces multiple models of gendered behaviors, with an emphasis on models of masculinity rather than femininity.

### Masculine Models

Masculine models in *The Snail on the Slope* present a wide range of traits and behaviors. The male characters can be complacent, traumatized, determined, timid, intelligent, lacking intelligence, driven by criminal intent and by lust, and—perhaps most notably absent. In this article, I will focus on four key male figures: Kandid, Tuzik, Perets, and the director.

Kandid, the hero of the Forest chapters, is the ideal member of the intelligentsia—the hero who overcomes adversities not so much because of his physical strength. He is smart, first and foremost, but also determined to achieve his goals. Kandid is not a perfect character, but he is dedicated to his search for moral clarity, and by the end of the novel, obtains it. Notably, during his attempts to leave the forest, he acquires a surgeon's weapon, a scalpel. Beyond the phallic symbolism Greene identifies in this object, it is clearly the weapon of someone who belongs to the intelligentsia—sharp, thin, precise, dependent upon skill and determination rather than physical strength. Kandid, out of all the characters of the novel, is a person with a future. Every single, male-assigned character in the novel is measured against him—and found wanting. However, Kandid only partially fits into the model of hegemonic masculinity (Connell) due to his liminal positionality.<sup>5</sup> Kandid is originally from the Administration, where he is respected and admired, but after the helicopter crash, Kandid is presumed dead by his Administration colleagues. He does not seem to have any close friends in the world of Administration: he is remembered, but not mourned. During the events of the novel, Kandid never reaches the Administration and does not interact with its people.

Kandid's hegemonic positioning does not translate to the forest society, at least not initially. After his helicopter crash, Kandid enters another society (that of the villagers), where he is a silent outsider who needs to learn the language and customs anew. Kandid is viewed by other villagers as strange and damaged, but through his journey, Kandid relies on strength of will and his moral principles in order to gain important tools which, upon his return to the village, position him as someone who is a protector, and who is both respected and feared.

During the Forest chapters, Kandid develops his masculinity in contrast and in opposition to the women of the novel, highlighted in his interactions with Nava—a young village woman Kandid sees as his daughter—and with the forest's *podrugi*. Kandid's role as a protector is an integral part of his masculinity. He successfully protects Nava from male bandits, but ultimately fails to safeguard her against the *podrugi*, who take her away to become a part of their separatist society. By the end of the novel, Kandid has lost Nava, and been unable to defeat the *podrugi*, but he is better equipped to continue his fight against what he perceives as the *podrugi*'s genocidal agenda. His hopeful ending reframes his goal from simply returning to Administration (as it was initially) to the goal of triumph of his masculinity model: determined, informed, empowered,

self-reliant, and—perhaps most significantly—in opposition to powerful women who exclude and dismiss him.

Another important model of Soviet masculinity is provided by the director, a looming and yet absent Administration figure. Perets, the viewpoint character of the Administration chapters, is always looking for him, but is never able to find him. Others speak about the director, but it is unclear if he can ever be found within the labyrinthine structure of the Administration. The director is a stand-in for the absent and absentee men of the post-WII era: the paternal and leadership roles associated with hegemonic masculinity go unfilled while everybody else scrambles to provide the missing labor and cover up for the absences created by the demographic crisis.

Tuzik (called “Acey” in Myers’s translation) is an overlooked but crucially important character and a member of the Administration. He provides a model of non-intelligentsia masculinity, and the novel frames him in opposition to both of its viewpoint characters—Perets, a man of the intelligentsia who is passive and tentative, and the absent, heroic Kandid. In the beginning it is not clear whether or not the narrative frames Tuzik in a negative light, but as the novel progresses, Tuzik’s framing is increasingly negative. A truck driver with a penchant for objectifying and dehumanizing women, Tuzik represents the worst kinds of stereotypically masculine behaviors. In the beginning of the novel, the reader comes to view this character as unintelligent, crude, and frustrating, as presented through his exaggeratedly aggressive, heterosexist and lascivious speech. For example, Tuzik gossips about the mysterious forest “mermaids” (those are, most likely, the alien *podrugi*). From Tuzik’s perspective, the most interesting fact about the mermaids is that they lie naked in the lakes. When discussing the absent Kandid, Tuzik explains that the forest is like Kandid’s woman, using the colloquial and often disparaging word for woman, *baba*:

“I didn't see the mermaids myself,” repeated Acey... “but I entirely believe in them. Because the boys have told me. So did Kandid even, and he was the one who knew everything about the forest. He used to go into that forest like a man to his woman, put his finger on anything. He perished there in his forest.” (Myers’s translation 29)

Tuzik presents Kandid as a picture of dominant masculinity. In Tuzik’s framing, true masculinity is associated with dominance over women—both real women and metaphorical ones. In Russian, the word “forest” is grammatically masculine, but here the forest is feminized; Kandid knows the forest through an allegorical heterosexual relationship, in which the man is the possessor. We have seen that for Kandid, masculinity is associated with qualities of a protector; for Tuzik, the protective qualities of positive masculinity are missing entirely.

Perets, the main character of the Administration chapters, is at first uncomfortable and then increasingly repulsed by Tuzik. Tuzik narrates to Perets some of the details of his sordid past, which involve sexual assault presented as if it were funny. Tuzik explains that he is sexually frustrated, and boasts that he is ready to commit sexual assault against the forest “mermaids.” Perets becomes increasingly upset, and has to restrain himself from hitting Tuzik. During a trip to the forest, Tuzik acts inappropriately towards Rita, a scientist from the Forest Administration.

Unable to endure Tuzik's behaviors any longer, Perets hits him and knocks him out. This first—and last—act of violence committed by Perets emphasizes the negative framing of Tuzik. Tuzik is a kind of man whom the forest *podrugi* see as the representative of all masculinity, which needs to be eradicated. Even the most timid member of the intelligentsia has a moral obligation to actively resist this kind of masculinity, demonstrating the protective qualities of positive masculinity Kandid exemplifies.

Perets, the viewpoint character of the Administration chapters, presents an interesting model of non-hegemonic masculinity and gender-nonconformity. Perets's arc presents a commentary on the weaknesses of intelligentsia masculinity. Perets is a shy, soft-spoken expert on medieval Japanese philology who has written his dissertation on the “Stylistic and Rhythmic Characteristics of Feminine Prose in the Late Heian based on Makwa-no Sosi” (Myers's translation). He arrives at the Administration dreaming of visiting the forest, although it is not initially clear what motivates this desire. For a number of chapters, Perets is barred from visiting the forest and becomes increasingly enmeshed in the life of the bureaucratic Administration. The other coworkers give him confusing directions, push him around, send him on odd errands, and poke fun at him—all ostensibly in a friendly manner. Unlike many of the other male characters in the novel, Perets is dreamy, passive, and indecisive, and yet possessing a lyrical internal monologue. He thinks constantly about the mysteries of the forest, which he is not allowed to visit. While other characters think about the forest using words in masculine or feminine grammatical forms, Perets is the only one who uses the neuter grammatical gender to refer to the forest in his internal monologues, and does so repeatedly in the early parts of the novel. Bolded are words in neuter grammatical gender, which refer to the forest:

...**Зеленое пахучее изобилие**. **Изобилие** красок, **изобилие** запахов. **Изобилие** жизни. И **все чужое**. Чем-то **знакомое**, кое в чем **похожее**, но по-настоящему **чужое**. Наверное, труднее всего примириться с тем, что **оно** и **чужое**, и **знакомое** одновременно. С тем, что **оно** — **производное** от нашего мира, плоть от плоти нашей, но **порвавшее** с нами и не **желающее** нас знать.

**Green odorous abundance**. **Abundance** of colors, **abundance** of smells. **Abundance** of life. And **all** of it **alien**. Somehow **familiar**, a **resemblance** somewhere, but profoundly **alien**. The hardest part was to accept **it** as **alien** and **familiar** at one and the same time, **derived** from our world, flesh of our flesh—but **broken away**, not **wishing** to know us. (Myers's translation 31)

Since the Russian word *лес* “forest” is grammatically masculine, selecting nouns in neuter grammatical gender to describe it is a clear stylistic choice. Previously, I showed how Tuzik's use of feminine forms for the forest is also marked, showcasing Tuzik's view of masculinity in terms of dominance over women. I argue that Perets's consistent gender-neutral reference to the forest marks him as outside the binary dichotomies of male and female; he is presented as gender-nonconforming.

Perets's gender-nonconformity is underscored in a surrealist episode in Chapter 3, in which workers of the Administration are about to receive a phone address from the mysterious director. Each person is assigned their own phone. Later in the chapter, it is revealed that each worker gets a phone that matches that particular worker's gender. Perets, unable to locate his phone, panics and runs around, observing others at their phones, attentively listening to the address. Finally, Perets barges into an office with a free phone and listens to the address delivered in an "unfamiliar squeaky voice." He cannot understand the address. Finally, another coworker reveals to Perets that he had picked up a phone on the desk of a female coworker currently on maternity leave: Perets had picked up a "female phone." Perets also finds himself in a number of homoerotic situations with himself in the receptive role. All these and other features reinforce the reading of this character as gender-nonconforming and existing outside of heteronormative expectations of masculine behavior.

We also discover hints of Perets's backstory: his wife was killed by a random, violent drunk person. Perets is a common Russian Jewish last name; the Jewish subtext is reinforced by the name of his wife, Esfir' (Esther), a markedly Jewish first name in a Soviet context. The Strugatskys routinely inserted Jewish references into their novels, including through naming conventions.<sup>6</sup> In 1965, the year *The Snail on the Slope* was written, the appearance of the name Esfir' was strikingly marked as a part of the lost world of Soviet Jewry. Esfir's senseless death is an allusion to the senselessly perished Jews, and the grief of their loved ones who are powerless to defend them. We discover that it was Esfir' who dreamt about visiting the Forest, and it is her dream that Perets has been pursuing.

After Perets strikes Tuzik, he reasserts his masculinity and earns a place among the workers of the Forest Administration. He stops thinking about the forest with words in the neuter grammatical gender, and begins to think about it in words marked masculine. He enters into a sexual relationship with Alevtina, a librarian who is friendly with Tuzik. These actions and choices might be interpreted as Peret's realignment with hegemonic masculinity: he has exhibited protective features, he has acted aggressively against a character who behaves negatively, and he has abandoned gender-nonconforming speech and behaviors in favor of heterosexuality. However, in the world of the novel, Perets's masculine turn is negative in nature. It marks his full integration into the Soviet-style bureaucracy of the Administration. His relationship with Alevtina is indicative of his moral defeat. Alevtina appears maternal, but their relationship is neither warm nor joyful. Perets tells her about his perished wife, and abandons his attempts to either leave the Administration or visit the forest. In the very last chapter, he suddenly finds himself thrust into the role of the new director, only to discover that it is Alevtina who is pulling the strings. Perets's ending sends a stark message to the novel readers about the dangers of passive or complacent masculinity within the Soviet context. Despite his new leadership role, it is clear that Perets's choices led him to a life devoid of meaning and agency—he is simply a part of a bureaucratic machine.

## Conclusions

The masculine models explored in this essay, as well as additional side characters, present primarily negative features of post-World War II Soviet masculinity. The novel showcases men who are complacent, fearful, traumatized, criminally lustful, violent, passive, hopeless, and absent. The only positive masculine model in the novel is Kandid, but even his arc does not culminate in victory.

In *The Snail on the Slope*, models of masculinity are used to discuss dilemmas and issues affecting post-WII Soviet men. The post-war demographic imbalances are allegorically explored through the novel's absent figures. Kandid, though an active protagonist in the Forest chapters, is absent from the Administration, and his absence is keenly felt. Another absentee is the director. Both men are supposed to be role models, almost parental: Kandid as a model of decisive and driven intelligentsia masculinity and the director as a model of leadership. Yet neither of them is physically present in the lives of the novel's humans. Kandid's heroic struggle is confined to the alien forest. As for the original director, it is not clear if he ever existed.

The traumatizing effects of WWII and the dangers of complacency under the Soviet regime are explored in Perets's arc. Perets, who takes on the role of the Administration's director at the very end of the novel, is traumatized by past violence. His narrative arc begins with consistent gender-nonconforming choices, but it culminates in Soviet-style, complacent masculinity. While his choices—both narratively and linguistically—become more markedly masculine, this outcome leads him to failure.

To understand the treatment of gender in *The Snail on the Slope*, we need to explore not only femininities, but also masculinities. I have argued that the novel critiques Soviet masculinity, reinforces some traditionally masculine actions (especially as it pertains to intelligentsia), and comments on the crises that faced Soviet men in the post-World War period. The Strugatskys explore the stark absences that the war and Stalinist repressions created in the gendered fabric of Soviet life and outline directions for hope. As the novel illustrates, hopeful masculinity in the Soviet context is exemplified by men who are intelligent, decisive, thoughtful, protective of others, and willing to persist despite trauma and loss.

## Notes

1. The original Управление is translated as the Directorate (Myers translation, 1980), the Administration (Bormashenko translation, 2018), and the Forest Authority (Greene, 1986). I use the Administration throughout this essay. In the original, Управление/Administration is capitalized, while лес/forest is not. Scholarly literature usually capitalizes both the Administration and the Forest when referring to the two different strands of the narrative, and I have followed this

convention in expressions such as “the Forest chapters”. The word *forest* is not capitalized in other contexts.

2. On *podrugi* and the gendered language of *The Snail of the Slope*, see Lemberg.
3. Ashwin; Wanner.
4. For a discussion of the intelligentsia in works of the Strugatsky brothers, see Tammaro.
5. Connell’s classic study discusses four types of masculinity: hegemonic, subordinate, complacent, and marginal. Connell views hegemonic masculinity as focused on male domination in society, exercising authority and power over women, as well as other men.
6. On Jewish references in the Strugatskys’ work, see Greenberg.

## Works Cited

- Ashwin, Sarah, ed. *Gender, State, and Society in Soviet and Post-Soviet Russia*. Routledge, 2000.
- Connell, Raewyn. *Masculinities*. U of California P, 1995.
- Gal, Susan, and Gail Kligman. *Reproducing Gender: Politics, Publics, and Everyday Life after Socialism*. Princeton U P, 2000.
- Grinberg, Marat. “Reading Between the Lines: The Soviet Jewish Bookshelf and Post-Holocaust Soviet Jewish Identity.” *East European Jewish Affairs*, vol. 48, no. 3, 2018, pp. 391-415.
- Greene, Diana. “Male and female in *The Snail on the Slope* by the Strugatsky brothers.” *Modern Fiction Studies*, vol. 32, no. 1, 1986, pp. 97-108.
- Khagi, Sofya. “One Billion Years after the End of the World: Historical Deadlock, Contemporary Dystopia, and the Continuing Legacy of the Strugatskii Brothers.” *Slavic Review*, vol. 72, no. 2, 2013, pp. 267-286.
- Lemberg, R.B. “Ungendering the English Translation of the Strugatskys’ *The Snail on the Slope*.” *Science Fiction in Translation*, edited by Ian Campbell, Palgrave Macmillan, 2021, pp. 55-78.
- Petrov, Victor P. “Some Observations on the 1959 Soviet Census.” *The Russian Review*, vol. 18, no. 4, 1959, pp. 332-338.
- Strugatsky, Boris. *Kommentarii k proidennomu*. [Comments on the Way Left Behind]. Amfora, 2003.
- Strugatsky, Arkady, and Boris Strugatsky. *The Snail on the Slope*. Translated by Alan Myers, Bantam, 1980.



Tammaro, Elizabeth. *Communism's Futures: Intelligentsia Imaginations in the Writings of the Strugatsky Brothers*. 2017. University of Central Florida, PhD Dissertation.

Wanner, Catherine. *Burden of Dreams: History and Identity in Post-Soviet Ukraine*. Penn State Press, 2010.

Zdravomyslova, Elena, and Anna Temkina. "The Crisis of Masculinity in Late Soviet Discourse." *Russian Social Science Review*, vol. 54, no. 1, 2013, pp. 40-61.

**R.B. Lemberg** is a queer, nonbinary immigrant from Eastern Europe to the US. They are an Associate Professor of Slavic, German, and Eurasian Studies and Jewish Studies at the University of Kansas. R.B.'s novella *The Four Profound Weaves* (Tachyon Press, 2020) was a finalist for the Nebula, Ignyte, Locus, World Fantasy, and other awards. Their first novel *The Unbalancing* (Tachyon) and short story collection *Geometries of Belonging* (Fairwood Press) were published in 2022.