

Feminism, Capitalism, Death: Neoliberal Womanhood and the Post-Soviet Person in Anna Melikyan's *Mermaid*

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Abstract

This piece works as a critique of neoliberal feminist ideology through an analysis of Anna Melikyan's 2007 film *Mermaid*. It begins with a close reading of several scenes in the film and how they operate as a criticism or representation of neoliberal post-Soviet existence. Alissa, the protagonist, is subjected to a series of events which shape her life as a post-Soviet woman—these events ultimately lead to her untimely death. The theme of labour, financially, domestically, and sexually, defines Alissa's life in Moscow. I use a sociological study on Russian post-Soviet self-help literature written for women as the ideological lens to study the film, drawing connections between the events of the film and the real contents of several self-help books, which are analysed and critiqued by the article's author. The film visualises a patriarchal double-bind where post-Soviet women are expected to be both patriarchally subordinate and independent economic subjects. This paradox is present in the self-help literature. The essay forges a connection between real-life feminist critique and film criticism, exploring how film criticism can be a vehicle for feminist thought. The essay also interrogates ideas of what a feminist text is and how the creation of a feminist text is an act of discursive meaning-making, a relationship to the viewer/reader as opposed to a definitive quality which takes shape during the text's creation.

Keywords

Neoliberalism, postfeminism, post-Soviet, framing, discourse, capitalism

*Men say that there are two unrepresentable things: death
and the feminine sex. That's because they need femininity to
be associated with death; it's the jitters that give them a
hard-on!*

- Helene Cixous, "The Laugh of the Medusa"

Anna Melikyan's *Mermaid* (2007) offers a filmic framework for understanding the structures of neoliberalism that configure a post-Soviet woman's experience. A young woman, Alissa, experiences her coming of age as she and her mother move from a small Russian village to the bustling city of Moscow. She takes up several odd jobs and ultimately falls in love with a scam artist who 'sells property' on the moon. The film ends in her death as she is struck by a car in a busy intersection. By picking up on critiques of post-feminism, which asserts that the goals of feminism have already been achieved, as well as neoliberalism, which favours the free market and bootstrap mentality, *Mermaid* puts forth a criticism that points out the irrevocable connection between the two concepts. Neoliberalism ignores the goals of women's liberation as it views every person as a capitalist subject who is unaffected by social structures, with complete autonomy over their circumstances due to the 'freedom' offered by capitalism. The film uses street advertising as an integral part of the narrative structure, demonstrating how neoliberal capitalism has infiltrated Russian society. The film also utilises long scenes of erratic camera movement that capture the paradoxical urban experience of being both trapped within it and lost amongst anonymous crowds.

Furthermore, the combination of intimacy and financial subordination Alissa experiences is integral to her integration into neoliberal womanhood, as she is forced to be both financially useful yet sexually desirable, creating a patriarchal double-bind where she is simultaneously an independent, hyper-insular subject forced to 'make her own way,' yet also an objectified female body that must gain its worth through its indecipherable feminine essence. By understanding this particular experience of city life amongst the rapid rise of consumer society in Moscow, Melikyan's film creates a post-Soviet person who is distinctly affected by her womanhood and the intersection between patriarchal and capitalist oppression. By analyzing the film's content, I will interrogate how Alissa's narrative arc is defined by the intersection between neoliberalism and the patriarchy and how that can inform our knowledge of the post-Soviet female experience.

Alissa's time in Moscow begins with a massive advertisement blocking her apartment window. A giant image of a woman reads, "It's good to be home!" This completely bars Alissa's view

of the outside world. Maria Adamson and Suvi Salmenniemi (2015) note that neoliberal Russian women's self-help literature that "emphasised femininity is construed in the books as the single most important form of capital which women should cultivate and mobilise" (para. 31). The billboard displayed on Alissa's apartment serves as a sort of oracle for her initiation into the neoliberal social order and the cultivation of femininity as a currency. This overt and impossible-to-miss feminine image displays the fame and money women's bodies are capable of producing when they succumb to objectification and loss of identity. Adamson and Salmenniemi's "emphasised femininity" (2015, para. 31) is on full display: the woman on the billboard is a simulacrum of womanhood, a package advertising itself not as a person but as an image. Domestic labour itself is not being sold, but instead a 'utopian' image of domestic labour wherein femininity is being sold to women. The advertisement shows a woman with no visible clothing, her body wrapped around a washing machine, and a subtle smile on her face. She is telling Alissa that "It's good to be home." This creates an image of a *real* woman who was presumably paid to advertise the kinds of domestic labour, such as laundry, that she is meant to be escaping by configuring herself as an ideal feminine capitalist subject through modelling. The woman is paradoxically selling the domestic labour she, as a modelling subject, escaped through her career path selling emphasised femininity. This form of womanhood obscures Alissa's real view of the city. From then on, she narrates that "Moscow, as they say, laid itself at my feet with all its power, beauty, and unpredictability" (Melyikan, 2007, 29:50). Her assertion that Moscow laid *itself* out as if through some ritualistic submission towards her, reifies the fact that Alissa becomes seduced by the life consumer society seems to offer her, her real view of the city's hostility obscured by the promise of 'home' delivered in the package of femininity.

Alissa goes on to take up a series of menial, dead-end jobs that strip her personhood and instead configure her as merely a replaceable or even invisible body. In her job cleaning bathrooms, she experiences a man coming in while she is working, ignoring her presence and stripping himself in front of her to use the urinal. In the scene, the recruitment of patriarchy and capitalism is clear as Alissa enters a masculine space as part of the job she is forced to take to survive in a capitalist world. She is then subject to a male body which simultaneously ignores and disrespects her humanity. Alissa's experiences in these dead-end jobs, however, are distinctly non-feminine – she takes a job as a phone mascot that completely obscures and de-genders her body, vastly different from the billboards that sell an image of womanhood as a marketable object. Through this degendered labour, Alissa resists using her femininity to gain access to the supposed luxuries she may enjoy if she did, choosing instead to try and forge her own path in the city. Eventually, Alissa encounters a woman

while working who asks her if she knows “that if a pregnant woman looks at a picture of a beautiful woman, the girl will look like her” (Melyikan, 2007, 34:53). In this scene, Alissa and the woman are in front of a massive billboard of Tyra Banks that the other woman is gazing at. The image of Tyra Banks represents the infiltration of Western influences that compound the promotion of neoliberalism and the imagined female subject. Alissa’s body is obscured, while the advertisement employs the opposite: hyper-visible femininity, which seems to display itself, allowing women to gaze upon her in their superstitious hope of creating beautiful children. The woman believes her own beauty is the result of staring at pictures of Madonna. Like Tyra Banks, she is widely perceived as an icon; this signifies her existence as an object for consumption rather than a person with agency. This is one of the many representations of Western beauty standards and culture that infiltrated Russia after the fall of the Soviet Union. Both Madonna and Tyra Banks are reducible to semiotic baggage of beauty, talent, and stardom: a non-corporeal sexuality focused not on female pleasure but instead on a displaced erotic gaze. Adamson (2015) writes that in Russian women’s self-help literature, “female sexuality does not appear important in itself but is, once again, harnessed to serve the sexual pleasures of the male partner” (para. 41). This superstition voiced by the woman emphasises this – beauty is important to make one’s children beautiful. It holds no intrinsic value in and of itself. This kind of self-surveillance is encouraged through the constant and forced surveillance of the image of the Other: the ultimate signifier of aspirational womanhood that exists to continue the cycle of reproductive heterosexuality. Even unborn babies are subjected to the expectations of beauty necessary to be successful under consumerism, emphasising the double bind of being forced to procreate and become subordinate to a domestic patriarch simultaneously, and also to market oneself and become subordinate to patriarchal capitalism.

Alissa also attempts to pass exams to study at university. After her failure, she meets a boy who tells her that “girls don’t have to go to school, women are nymphs, they were created for another purpose” (Melyikan, 2007, 36:06), making fun of her ambitions because he believes that as a woman, such pursuits are ‘unnecessary.’ Adamson (2015) quotes a sample from a Russian women’s self-help book, which notes that,

“a real woman ... will not bang her head against the wall to achieve something ... A real woman does not compete with men ... she does not try to educate or change them ... she does not impose responsibilities. She creates an illusion of being defenceless, thereby awakening a man’s desire to perform noble deeds” (para. 36).

This sentiment is espoused by the boy Alissa meets – that women are ‘nymphs’ without need of education, that they are simultaneously too stupid yet somehow rise above the crude logic that is learnt in an academic setting. The neoliberal culture which rose in the wake of the Soviet collapse, as evidenced by the books Adamson (2015) reads through, was a paradoxical one; women were simultaneously meant to be independent yet also sexually subordinate to men, to use their ‘feminine mystique’ to get what they wanted. Alissa is encouraged against education because she is a ‘nymph,’ a nature spirit evocative of primitivism or prehistory. This comparison implies that women exist outside of society and instead occupy a space of magic or divinity. The cult of divine femininity is a pseudo-scientific method of upholding the patriarchy. It convinces women that they do not *need* to do the tough mental and physical labour of men because their feminine wiles and beauty are sufficient. It also attempts to position women as both innately spiritually superior to men yet incapable of achieving real personhood.

Further, as Alissa spends some time with the boy, he makes a pass at her to request sex. He suggests they skip all the relationship niceties, asking her ‘why waste time?’ Rather than sex being seen as an intimate act between two people, he views sex as something both necessary and yet not worth the investment of time. The interconnection between the neoliberal cult of convenience (where the highest cause is getting what you want quickly) and the mistreatment of women is on full display here: he wonders what the point could possibly be of treating Alissa with respect because time is of the essence. Sexual acts are turned into a form of neoliberal labour in which the woman must act as quickly as possible, another thing on her long list of tasks and expectations to meet.

As Adamson (2015) notes, within Russian self-help literature, sexuality is considered “essential in order to keep the man from leaving, which is an ever-present risk” (para. 43) in the context of configuring post-Soviet womanhood. However, in *Mermaid*, the effort sexuality must exert is never-ending – one must be visually flawless, yielding, and coquettish. Therefore, the goal of subtle manipulation is rendered impossible. Alissa and another woman, Rita, are involved and infatuated with the same man. In their desperation to maintain his attention without *seeming* desperate, they cast a spell by smoking a cigarette with his name written on it. Rita conforms to expectations of sexuality and femininity while Alissa does not – with her ‘out of style’ green hair, bare face and frumpy clothes. Both women attempt to combat the ever-present risk of their man leaving by undertaking superstitious spell-casting – not unlike the superstition related to beauty in childbirth. The through line of magical thinking being used as a way to combat the seemingly impossible-to-conquer standards for female existence speaks to the ultimate paradox of neoliberal

femininity espoused by self-help books: you must “manipulate men without them knowing it” (Adamson, 2015, para. 32). The effort necessary to assimilate into post-Soviet society is too immense, and so the turn towards superstition is the only means of manipulation. However, Alissa’s youthful effervescence and enigmatic attitude earn her a place as the ‘Lunar Girl,’ the face of the man’s scam business selling properties in space. After auditioning a group of explicitly sexualized women and then afterwards, a group of innocent children, neither group seemed to fit their bill – Alissa was found to be “quite the Lunar Girl” (Melyikan, 2007, 1:19:24). She is beautiful and titillating without any effort, inhabiting both the allure of womanhood and the cheerful innocence of childhood – in the spirit of neoliberal femininity, she “creates an illusion of being defenceless” (Adamson, 2015, para. 35).

The ending of *Mermaid* establishes that the burden of womanhood under capitalism is insurmountable. Alissa’s disruption to the social order must be restored. As Helene Cixous (1976) writes in “The Laugh of the Medusa,” “once the palace of magistrates is restored, it’s time to pay: Immediate bloody death to the uncontrollable elements” (p. 76). Alissa is struck by a car in a moment of panic. Throughout the film, her insistence in defying expectations of femininity – going against fashion norms, refusing to endure gendered labour, her desire for education – forms her into an embodied disruption of an intended patriarchal social order. The moment of the car’s impact is the moment of discursive meaning-making, which calls the viewer into conversation. Her death propels the narrative – like the intersection she stands in, vehicles of potential meaning move through every fibre of the text. Hindsight is crucial to the reception of the text because “a feminine text then has no fixed formal characteristics, precisely because it is a relationship: it becomes a feminine text in the moment of its reading” (Kuhn, 1994, p. 13). The moment of Alissa’s death behaves as that critical point that a feminist reading can be formed, a collision of a conversation-starter building a relationship with the viewer. One might feel disappointed, expecting a text which encourages the idea of female perseverance – the moment of the car’s impact may retrospectively change the meaning of the film, affirming the idea that feminist textual production occurs in the moment of its reception. I instead choose to read *Mermaid’s* ending through the lens of a radical feminist pessimism, where women’s escape from the expectations and oppression of the patriarchy is rendered impossible, where “immediate death to the uncontrollable elements” (Cixous, 1976, p. 76) is the only possibility. Billboards surround Alissa, which read “Live in Glamour!” and “Don’t Put it Off Until Tomorrow!” grimly predicting the events to come. ‘Living in glamour’ is a state rendered impossible to reach, and so she must die. Her death is precluded by her bombardment

with the messages that cause her downfall – the capitalistic urgency to do things now, the cars which surround her in too much of a rush to stop, the kind of glamorous femininity necessary to ‘live’ at all. In the end, Alissa is reduced to her image – no different than the women decorating the other billboards in Moscow, a hypervisible anonymous object, the only kind of woman that can truly assimilate.

Mermaid articulates a kind of feminism which eschews marketing tactics, self-help culture, and consumerism. A kind of feminism whose inevitable end goal is death cannot be abstracted into neoliberalism. Alissa’s image haunts the film through time, informing each interaction she has by representing the ideal she can ultimately aspire to. By acknowledging the utter absurdity of expectations of post-Soviet womanhood, *Mermaid* suggests that liberation’s end goal is perhaps unimaginable as everything can be subsumed into a marketing tactic. As the self-help books suggest, Soviet post-feminism asserts that women are in complete control of their own lives and that the goal of this must be to conquer womanhood and wrangle manhood in a sneaky recreation of patriarchal roles where the woman is ‘secretly in control’ (though in reality, she is not in control at all). Adamson (2015) says of Russia that “Feminist ideas appear to be in double jeopardy: they are repudiated for echoing Soviet gender politics, and at the same time (and paradoxically) they are understood as an invariably alien, Western-imported ideology is incompatible with ‘Russian culture’” (para. 14). *Mermaid* perpetuates this through its critique of a patriarchal paradox – women must simultaneously deny themselves autonomy and be subservient to conform with the Russian patriarchy, and also make their own way in the world to conform with the newly burgeoning market economy.

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