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Dialectics of Sin: *snokhachestvo* Incest in Maxim Gorky's Fiction

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Russian literature famously contributed to thinking about sin in the works of its most celebrated writers, such as Fyodor Dostoevsky and Leo Tolstoy, dubbed as “Russian thinkers” to denote their contribution to moral, philosophical, and psychological thought.¹ Dostoevsky explored the problem of sin and crime in *Crime and Punishment*, and in his last most philosophical novel, *The Brothers Karamazov* (1880), he even posited the problem of the hereditary nature of sin with its focus on the family. Leo Tolstoy also explored the relations between sin, crime and evil within the family, notably in his play *The Power of Darkness* (1886) that controversially depicted the Russian peasant family as home to criminal and sinful acts of incest and murder. So powerful was Tolstoy's indictment that the play was forbidden to be staged till 1902. My present investigation focuses on the work of another celebrated classic of Russian literature, Maxim Gorky (1868-1936), whose contribution to thinking about sin/crime in relation to the workings of the Russian family has not been fully explored. In particular, his stories reveal a preoccupation with the theme of father and daughter-in-law incest, in direct relation to the notion of sin in Judeo-Christian tradition. Writing on the topic of sin and evil in European literature, Ronald Paulson has noted that topics of sin in literature often relate to transgressions of sexual prohibitions set out in Leviticus in the Old Testament (Hebrew Bible).² Paulson uses the writings of the French philosopher Paul Ricoeur who maintains in his *The Symbolism of Evil*, that “sin does not so much signify a harmful substance” but rather a violated personal relation to God, a violation of a religious bond, of a contract with the deity himself (p. 12, 14).³ Gorky turns to the topic of a particular kind of

prohibition, that of the sexual liaison between father and daughter-in-law, stated in Leviticus 18:25, and narrates different stories on this particular form of sin. Notably, Gorky's protagonists in some cases want to negotiate their sinful behaviour with God himself, thus showing both an understanding of sin as a violation of a personal relation with God, and, importantly, as a manifestation of their free will. Gorky was influenced by Friedrich Nietzsche and of relevance to the notion of sin in Gorky's writing is Nietzsche's understanding of sin as a form of exploitation of the sense of guilt by the church. Nietzsche developed his idea of the reinterpretation of sin by the priests as feeling of guilt, fear and punishment in his *On the Genealogy of Morals*, III, 20.⁴ Fittingly, not all of Gorky's protagonists involved in the father and daughter-in-law relationship experience the feeling of guilt because they question the applicability of the prohibition to their personal case. The form of incest that Gorky describes is a particular Russian culture-specific phenomenon, that of *snokhachestvo*, when the head of the peasant family enters into a sexual relationship with his daughter-in-law. Gorky devises three different plots to explore this relationship, and shows that not every case can be treated as sin. Moreover, he gives voices to all three parties involved in the *snokhachestvo* triangle: father, son and daughter-in-law, thus allowing a critical exploration of gender and seniority hierarchies linked to this form of sin/transgression.

Gorky earned his reputation as a celebrated writer well before the Bolshevik Revolution of 1917, as an author who had a deep knowledge of the real life of simple people of the lower classes of Russian society. He positioned himself as a writer who learned reality by experiencing life of people of lower strata not only by observing or even living side by side with them, but also by participating in their everyday life, work and activities. To do this he moved among various communities and joined people in their professional tasks. Gorky's earlier stories written before the Revolution were thus informed by this life-experience acquired through encounters with various remote and isolated communities in Russia. These communities included peasants, artisans, tradesmen and underclasses on the run from authorities and law. Many of these stories were later published under the cycle *Po Rusi* (Across Russia). As the title suggests, they demonstrate his interest in ethnographic and anthropological material told by a narrator who often participated in the events forming the fictionalised plots. Gorky's narrator often shows his involved attitude towards the protagonists of his stories. This attitude is underpinned by his experiential knowledge of the circumstances leading to unfolding events. Gorky's protagonists live their lives in particular and specific micro-cultures and micro-communities. Their lived practices often deviate from and transgress the normative rules postulated by the official governing codes, including the teachings of the Russian Orthodox church. Certain practices in these communities go against the official guidelines of the church, one prime example of these transgressions is the practice of *snokhachestvo*. Notably, in Gorky's stories *snokhachestvo* is often connected with murder or an anticipation of murder. My article investigates the evolution of this intersection between *snokhachestvo*-incest and murder/death and its link to the notion of sin. I argue that Gorky's interest lies in the investigation of the dynamic within the nexus between *snokhachestvo* and murder, and that by perceiving the causal link between the two transgressions he thinks about sin. While Gorky treats *snokhachestvo* as a culture-and-society specific practice, he shows that it is individual reactions which lead to plotting, imagining or committing murder. In what follows I investigate three stories

written between 1895 and 1916 all of which are centered around the connection of *snokhachestvo* and murder, be it actual murder or incitement of it. The analysis of these three stories shows that Gorky did not abandon his early ideals of a strong and honest personality but rather, incorporated these ideals into the plots related to *snokhachestvo* in the span of some twenty years.⁵ The stories show continuity in his romantic leaning, punctuated by critical realism with a strong naturalist underpinning. Gorky's admiration for strength was inspired by his readings of Nietzsche's writing (from 1891) as well as it was the result of his personal hard youthful experience. Yet his contempt for weakness did not prevent him from feeling and expressing compassion for the down-trodden. I content that a combination of these features makes Gorky's depiction of *snokhachestvo* more nuanced, and it is his protagonists' thinking of *snokhachestvo* as sin they live by that sets his stories apart from the mainstream depictions of this practice at the time.

Snokhachestvo as practice in historical reality

Snokhachestvo was a common practice in peasant communities linked to the concrete socio-historical situation in Russia in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Historians typically explain *snokhachestvo* by the obligatory mass conscription of young married men to the army which led to the situation when their young wives were left in the household of their in-laws without the presence of their newly-wed husbands. After the emancipation of serfs from the 1860s young men looked for jobs far away from home and often were absent for long periods. The male head of the peasant family (*bol'shak*) took advantage of the proximity of the young women and sometimes even fathered children with them. This situation often led to complicated and violent relationships within the household living under the same roof of a small hut. The life of a young daughter-in-law in these households could be very difficult in cases when both the head of the household, the father-in-law (*snokhach*) or his wife, were exploitative of the young woman. Historical material shows that the father-in-law often blackmailed the young daughter-in-law if she refused to enter into intimate relationship with him by telling her husband lies about her alleged extramarital affairs with other men, or, very often, by making her life intolerable by forcing her into hard work.⁶ In most cases women were victims of *snokhachestvo*. However, in some real-life situations, the young woman could manipulate her father-in-law, or the father-in-law could prefer her to his wife, which led to victimisation of the older woman. It is these nuances which could result in a variety of scenarios that were explored by fictional writing.

The Church disapproved of *snokhachestvo* and considered it a sin. Church laws viewed *snokhachestvo* as a reason for divorce, but in reality, peasants rarely applied for divorce on these grounds (Bezgin 2012). Local rural clergy promoted patriarchal values and rarely considered divorce as a measure to prevent the abuse of peasant women.⁷ Such dogmatism and patriarchal dictates of the rural clergy paradoxically contributed to *snokhachestvo* by turning a blind eye to the sin of incest. Legally, criminal jurisdiction considered *snokhachestvo* a punishable crime which could lead to exile in Siberia or conscription to forced labour. Regional courts could prescribe a penance of fifteen or twenty lashes for the offence of *snokhachestvo* (Farnsworth 1986).⁸ Yet in reality villagers did not inform on cases of *snokhachestvo* because of their general hostility to authorities. According to Bezgin's recent study of the legal culture in Russia at the

second half of the nineteenth and the beginning of the twentieth century, there was a gap between the evaluation of this crime by peasants and the official law (Bezgin 2012).⁹ Yet while *snokhachestvo* was common it did not mean that peasants treated it lightly. They often ostracised the *snokhach* by denying him the status of an equal in community gatherings. It is important for the focus of my article to stress that *snokhachestvo* was viewed as sin by some peasant communities (Bezgin). While the government authorities had to deal with crimes emerging from this cultural practice, realist literature could investigate social, cultural and psychological dynamics linked to this complex phenomenon. While authorities turned a blind eye to the personal lives of peasant families, literature could expose and explore individual life stories of people involved in the drama of human relationships.

Some populists (*narodniki*), who lived periodically in rural communities, reported or documented cases of *snokhachestvo*.¹⁰ Such a notable populist writer as Gleb Uspensky gave a socio-economic explanation of this practice in his essays, or “sketches”. Strikingly, in his celebrated “The Power of the Soil” (1882) he even maintained that falling in love with a young daughter-in-law by a middle-aged peasant man can be viewed as a form of emotional compensation for his years of hard toil on the land.¹¹ For Uspensky a peasant man’s preservation of physical strength proved that rural life-style was healthier than the city life. Without sentimental views on Russian peasant classes, Gorky went further than many *narodniki* of the 1880s and 1890s both by fictionalising real-life plots and by presenting himself as an observer who gained an individual insight into every concrete situation. His stories avoid generalisations, and reflect the wide range of people’s understanding of *snokhachestvo* not only as transgression or a local practice, but, importantly, as sin. And it is Gorky’s power of observation rather than explanation which, according to his first biographer, convinced the reader most (Kaun 1931 105). For Gorky’s romantic realism, acts of transgression could be expressions of human vitality, individual will and free choice. Some of his defiant quasi-Nietzschean protagonists were even prepared to personally argue their cases as sinners before God.

Snokhachestvo as sin and crime in fictional writing of Maxim Gorky before the Bolshevik Revolution

“On a raft”: is it sinful to love?

In “On a Raft” (1895) Gorky describes a case of the *snokhachestvo* triangle in a single episode which takes place on a raft being taken down the Volga river.¹² There is no interaction between the two parties - the *snokhach* with his mistress daughter-in-law and his son. The two groups are separated by the rafts which they have to navigate, with the couple steering the first raft and the son/husband steering the second raft. The physical distance, the noise of the river and the misty air create a barrier between the two parties, which allows two different simultaneous conversations to take place. The conversation on the second raft takes place between the son/husband and his employee who provokes him into a discussion about the openly demonstrative liaison between his

younger master's wife and father. From the beginning the story stresses the difference in skill and physical strength between the father and his son by showing that the son does not have enough prowess in coping with the speed of the first raft, driven by his father. Moreover, his father navigates the raft in harmonious tandem with his woman, and both of them are visible from the second raft. The two conversations reveal that the situation of the illicit liaison is intolerable for both parties and that both are looking for a resolution. From the conversation between the son and the employee it becomes clear that Gorky is interested in the notion of sin not only in relation to *snokhachestvo*-incest, but to a wider domain of sexuality.¹³ Gorky finds an explanation of love between the father-in-law and his young daughter-in-law in the fact that the young woman was rejected by her husband because of his zealous abstention from sex. This situation allows Gorky to provide a multifaceted explanation and justification of the relationship. Because the marriage between the young wife and husband was not consummated after the marriage ceremony, the woman was left in a liminal situation. Being rejected by her own husband she found herself in the paradoxical position of both being and not being married, and this serves as a moral justification for the developing relationship with the male head of the household, the *bol'shak*. Moreover, her father-in-law is a widower and by entering into relationship with his un/married daughter-in-law he also is positioned in a liminal space which both complicates and escapes moral judgment.

Gorky creates a complicated situation around the practice of *snokhachestvo*, which allows him to address this particular practice in relation to a wider domain of sexual norms and prohibitions. While *snokhachestvo* is a culture-specific transgression from the institution of marriage as sanctified by the church and religion, Gorky widens the domain of the role played by religious beliefs. The son believes that sex even within marriage is repulsive and sinful, and it is this notion of the sexual act as sin which makes him reject his bride/wife and abstain from carnal relationship with her. Gorky is aware of the fact that *snokhachestvo* is considered to be sin by the church, but he also suggests that the whole notion of sin evolves around human sexuality and is used as a regulatory tool. He extends the domain of the impact of regulatory notions around sexual norms, and shows that they lead to extreme reactions and behaviour.

In this story Gorky explores a phenomenon of religious somatophobia, thus introducing a topic related to the issues of human sexuality and normative behaviour. Provoked to a confession by the employee, the son expresses his inner desire to free himself from his family ties and instead to join a religious sect of celibates. The son is physically weak, and no match to his strong and virile fifty-year-old father. This portrayal suggests that Gorky conceptualises hatred of the flesh and carnal desire both as an inborn predisposition and a result of religious beliefs. The son's rejection to consummate marriage is underpinned by his view that carnal relationships are sinful even when sanctified by marriage. And while there is no discussion in this short story of the teachings of the Russian Orthodox Christianity on the topic of sexuality, the son's leanings towards sectarian groups suggests that his views fit the aspirations of some alternative communities who also seek independence from normative behaviour. The fact that such groupings and subcultures exist suggests that people form kin communities who share their interpretation of sin. These communities are formed by people who escape from various forms of societal norms and dictates. Among these communities the

sects of celibates find their freedom from the regulatory dictates of the official church. As elucidated by Aleksandr Etkind in his study of Russian religious sects, at the end of the nineteenth century and the beginning of the twentieth century, members of the sects consisted of individuals who were driven by the desire to rid themselves of the sins of flesh in this life.¹⁴ Their utopian quest was characterised by the desire for an immediate and radical implementation of celibacy as a means to atone the sin of Adam succumbing to carnal desire. It is such carnality which they saw as the source of ensuing evil and disharmony, which included social and economic inequality and injustice. This form of sectarian thinking, Etkind explains, is characterised by impatience and a maximalist drive to turn ideas into immediate reality. The quest to act is expressed by extremes in disciplining the body. Gorky was familiar with sectarian communities and, like many members of the educated classes, was interested in the study of sectarian movements in Russia. In his case as a result of his wanderings through Russia on foot, his knowledge of these communities was empirical. Fittingly, in "On the Raft" the son intends to run away from his family and join one such sect in the Caucasus, the Caucasus serving as a fitting locale for self-isolating communities who seek distance from the authorities.

The simultaneous conversation which takes place on the first raft both echoes and differs from the confessions of the son. The father and his mistress also want to find a way out of the difficult situation. In a passionate monologue the father admits that he is a sinner, but says that he does not repent his act because it is an expression of his free will. Notably, to find a way out of this triangle he wishes the death of his son. Because the son is physically weak the possibility of his early death is plausible. There is no clear indication that the father would go as far as to murder his son, but the desire to see his son dead makes a causal link between transgressions of *snokhachestvo*-incest and death. In this particular case the sin of *snokhachestvo* is nominal and liminal, yet there is a warning that a real sin, that of murder or other foul play, can emerge out of it. Gorky groups crimes of passion into a cluster.

Snokhach, like his son, dreams of an alternative scenario for his future. While his son wants to leave and join the religious sect, his father wants to leave with the woman he loves to settle in the faraway lands of Siberia. In this new place they could start their lives under new identities, as husband and wife. The father muses that in this new life they would live honestly and do good deeds, help people and would earn forgiveness from God. Defending his right to be happy on this earth, the man states that he will account for his sins in front of God. His plan to leave the place where their situation is known to the community echoes the desire of his son to escape. Both father and son want to free themselves from the societal norms and mores. A strong and handsome fifty-year-old man expresses his right to enjoy life in contrast to his feeble son's desire to reject the pleasures of living.

Gorky thematises *snokhachestvo* within the framework of alternative attitudes towards the physical being and life and ends his story with the description of the bright morning which has dispelled the dark thoughts of the previous night. The ending celebrates nature, life and human vitality leaving the impression of optimism. The depiction of blue sky and bright sun-shine do not suggest a dramatic outcome of the situation. The story reflects Gorky's interest in the strong human personality and avoids moralising conclusions about illicit love relations. In this particular case *snokhachestvo* is an expression of rebellious behaviour of a strong individual, a human personality

celebrated by Gorky in his writing. Additionally, the father's readiness to challenge God himself in the final judgment corresponds to Gorky's cult of the honest man who, by not wanting to live a life of lies, subverts the existing order and paves the way to a better future.

"Bird's sin": when adultery and *snokhachestvo* lead to murder

In "Bird's sin" (1915) Gorky returns to the theme of *snokhachestvo*, placing it in a poor peasant community. Here the three individuals involved in the triangle are not known to the narrator, who passes through the village. The narrator is a chronicler of the murder scene, depicting a mutilated corpse of the father, a body of a dying woman and her husband, who has been tied up by the villagers. The husband killed his father and his wife in revenge for their liaison. In this story the *snokhachestvo* event is explained by a local villager. There is no history of this relationship, just the tragic consequence. In "On a Raft" the narrator gives voice to all three participants, here the members of the triangle remain silent. In the earlier story, "On a Raft", both father and his mistress had justification for their liaison, in this story there is no motivation for the relationship.

The title of the story is based on the characterisation of *snokhachestvo* by a local village elder, who explains that in this region such a relationship is called "ptichii grekh", "bird's sin". This characterisation is an example of regional language and micro-culture and reflects Gorky's position as a chronicler who gives certain ethnographic information as he passes through the area. The fact that the local community has an expression to characterise *snokhachestvo* suggests that this practice is both common and subject to moral judgment. The word sin, *grekh*, as a religious concept is paired with the word denoting un-human behaviour, supposedly common in nature among birds. This expression – bird's sin – suggests a conceptualisation of human beings as both being part of nature and separated from nature by religious laws. It implies that people transgress by becoming like nature, and, accordingly, when humans are driven by instincts, the results will end in competition, fighting and killings.

The village elder gives an explanation to the "bird's sin":

In our parts this is called bird's sin, that is when a father-in-law gets together with the daughter-in-law, or father with daughter... They are like a bird in the sky, who does not recognize either family relations or kinship. This is why we say: bird's sin... Yes ... ("Ptichii grekh", 304)

This elder's description of the sin of incest shows that the local peasant community is aware of prohibitions and nuanced categories of relation by blood as well as by ties of kinship. The notion of "bird's sin" conflates biological incest and incest by transgressing kinship, where partners are not related biologically. This understanding of incest matches the prohibitions of Leviticus 18:5 and 18:15, and it also shows that the system of kinship was normative in the peasant community. Moreover, there is historical data which shows peasants communities' understanding of *snokhachestvo* as sin of incest. One study of the case in Orlov region shows that peasants considered this sin not forgivable in the afterlife. Peasants of the Yaroslav region equated incest between father and daughter and between father-in-law and daughter-in-law. In their conceptualisation of this equation they argued that "Husband and wife are the same body and the same spirit. For father living with his son's wife is the same as him living with his son or his daughter" (Bezgin 2012 57). This reasoning shows that peasants conceptualized

relationships of kin in complex anthropological categories, which corresponds to what contemporary anthropologist Françoise Heretier calls the “subterranean logic” of prohibitions on incest in Leviticus (Heretier 1999), which relates to pollution, defilement and abomination.¹⁵

Peasant groups depended historically on the peaceful relationships between the members of these small communities, and this demanded respectful treatment of their kin (*svoiak*). The practice of *snokhachestvo* threatened to destabilize the whole community and therefore was perceived as a serious transgression. In this particular case fictionalised in Gorky's story, the sin of incest resulted in a sin classified as a crime – murder, and the story reveals the implications of this dyad. The village elder pronounces didactically that “sins teach” (*grekhi – uchat*) (p. 302) and explains that for this reason they have put the tied-up *muzhik* on the chair facing his injured wife.

Gorky finds ways to express his authorial attitude in this story by describing the atmosphere around the occurrence. While it is the village elder who pronounces moral judgment of the event as sin, the narrator refrains from making any comments. Instead, he describes the day and the village in grey colours, stressing that it happened on a cold autumn day, the mud of the village represents not only the physical but also the moral state of the affair. The dead body of the *snokhach* lies in mud, and the dying and mutilated young woman lies in the blood puddle on the dirty floor of the hut. To parallel the discourse of animality represented in the notion of “bird's sin”, the narrator describes the “wolfish eyes on the darkened face” of the young *muzhik* (p. 303). The narrator contrasts this appearance with the child-like light and meek eyes of the village elder, the eyes that “shine like two stars in the dark”. The elder with his exhortations about sin is depicted as the only person present who understands the notion of sin. The story ends with the arrival of the police and departure of the narrator. The narrator continues his wandering through the villages, walking barefooted in the mud of the soil, suggesting that this muddy soil breeds muddy deeds.

Unlike “On the Raft”, the plot and its execution in “Bird's Sin” are presented in dark and critical colours. Gorky uses expressive imagery to portray a gloomy atmosphere of village life with its dark secrets and practices. Notably, the arrival of the police takes place after the crime has been committed. This detail suggests that authorities do nothing in terms of preventive measures to avoid conflicts leading to crime. The link between *snokhachestvo*-transgression and murder is firmly established here, and the blame is shown to be multidimensional. From the village elder's point of view, the blame lies with all three participants of the triangle who do not live in line with the moral norms of communal village life. From Gorky's position, the village is sunk in darkness out of which it cannot rise, and the imagery employed suggests that the dark side of passions and customs is as intrinsic to this world as the physical composition of soil and dirt. It is for this reason that his narrator walks through the village wanting to leave it as soon as possible. Yet the mud “sucks” his bare feet as if trying to stop him from escaping being part of the soil from which the humanity was allegedly created. By writing the story, Gorky as an author does his duty in educating the public. While the village elder advocated the idea that “sins teach”, fictional writing can also teach by disseminating stories about sin. There is, however, a wide difference between the understanding of sins by the peasant and the educated author. The village elder saw the educational value of seeing the consequences of sinful behaviour in remorse and repentance, while Gorky

depicted a wide range of attitudes and reactions towards sin, revolt and rebellion paradoxically co-existing with repentance. For his strong and proud heroes, repentance was something that they negotiated with God, not with other people or regulatory authorities.

While the narrator in "Bird's Sin" walked through the village after the murder had been committed and could not stop the outrage of the husband, in real life Gorky interfered in a situation of the violent abuse of an adulterous woman. In his story "Vyvod" (A Stroll) (1896), often translated into English as "The Adulterous Woman", Gorky describes a scene of the horrendous public execution of a young woman.¹⁶ A naked woman, streaming with blood, was tied to a horse driven-cart, while a bearded ruffian, her husband, lashed her with a knout from the driver's seat. To the narrator's dismay a large crowd of villagers applauded and shouted abusive words to the woman. Strikingly, Gorky describes that a local priest took part in this violent procession. What the author does not tell here in the story is that curiosity of an impartial observer failed him on that occasion and that he tried to interfere in the ordeal. When in real life Gorky tried to intervene, the peasants nearly beat him to death.¹⁷ In the story Gorky explains that this form of punishment for an adulterous woman was one of the customs of the local community, along with other forms of violent torture inflicted by husbands on their allegedly adulterous wives. Notably, in this story Gorky does not mention the word sin (*grekh*). Yet the presence of the priest at the scene of execution suggests that the violent ceremony is performed as a local custom evoking a form of religious punishment of an adulterous wife, a kind of punishment tolerated by the local Church. When years later Gorky reminisced about this event, he mentioned that it was the priest whom he confronted in the outrageous execution in July 1891 in the village Kandybovka (Kherson Province, near Crimea).¹⁸ His challenging the priest's silent approval of the abuse suggests that Gorky perceived the religious underpinning of viewing adultery as sin and transgression. It is for this reason, I propose, that his stories of *snokhachestvo* involve murder only when this relationship technically involves adultery.

Giving woman a voice: gender and ethnicity in "Hotchpotch"

In "Hotchpotch" (or "Mélange") ("Eralash") (1916), written a year after "Bird's Sin", Gorky once more turns to the theme of *snokhachestvo*, but depicts the story in lighter and brighter tonality. The story is told by an educated narrator who walks through villages in southern Russia and ends up staying in a village with a multi-ethnic population. The village is wealthy, its inhabitants are local Russians, Cossacks and Muslim Tatars, and the main personages are not peasants but lower middle class. The narrator describes not only what he sees, but also expresses his opinions in conversations which he has with the main actants. Moreover, he even uses his chats with the young daughter-in-law to challenge her thoughts and intentions. In this particular case the *snokhachestvo* relationship between father-in-law and daughter-in-law is once more put into a liminal domain (as in "On a Raft") because both of them are widowed and technically are not in a relationship of adultery. Choosing this particular version of *snokhachestvo* allows Gorky to show concrete situations and possibilities of human relations under this often generalized category. The forgiving nuances of this liaison explain a lighter treatment which this relationship receives. Yet in spite of the light-hearted attitude of the narrator to the situation, Gorky once more employs the tandem of

incest-murder, and while the actual murder does not take place, the notion of coexistence and causal relations between forms of sin and crime leaves a strong imprint on this otherwise life-affirming story.

The title, "Eralash", suggests a comic side to the hotchpotch relationship which develops between the lovers. "Eralash" as a noun defines a muddle, an unclear situation or even a game with no clear rules. The word conceptually implies lack of clarity and as a title of the story suggests a situation with no clear boundaries. Indeed, the relationship between father-in-law and daughter-in-law reflects this uncertainty of categories: as two widowed people they are in a relationship that can be described as *snokhachestvo* only because of their (non-biological) kinship, yet as two widowed people they should be able to re-marry. Gorky chooses this situation to show that kinship can be a grey area in terms of differences between religious and legal concepts. Indeed, is father-in-law a stable category, is it forever? Surely one can have more than one father-in-law officially if married legally more than once. This uncertainty reflects the *eralash* side of the kinship system. The relation between the two protagonists may be questionably viewed as sinful but legally it is not criminal, because their legal spouses are dead. To express and further complicate this unclear relationship, Gorky uses the same narrative technique as in "On a Raft" – he has two different stories told by the parties involved. The stories give conflicting description of who initiated the relationship. Father-in-law tells the narrator that his daughter-in-law seduced him after the death of her husband. Daughter-in-law gives a different account of events and maintains that her father-in-law made her cohabit with him half a year after her husband's death. The narrator describes her as well-dressed, flourishing and idle, showing that she enjoys good standard of life in her father-in-law's household.

To further show that the relationship has no clear boundaries, the narrator discovers that the young widow is having an affair with a local young Tatar. This shows that her father-in-law has a good reason to be jealous of her. Through this relationship the story acquires ethnographic character as it shows differences in religion and ethnicity and a dividing role which they play in this geographical region. While the young woman and her Tatar lover would like to be together, his father would not allow the marriage between them because of their religious differences.

Gorky clearly gets to show more confusion around practices related to marriage and transgressions, which the culture regards as sinful. In a conversation with the young woman the narrator teasingly reminds her that Muslim Tatars are allowed more than one wife, implying a certain parallelism between the position of *snokhach* as the head of the family and the husband in Muslim communities. Moreover, in this region, Cossacks, who are Christian, and Muslims have lived side by side for centuries, and it can be argued that a widely-spread practice of *snokhachestvo* among local Cossacks is easily tolerated because it parallels the Muslim practice to have more than one wife. Such implied irony suggests that *snokhachestvo* can be viewed as a phenomenon which emerges at the intersections of cultures. As such it becomes an *eralash*, a situation or game without clear boundaries and rules. Certainly, in the love relationship in this story, all three actants are not married and, in line with Gorky's ideal of a free and proud individual, they should have the freedom to express their physical desires. If *eralash* is to be understood as the name of the game, they play the game according to its muddled and unclear rules.

Yet even in this humorous story Gorky introduces the theme of murder and death as explored by him in his previous stories about *snokhachestvo*. The narrator overhears that the young woman tries to talk her Tatar lover into killing her father-in-law. Notably, the Tatar refuses to perform such a deed explaining that this would be sin, using the Russian word *grekh* (which he pronounces with an accent *gyrekh*, p. 289). Moreover, when in a friendly chat the narrator reproaches the woman for inciting the young Tatar to commit murder, the woman asks whether he would not agree to accomplish this deed. Through these two scenes the reader is given evidence that the young woman is capable of plotting a murder to achieve her ends. She is presented simultaneously both as calculating and exploitative and as naïve and natural in her behaviour. When asked by the narrator why she does not leave the household she explains that she does not have a family of her own. When the narrator suggests that she could find a job somewhere she replies that she is not prepared to change her idle life for a life of hard labour. The reader thus is given ample evidence that the young woman is comfortable in the current relationship, and that her falling in love with a young Tatar is the main reason for her desire to escape the bond of *snokhachestvo*.

In "thinking sin", Gorky introduces the theme of gender, agency and patriarchy as entangled in sexual prohibitions and customs. Additionally, he explores this thematic cluster in its intersection with ethno-religious differences, given that the actants of the story are Christians and Muslims. The young woman is agentive, she is given a voice and ability to argue and justify her behaviour. She not only explains that in this region among the Cossacks *snokhachestvo* is a wide-spread practice, she also understands that her case no longer should be categorized as incest and sin. Moreover, when thinking about her not being allowed to marry the Tatar man because of religious differences, she invokes the case of a local man being married to a French woman. This particular example suggests that she thinks in terms of gender inequalities, and raises issues of patriarchal dominance in the local region. Gorky introduces the theme of the pressures of patriarchy across religions as the young Tatar is not permitted to marry her because his father would not break local ethno-religious boundaries between the Muslims and Christians. Technically, the Tatar man as a widower can marry, yet his father forbids his marriage. In his personal story is embedded a motif of gender inequality in Muslim customs, as he became a widower after his young child-bride died in childbirth. Notably, the readers learn this information from the Russian woman as she describes her situation to the narrator. In the concise space of a short story, this detail conveys a cluster of critical messages, related to the problematics of ethno-religious laws and practices.

While the young Tatar man is submissive to the authorities of patriarchy, the young Russian woman challenges the customs. She asks questions which expose the relative and fluid nature of the very notion of sin as well as the hypocrisy around sexual behaviour. Thus, when her Tatar lover refuses to kill the *snokhach* because it would be sin, she retorts by asking him rhetorically whether his own relationship with her is not sin. In this story the young woman comes out as the only rebel who challenges the concept of sin as a quasi-law which does not have the flexibility to fit all varied real-life situations, including her own, also because it is not genial to the reality of her natural desires. Described as blue-eyed, endowed with bright and strong colours by nature, she

is framed within the surroundings of bright, sunny and fertile land which breathes life, health and well-being.

In terms of the typology of sinful women characters who are prepared to transgress religious and criminal laws as a form of expression of their free will, Gorky's story, I suggest, echoes the plot line of *Lady Macbeth* – a motif explored in Russian literature by Nikolai Leskov in his story “*Lady Macbeth of the Mtsensk Region*” (1865).¹⁹ In it the heroine conspires to murder her husband in order to marry a younger man, and her intention is to remain the lady of the house and inherit all the possessions. While there is no theme of incest, the tandem of sexual passion and murder of an old and rich man is clearly a motif which Gorky's story evokes. Gorky, however, reworks the theme of a crime of passion by depicting a situation with fuzzy borders and categories, related to sin and crime. The simplicity and openness with which the young woman in his story talks about disposing of the father-in-law suggest that the line separating sin and crime is a fine one. Yet in this case, sin as a religious prohibition cannot be fully applied to the *snokhachestvo* relationship. Rather sin will become sin if and when the murder will take place. And because the murder has not been committed the narrator treats the given situation as no more than a “hotchpotch”, a muddle, and looks at the sexual behaviour, intrigues and desires of the three actants with a sense of humour, irony and light-heartedness.

In this story Gorky uses descriptions of nature and environment to parallel his treatment of this entangled relationship and this setting is in sharp contrast to the atmosphere in his story “*Bird's Sin*”. While in “*Bird's Sin*” the tragedy of murder and violence within the *snokhachestvo* triangle took place in autumn, the episode in “*Hotchpotch*” takes place in the warm spring. In “*Bird's Sin*” the dirt of the local soil, muddy roads and dirty floor of the hut create a setting for the dark criminal/sinful deeds of the actants. In “*Hotchpotch*” the local soil is described twice as “black velvet” (*chernyi barkhat zemli*, 280), “velvet of black fields” (*barkhat chernyh polei*, 278), creating a sensual imagery of the earth and fields in spring time, ready to receive and sprout new life.

The story ends with the description of a warm spring night, a happy village party in which all three actants of the triangle participate. To frame the story within the elements of universe and nature, Gorky describes the moon that touches the black earth “as if looking at and listening to” the festive “noise of this sweet sinful earth” (*shum miloi greshnoi zemli*, 293). The ending suggests that Gorky uses the discourse of nature differently in this story in contrast to the old peasant man's description of *snokhachestvo* as “bird's sin”. Without the son being alive, there is nothing unnatural in the sexual behaviour of the parties involved. It is the regulatory category of sin in the sphere of human sexual behaviour that sets nature against culture.

Conclusion

The three stories show Gorky thinking about the institution of *snokhachestvo* and its real-life implications. In the stories which deal with the situation when relationship between father-in-law and his daughter-in-law technically does not involve incest and adultery, Gorky exposes the absurdity of applying the moral stigma to their relationship. Yet in “*On a Raft*” and “*Eralash*” the consequences of a dogmatic and formalistic attitude to the relationship could potentially lead to crime. Notably, in these two stories there is

no adultery and, perhaps for this reason, no murder. Rather, Gorky issues a warning that in these situations of nominal incest it is the lack of freedom of choice (including divorce) and the expression of individual willpower that can potentially lead to criminal outcomes. "Bird's Sin", on the other hand, is a bleak illustration of the most archetypal case of *snokhachestvo*, with father-in-law and daughter-in-law being in a sexual relationship with the present husband in the household. Here Gorky gives a textbook case of *snokhachestvo* as adultery with the graphically delineated causal link between incest and murder, and it is the murder which valorises the sin/crime dyad implicated in this form of incest.

The chronology of the stories shows that Gorky retained his ideals of romantic realism from 1895 to 1916, while "Bird's Sin" serves as an expression of critical realism. His treatment of *snokhachestvo* with its dynamic of sin and crime shows the non-linear dialectics of his approach to these issues. The first and the last story are separated by some twenty years but they share the same pathos inspired by Gorky's ideal of a strong freedom-seeking personality. The last two stories, "Bird's Sin" and "Hotchpotch" are separated only by one year, but they show diverse assessment of *snokhachestvo* in peasant communities. Different situations produce different authorial evaluations, and while *snokhachestvo* might be a wide-spread practice, every case should be given individual treatment and evaluation. Gorky's task as writer was to demonstrate individual fates and circumstances in line with his interest in individuality. Moreover, as a realist writer he knew the role played by the Church in preventing divorce in rural communities and inadvertently making possible the sin of incest. Additionally, quasi-ethnographic details enrich the focus on the fates of individuals embedded in customs, prohibitions and laws imposed by patriarchy and social dictates of local communities. Many features of Gorky's treatment of sin share Nietzsche's reinterpretation of sin as a form of exploitation by church authorities.

Gorky's multifaceted portrayal of *snokhachestvo* corresponds to his attitude to peasant and lower-classes of the Russian society. While he learned of these communities in his peregrinations through various parts of Russia, he did not, unlike the populist-writers, succumb to sentimental adoration of the alleged submissiveness of peasant classes.²⁰ His personal encounters with multiple peasant communities, stretching from central Russia to the Caspian Sea, gave him the authority to challenge these idealisations of the lower classes. And while his unique trademark was to show with sympathy rebellious individuals in the social "lower depths"²¹, he at the same time was fully aware of the consequences of behaviour which crosses boundaries and borders on criminality. All the protagonists in the three stories are familiar with the notion of sin, they talk and think about it, and often admit that their behaviour is sinful. Yet many take special pride in asserting their will as an expression of individual freedom. As a Nietzschean, Gorky admired these strong individuals and despised the weak ones.²² However, as a witness of violent manifestations of their behaviour, he was afraid of the harmful outcomes of this expression of free will. Strikingly, in real life he interfered in the violent abuse of an adulterous woman and was beaten by the vicious mob for daring to interfere in local customs. As noted in Ricoeur's *The Symbolism of Evil*, sinful behaviour is about an individual breaking the covenant with God. In Gorky's real-life interference in the all-male crowd abusing "the adulterous woman", he himself became a victim of the collective violence that grows into an act of crime and evil, and falls out of

the domain of the sin. Sin of *snokhachestvo* in Gorky's stories is an affair of individuals. It is his depiction of actants that he drew from "a fantastic real life" (Hare 26) that earned Gorky the status of celebrity among the reading classes in pre-Revolutionary Russia.²³ His stories describing the nexus between sin and crime, *snokhachestvo* and potentiality of murder, follow the pattern of the dynamic involved in the struggle between free will and constraints imposed by circumstances. What gives his depiction of sin of *snokhachestvo* a special humanitarian appeal is the exposure of concrete, unfortunate, unjust and often cruel circumstances in which the individuals find themselves. Gorky's choice of a form of narrative allows him to give different opinions and explanations of a single situation. While ethnographic writing of some of his contemporary populists gave a documented account of *snokhachestvo*, Gorky entangled personally-acquired ethnographic information into fictional narratives. This combination allowed him to describe sin as a lived phenomenon, something that allows human beings to think about sin as a God-given and man-made category. Many of the sympathetically-portrayed protagonists of the *snokhachestvo* plots correlate to Maxim Gorky's most famous *maxim*: "Human – that sounds proud".

Notes

- ¹ Isaiah Berlin. "The Hedgehog and the Fox". *Russian Thinkers*. Harmondsworth: Penguin Books. 1978. 22-81.
- ² Ronald Paulson. *Sin and Evil: Moral Values in Literature*. Yale UP. 2007.
- ³ Paul Ricoeur. *The Symbolism of Evil*. NY: Beacon Press. 1972.
- ⁴ Friedrich Nietzsche. *The Genealogy of Morals*. NY: Vintage. 1969. 140-141.
- ⁵ On the honest personality in Gorky see Nikolsky, Sergei. "Gorky: In Search for the Honest Man". *Russian Studies in Philosophy* 57: 5. 2019. 370-397.
- ⁶ The first sociological description of cases of *snokhachestvo* were made by Iakov Ludmer in his article in "Legal Digest" in 1884. (Ludmer, Iakov. "Bab'i stony". *Iuridicheskii vestnik* 11, 12. 1884).
- ⁷ See Iakov Ludmer. "Bab'i stony". *Iuridicheskii vestnik* 11, 12. 1884.
- ⁸ Beatrice Farnsworth. "The Litigious Daughter-in-law: Family Relations in Rural Russia in the Second Half of the Nineteenth Century". *Slavic Review* 45: 1. 1986. 49-64.
- ⁹ V.B. Bezgin. *Pravovaia kul'tura russkogo sela (vtoraia polovina XIX veka – nachalo XX veka)*. Tambov: izd-vo TGTU. 2012.
- ¹⁰ Engelgardt in his *Letters from the Country (1872-1887)* documented *snokhachestvo* as practice. A.N. Engel'gardt. *Pis'ma iz derevni*. Moscow: izd-vo sel'skokhoziaistvennoi literatury. 1956.
- ¹¹ For *snokhachestvo* in Uspensky see Henrietta Mondry. *Pure, Strong and Sexless. The Peasant Woman's Body and Gleb Uspensky*. Amsterdam: Rodopi. 2006. (pp. 33-38).
- ¹² All quotations from Gorky are from M.A. Gor'kii. "Rasskazy". *Sobranie sochinenii v shesti tomakh*. Vol. 6. Moscow: izd-vo Khudozhestvennaia literatura. 1935.
- ¹³ Notably, the story "On a Raft" attracted attention of figures of Western psychoanalysis. In his monumental study of the incest theme in literature (1912) Otto Rank refers to this Gorky's story as example of "the relinquishment of the bride" typology (p. 114). Rank borrows this information from A. J. Storfer's book *Zur Sonderstellung des Vatermordes*. [The special significance of patricide]. Leipzig: Deiticke. 1911. See Otto Rank. *The Incest Theme in Literature and Legend: Fundamentals of a Psychology of Literary Creation*. Translated by Peter Rudnytsky. Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins UP. 1992.
- ¹⁴ Aleksandr Etkind. *Khlyst: sekty, literatura, revoliutsiia*. Moscow: NLO. 1998.
- ¹⁵ Françoise Heretier. *Two Sisters and their Mothers: The Anthropology of Incest*. Translated by Jeanine Herman. NY: Zone Books. 1999.
- ¹⁶ Borrás translates the story's title as "The Trotting Ordeal". See F.M. Borrás. *Maxim Gorky The Writer: An Interpretation*. Oxford: The Clarendon Press. 1967.
- ¹⁷ F.M. Borrás. *Maxim Gorky The Writer: An Interpretation*. Oxford: The Clarendon Press. 1967.
- ¹⁸ See a discussion in Dmitrii Bykov. *Byl li Gor'kii?* Moscow: ACT. 2008.

¹⁹ Leskov was one of Gorky's favourite writers. See Barry Scherr. "God-building or God-Seeking? Gorky's Confession as Confession". *Slavic and East European Journal* 43: 3. 2000. 448-469.

²⁰ In 1935 Gorky noted that "even critically-minded Gleb Uspensky sometimes succumbed to the literary image" (128) of submissive and God-fearing peasants, created by other writers. See Maxim Gorkii. "Village History". *Literature and Life: A Selection from the Writing of Maxim Gorki*. London: Hutchinson International Authors. 1946. 127-130.

²¹ *The Lower Depths* [*Na dne*] (1901) is Gorky's most well-known play. It describes under-classes and riff-raff while his stories about snokhachstvo are set in peasant communities.

²² In the political atmosphere of the 1930s Gorky denounced Nietzsche, but in his pre-Revolutionary period his ideal of the strong personality was affected by Nietzsche's pathos.

²³ Richard Hare. *Maxim Gorky: Romantic Realist and Conservative Revolutionary*. Oxford: Oxford UP. 1962.