

*zhenskii vopros*), which is the Russian term for the whole range of issues concerning the legal, social, political, philosophical and cultural status of women.<sup>3</sup> Because of her writing on women's lot in the former Soviet society , Kollontai was best known as one of Russian prominent Soviet woman writers.

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<sup>1</sup> Gornic, V. and Moran, B.K. (ed.). 1990, *Women in Sexist Society*, p. 228.

<sup>2</sup> Hunt, Sara,1996, *Heroine: Remarkable and Inspiring Women*, Saraband.

<sup>3</sup> Marsh, Rosalind,1996, *Gender and Russian Literature*, Cambridge, cambridge University Press, p. 1.

This is focussed on one of Kollontai's best stories, *Vasilisa Maligna*. As implied in the title, the theme of this story is the struggle of a woman named Vasilisa Dementevna Malygina to achieve her full freedom and independence.

In this story, Kollontai presents many types of women characters such as the housewife, the single woman, and the prostitute. However, these types can be divided into two groups of types of characters which are represented by Vasilisa Dementevna Malygina and Nina Konstantinovna.

Vasilisa Dementevna Malygina, twenty - eight years old, is portrayed as a good woman worker who has worked since she was young. Physically, Kollontai describes Vasilisa's appearance as unattractive: a pale, skinny, curly-haired woman who does not wear make-up or dress for show. So, in her simple blouse and with her flat chest she looks like a boy. The only thing about her physical appearance which is impressive is her wonderful, perceptive brown eyes. Those eyes make people feel more cheerful whenever they are looking into them.

Although physically she is described as not beautiful, Kollontai gives Vasilisa a strong and attractive personality. She is reliable, perceptive and firm, as can be seen from her process of critical analysis before making the decision to become a communist. Influenced by Tolstoy's ideas, she is a pacifist and sure of her opinions, although it means she struggles against overwhelming odds, since most people at that time disagreed with her ideas. After meeting the local Bolshevik organiser and the committee members who give her an explanation of their struggle she becomes a communist. She ignores her family' anger and disapproval.

In the novel, Vasilisa's abilities are well suited to Party work. She is a passionate and assertive public speaker. Unlike other working women who are shy and tongue-tied, she knows how to debate skilfully and to argue cogently. Soon she becomes the leader of the women workers. She tries to understand and fight for their needs, and to discover the reason for her efforts.

In her opinion, the struggle for women's rights is one of many ways to achieve Bolshevik goals. Briefly, it can be said that she is concerned about women's matters not only because she is a woman whose deepest feeling has been touched by the subordinate position of women in society, but also because she is one of the Bolshevik thinkers who devotes her idealism to the Bolshevik victory.

For Vasilisa, the revolution is not a game and everyone has to make sacrifices. In 1918 she is known as a true indefatigable Bolshevik fighter. It can be said that Vasilisa is the kind of person who knows what she wants and sticks to it. Once she decides to be a communist, she dedicates all her energy and mind to Party works. Vasilisa married to a man named Vladimir, but, she leaves him after finding out that he is not the Vladimir she used to know.

The second leading character of this story is Nina Konstantinovna, Vladimir's mistress. Kollontai gives Nina a family background, a physical appearance, a personality and a way of life which are opposite of Vasilisa's.

Unlike Vasilisa, Nina comes from a rich family which provide her with the luxuries of life and support her study in a institute. When the revolution comes, her father joins the Whites. Her mother dies at this time and her brother, a White Army Officer, is killed in action. Because of that, unlike Vasilisa who becomes a Bolshevik, Nina remains a bourgeois.

Physically, Kollontai presents Nina as a good-looking woman who knows how to dress up. Unlike Vasilisa who does not want to use her femininity to attract men's



attention, Nina flaunts her physical beauty and femininity to attract people's attention, especially that of men.

However, Nina's personality is not as impressive as her figure. Kollontai portrays her as a boastful, ignorant, and selfish person. She is also described as a weak and dependent person, unlike Vasya who is strong and independent.

Although Kollontai offers, through her stories, multiple examples of women from varying age groups and social strata, positive characterisations outweigh negative characterisations. Indeed, two arrays of female characters, despite their apparent varieties, merely offer the readers a simple black and white opposition.

In creating some images, positive or negative, of her characters there is no doubt that Kollontai bases her creations on three basic concepts of her own.

It can be said that the first influential concept is communist ideology. Since her efforts to emancipate women through communist values, Kollontai is well known as a Bolshevik feminist. Her efforts can be seen from the way she divides her characters into negatively characterised women and positively characterised women.

It is obvious that Kollontai portrays communist women, a group of characters who revere the morality of the proletariat, as the representatives of positive women. In contrast, she portrays bourgeois women, a group of characters who highly praise bourgeois values, as the representatives of negative women.

Since her positive women are communists, Kollontai also portrays her heroines as persons who put collective interests far above individual interests, while her negative women or antiheroines are shown to have a contrasting image. Her heroines this image comes from Kollontai's rejection of bourgeois morality which demands all for the loved one instead of all for the collective.<sup>4</sup>

Furthermore, in her stories some of Kollontai's positive and negative characters are shown as having jobs. What makes them negative or positive is the way they value work. Negative women value work as a means to get a brief moment of luxurious life and illusory happiness; positive women, in contrast, value their jobs as tools to change their fate, and to shape their own destiny. Kollontai demonstrates the difference between Nina and Vasya in valuing a job. Vasya values work as her existence and a realisation of her independence. Because of that, she is totally absorbed in her work and gives it her first priority. In contrast, Nina values work just as a tool to sustain her life. That is why she happily quits her job after getting an offer from Vladimir to provide her with a luxurious life as long as she becomes his mistress. Giving her positive women this image is influenced by Kollontai's view that change in the economic role of a woman and her independent involvement in production are the only ways to make a woman valued as a person with individual qualities.<sup>5</sup>

Kollontai's giving an image to her characters is also based on the type of job performed by the character. This can be seen in comparing the job of Mrs Feodoseev and Vasya. Mrs Feodoseev spends her time from morning to evening only in the interests of her family, such as providing proper food, while Vasya dedicates her time to the collective interest. Kollontai gives Mrs Feodoseev, as a representative of housewives, a negative image, while Vasya is given a positive image. Kollontai's decision in doing this is based on her view which impartially judges all types of job as long as it has value to the state and the national economy.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Holt, Alix, 1977, *Selected Writings of Alexandra Kollontai*, New York, W.W.Norton, p.291.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid, p.245.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid, p. 254.

*Australian Feminist Studies*, vol.12,no.25 April, hal.59-75, Oxford, Journals Oxford Ltd., p.59.

<sup>9</sup> Waters, Elizabeth, 1991, 'The Female Form in Soviet Political Iconography', in *Russia's Women: Accommodation, Resistance, Transformation*, edited by Barbara Evans Clements, Barbara Alpern Engel, and Christine D. Worobec, Berkeley, University of California Press., p. 226.

<sup>10</sup> Kollontai, op. cit. p. 4.



prefers to give her positive women the image of women who have inner beauty. The most important thing about these heroines is their immutable clarity, their whole-hearted nature, their absence of doubt, and their optimism as can be shown by Vasya's personality.

In contrast, Kollontai gives a feminine image, as Nina's image, to her negative characters. These women are presented as persons who are interested in fashions, in new hair-styles, or in cosmetics. They usually appear in beautiful dresses. Unlike the positive women who have to rely on their natural beauty instead of social charm, these negative women know how to express their sensuality. In other words, Kollontai presumes that modesty, severity, and simplicity are ideal beauty and suited to communist values, while over-dressing and using make-up are the values of bourgeois femininity, and symbols of women's subordination to men.

Because of that, Kollontai portrays their beauty as a symbol of forbidden fruit, and their sensuality is shown as a destructive thing. The negative women are shown as the women who use their femininity as a tool to seduce men. An example can be seen in the action of the young prostitute who seduces the 'party man' and 'commissar' with her boudoir-beauty.

Furthermore, their beautiful appearances go with negative personalities. These women are presented as selfish, possessive, and weak. They are also characterized as persons who do not have solidarity with their peers. For example, Nina Konstantinovna's personality is shown as being not as impressive as her figure, since she does not care about other people's problems. She also feels that she deserves to be the focus of attention.

Because of her communist principles, Kollontai also gives her positive women an image of valuing friendship between man and woman as long as the friendship is based on equality, mutual respect, and complete freedom. Kollontai's positive women believe that love and passion are not the only reason for building a relationship between a man and a woman. An illustration can be seen in the long friendship between Vasya and Mikhailo Pavlovich which is based on the similarity of their way of life. The friendship between Vasya and Mikhailo is a reflection of Kollontai's view that proletarian women consider men as their comrades in fighting for a better future since they are enslaved by the same social condition, capitalism.<sup>11</sup> This attitude is different from those of bourgeois women who see men as the enemy and the oppressor.<sup>12</sup>

To strengthen her idea, Kollontai contrasts the friendship of Vasya and Mikhailo with the friendship between Nina and her male friends. Kollontai shows this relationship as a kind of business transaction: supply and demand. The bourgeois men, who see a woman as a sex object, "buy" women's attention with their power and money; in return bourgeois women "sell" their freedom and dignity to gain moral and material support from men. That is why Nina, a bourgeois woman, is so unhappy with her friendships with her male friends.

The second basic concept which influences Kollontai in giving particular images to the characters in her stories is her concern about the new type of woman, man-woman relationship and family matters.

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<sup>11</sup> Holt, op. cit. p.60.

<sup>12</sup> Buckley, Mary, 1989, *Women and Ideology in the Soviet Union*, New York, Harvester Wheatsheaf, p. 53.

It is clear that the types of women, which are spread out in her novel, are based on Kollontai's thoughts about types of women described in *The Autobiography of A Sexually Emancipated Communist Woman*. There she writes:

Who, then, are these new women? They are not the pure, "nice" girl whose romance culminates in a highly successful marriage, they are not wives who suffer from the infidelities of their husbands, or who themselves have committed adultery. Nor are they old maids who bemoan the unhappy love of their youth, just as little as they are "priestesses of love", the victims of wretched living conditions or of their own depraved natures. No, it is a wholly new "fifth" type of heroine, hitherto unknown, heroines with independent demands on life, heroines who assert their personality, heroines who protest against the universal servitude of woman in the State, the family, society, who fight for their rights as representatives of their sex.<sup>13</sup>

For Kollontai, the new type of woman is a woman who is pure and virgin mentally. The pure and virgin woman is a woman who fight for her rights in this life. That is why Kollontai gives Nina and Vasya a different concept of virginity. Vasilisa, who does not keep herself virgin for her husband, believes that a pure heart is far more worthy than a pure body. It can be seen from her praise of Zinka. Zinka was a whore, but when the revolution broke out she started working for the political police with passionate enthusiasm, taking on the most perilous and punishing assignments. Even when she was eventually shot by the Whites, she managed to shout: 'Long live the Soviet Government! Long live the revolution!'. Because of that, in Vasilisa's opinion, a person like Zinka is far better than society ladies who overvalue their physical virginity.

On the contrary, Nina values physical virginity more highly than a pure heart, as seen from her behaviour using her beauty to attract many men in order to get a luxurious life. It seems clear that for Nina, it is not wrong playing games with many men as long as she can keep her virginity for the man she loves. Because of that she feels that she deserves to get Vladimir's love since she can give him her virginity.

Since her stories can be assumed to be propaganda for her ideas, Kollontai portrays her protagonist, who also acts as her heroine, with the images which are suited to her ideal woman, while her antagonist, who acts as her antiheroine, is portrayed with the images which are contrary to those of her ideal woman.

In her article, *Tezisy o Kommunisticheskoi Morali v Oblasti Brachnykh Otnoshenii* (Theses on Communist Morality in the Sphere of Marital Relations) in *Kommunistka*, nos 12-13, Kollontai proposes the new concept of the relation between man and woman. According to Kollontai, a couple, who are liberated individuals, should be sexually active and living in a comradely marital union which is not based on economic calculations. The private family's values, which are based on bourgeois, jealousy, possessiveness, and narrow and exclusive concern for one's own child, should be replaced by the higher values of collective love. Moreover, the couple, who now are equal workers, can stay together as long as their mutual love remains.<sup>14</sup> This concept becomes the basis of her heroines' attitudes towards their partners.

In their personal relationships with men, Kollontai's positively characterises women tend to maintain a kind of relationship based on equality, mutual recognition of the fact that one does not own the heart and soul of the other, mutual respect for the rights of

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<sup>13</sup> Kollontai, op. cit. p. 53-54.

<sup>14</sup> Holt, op. cit. pp. 230-231.



others, and mutual caring. Moreover, they refuse the old values which give women subordinate roles as shadows of their husbands, the supplement, the "sweeteners of their homes". In fact, to some extent, instead of making them subordinates, Kollontai gives her heroines an image of having more character and higher status than their partners of life, as can be seen in Vasya and Vladimir's relationship.

Moreover, for positively characterised women, to be treated as free individuals is more important than anything else. The positive women can bear their husbands' inability to provide them with material needs, and demonstrate a lack of attention of an external kind since they are also working. They even can forgive their husband's infidelity as shown by Vasya's forgiveness. However, they will never tolerate if their husbands cease to respect their existence as free and equal partners. An example of it can be seen from her reason for leaving Vladimir. Vasya decides to leave Vladimir not because of his betrayal, but because of the breaking of their equal friendship.

In contrast, Kollontai gives her negatively characterised women an image of valuing the ideas of possessiveness and inequality in man-woman relationships in every way and every sphere, including the sexual sphere. This can be seen in Nina's case. Because of the need of love and security, Nina lets her freedom be tied, and proudly chooses her role as Vladimir's passive, subordinated woman.

Furthermore, it can be observed that Kollontai tries to expose the ambiguity of men's characters. Through her story Kollontai shows that, partly, men need independent women whom they can rely on, as it can be seen from the attitudes of Vladimir, Mr. Feodoseev to his partner. However, partly, men also enjoy their privileges, which are given by patriarchal culture, to be dominant and superior. Because of that, they still insist that their partners serve their needs, especially in private matters. It can be assumed that Kollontai exposes the ambiguity of men's characters in her stories in order to strengthen her idea that it is necessary to change men's behaviour to "achieve relationships based on the unfamiliar ideas of complete freedom, equality, and genuine friendship".<sup>15</sup>

Through her story Kollontai tries to show that a traditional family unit which consists of husband, wife and children is no longer appropriate to society since it has failed in fulfilling its main function as a good living environment in which to raise a strong, free, and independent person. This is shown in the way Kollontai describes Vasya, before and after her marriage.

Obviously, Kollontai gives, in the unmarried Vasya, the images of a person who is healthy, active, firm, and happy. These images are in contrast with the images given to Vasya after she marries. Vasya is then shown as an unhappy woman who cannot be active very much in her work because of her sickness and marriage problems. She is also shown as not as firm and self-confident as she was before her marriage as indicated by her doubts about the idea of an equal and free relationship between man and woman. The married Vasya is even shown trying to follow Maria Semenovna's advice on how to be the good, traditional wife whose functions are to be cheerful and to brighten up the home. Fortunately, because she is a representative of Kollontai's own positive character, Kollontai does not let her be crushed. When, by accident, Vasya finds Nina's letter she becomes herself again.

A second fact can be seen from Vasya's married life. Kollontai tries to demonstrate that Vasya's marriage is working well as long as she is not living with her husband. Crises occur whenever they are living together because Vasya has to face conflicts

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<sup>15</sup> Ibid, p. 241.

between work and love. These conflicts make Vasya unable to fulfil her functions as a woman and a Party member. This makes her life miserable since she values her work as her existence, dignity, and the source of her happiness.

Kollontai's rejection to traditional family relationship can also be seen from the way Kollontai portrays other women. In her story Kollontai presents married women as characters who cannot express themselves freely since they depend on their husband emotionally and economically. This can be taken in Nina's case which shows how an intelligent woman worker loses her existence as a free individual just because she maintains a relationship with a man. In contrast, Kollontai portrays unmarried women as characters who have the right and responsibility to choose their own fate. Moreover, unlike the married woman who is shown as a passive suffering person, Kollontai describes the unmarried woman as a person who is actively enjoying life. Kollontai even demonstrates how an unhappy, weak woman can become a strong, active, and happy woman after she breaks her relationship with a man. This can be seen from the experience of Lisa Sorokina, the local women's union organizer.

Relating to family life, Kollontai presumes that the traditional family in which the man is superior and has everything while the woman is subordinate and has nothing, is ceasing to be necessary either to its members or to the nation as a whole. She adds that the reason for it is that the domestic economy is no longer profitable. The family also distracts the worker from more useful and productive labour.<sup>16</sup> This presumption becomes the basis of describing family life in her stories. Obviously, Kollontai shows the failure of the traditional family, as can be seen in the failure of the Feodoseev family. Through the Feodoseev's case Kollontai tries to illustrate her view that an indissoluble marriage based on a church wedding and the servitude of women, as symbolised by the relationship between Mr and Mrs Feodoseev, should be replaced by a free union of two equal members of the workers state united by love and mutual respect, as symbolised by the relationship between Mr Feodoseev and Dora Abramovna, one of Kollontai's positive women.

Furthermore, Kollontai also shows the severance of the relationship among family's members, as can be seen from Vasya's decision to leave her family. By showing a positive character with this image, it can be assumed that Kollontai wants to express the idea that a woman can achieve full freedom and independence by breaking her relationship with her family to which she is tied only by blood, not by a similar purpose in life.

To strengthen this suggestion, Kollontai gives her negative women the image of persons who are dependent on their blood family, as can be seen in Nina's case. Like Vasya's family, Nina's family is also bourgeois, but because she is more concerned with and loyal to the blood relationship she remains a bourgeois unlike Vasya who becomes a communist. By comparing these two characters' relationships with their own families, Kollontai wants to point out why a person like Nina, who is intellectual enough to adjust to a new idea (communism), cannot emancipate.

Kollontai also gives her heroines the image of persons who believe that communal life and strong solidarity among women can replace an unharmonious family relationship, as Vasya finds her happiness and support from her communal friends.

The third concept which becomes a basis for creating some images to her stories characters is Kollontai's argumentation in the name of the Workers' Opposition against NEP (the New Economic Policy). NEP was introduced by Lenin at the Tenth Party

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<sup>16</sup> Ibid, pp. 250-258.





Congress (8-16 March 1921) in order “to rescue the proletariat from the deplorable, declassed state of speculation and near-starvation to which the Civil War and War Communist policies had reduced it”.<sup>17</sup> Some of the Party members disagreed with this proposal, which was assumed to be the reintroduction of capitalist forms into the Russian economy. One of the opponents of the NEP policy was Alexandra Kollontai. At the Third International Congress of the Com-intern in the summer of 1921 Kollontai, who became the principal spokesperson for the Workers'opposition, criticized NEP. In return, Lenin condemned the Workers' Opposition as “ a petty bourgeois anarchist element hiding behind the back of the proletariat”.<sup>18</sup> As a result of her argument against the NEP proposal, Kollontai was threatened with expulsion if she continued expressing her anti-Party attitude.

Kollontai's hostility to the New Economic Policy is reflected in her stories, in which Kollontai blames the NEP values as the cause of the breakdown of her heroines' family lives, as can be seen in the case of Vasya.

Moreover, Kollontai presents NEP women, the wives or daughters of NEPmen, as the other representatives of negatively characterised women. These NEPwomen, called the bourgeois ladies during the period of NEP (roughly from 1921 to 1928), are portrayed as unemancipated women who enjoy their subordination and take it as a “privilege card” for getting a life of luxury without working at any job. Letting themselves be subordinated and allowing their fragile femininity to be trampled on are the price that they must pay for. Kollontai also shows the NEPwomen as the kind of persons who use their beauty to smooth the path of their husbands' shady transactions, as shown by the

In contrast, Kollontai gives an image to her positive women as the group of characters who are never tempted by NEP people's blandishments. An example can be seen in Vasya's rejection when she realises that her husband is becoming a NEPman.

## Conclusion

In analysing A. M. Kollontai's work, *Vasilisa Maligina*, there are two major points to consider:

Firstly, Kollontai represents women in recognisable settings and as believable characters. This representation is based on the fact that she portrays women of various ages, social background, and occupation; which counteracts stereotypes which explore women as one-dimensional creations. Despite this rejection of stereotypes, the author chooses a strong working communist woman as a representative of the ideal woman. Her protagonist, the manifestation of “Soviet superwoman”, is capable of surviving the hardship of work's demands. From the way Kollontai describes her two characters, it can be assumed that Vasilisa Malygina is the main heroine of this story, while Nina Konstantinovna is the main antiheroine whose character is in contrast with Vasya's. It seems clear that Kollontai creates Vasilisa Maligina as a symbol of ideal Soviet women.

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<sup>17</sup> Naiman, Eric, 1997, *Sex in Public: The Incarnation of Early Ideology*, Princeton, New Jersey, Princeton University Press, p. 145.

<sup>18</sup> Fetscher, Iring, afterword of *The Autobiography of A Sexually Emancipated Communist Woman*, by A. Kollontai, Shocken Books, p. 127.

Secondly, her communist ideology, her concerns on women's role and family matters, and her hostility to NEP'S idea are three concepts which have become her reasons to put certain images to her woman characters in her story.

Thirdly, as a feminist Bolshevik theorist, Kollontai makes serious attempts to incorporate feminist ideas into her fiction. It seems clear that Kollontai who is interested in the "woman question", tries to depict women's problems in general. Kollontai concentrates on the theme of emancipation in her story. It seems clear that Kollontai tries to diminish the image of domesticity and motherhood from her positive female characters in order to give a new concept of women's position in the society.

In *the Autobiography of a Sexually Emancipated Communist Woman* Kollontai writes that, "life created the new woman - literature reflects them"<sup>35</sup>; but in her case, based on the way she gives such images to her female characters, it is more appropriate to say "Kollontai creates the new woman - her literary work reflects them".

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