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Single Motherhood in Postwar Soviet Russia: Cultural Code and its Literary Implication

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of the paper is to reveal the development of cultural code of single motherhood in postwar Russia through the analysis of fiction. The research turns on the assumption that cultural codes might be deciphered only through a process of semiosis. The cultural code of single motherhood has been forged in a contradictory environment. Though officially accepted by way of 1944 law, Soviet single mothers found themselves in an ambiguous context: urged by the state to give birth to children and under pressure from traditional family values. Using the result of content analysis of 12 short stories, novels and novellas written by female Soviet authors between 1959 and 1984 I reconstruct the cultural code of post-war Soviet single motherhood. The analysis identifies 11 meaningful facets around which the code was centred. Putting stories in a chronological order contributes to unravelling the evolving, functioning and principles of code.






KEYWORDS

Single motherhood; cultural code; cultural meaning; Soviet literature; East European studies; post-war Soviet culture

Cultural Code: Society, Community, Individual

Although single motherhood has become a widespread phenomenon in Russian society, single mothers remain culturally invisible and underrepresented in different media. To understand the reasons for this invisibility I would like to analyse its connection to the previous Soviet period. I will begin with the discussion of cultural code, a notion that serves to structure isolated statements on single motherhood strewn across Postwar Soviet fiction. For this purpose, I describe the cultural code from a semiotic perspective and delineate its meaning from other theoretical frameworks and political narratives.

In the semiotic approach, a code includes the repertoire of symbols organized as a set of oppositional signifiers, the rules for their combination, and the occasional correspondence of each symbol to signified.¹ Sociological interpretation supports a threefold structure of any code system, which comprise relevant meanings or orientations to meanings, forms of semantic realization or textual productions, and evoking contexts or specialized interactional practices.² Umberto Eco separately defines cultural code as a 'system of

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behaviour and values'.³ The examples of such systems include attention to etiquette, world modelling systems, typology of cultures, and models of social organization, and can be extended further.

There are several reasons to reaffirm the usage of this notion in terms of Soviet and Post-Soviet cultural materials. First, some researchers, like influential cultural anthropologist Clifford Geertz, criticize its implementations because of its restrictiveness.⁴

Second, the term has lately been politically corrupted due to its propagandistic application by the Russian political establishment in attempts to purport national exclusiveness.⁵ Such a misuse also calls to mind marketing manipulations with cultural codes allegedly reconstructed from a universal collective unconscious to increase corporate profits⁶; these psycho-marketing practices have been deemed controversial and ridiculed within scientific and professional circles.⁷ These twists may happen because of deeply rooted structuralist tradition to look at the cultural code as a static system ripped from any historical context. Eco developed one of the most penetrating criticisms of structuralism as a failed ontological project and instead defended the social and cultural determinations of cultural code development.⁸

Third, the notion could be blamed for a dehumanizing connotation. Yuri Lotman's literary-based theory of semiosphere is probably the most well-known one in its attempt to build a dynamic model of semiotic and coding systems. Despite Lotman's valuable contribution to understanding how a cultural code might function in a culture, his theory has been criticized on several grounds for its theoretical construction as overtly metaphorical⁹ and ultralocalistic.¹⁰ I consider his idea of self-description as the final stage of semiosis¹¹ as dehumanizing because this scheme is devoid of any individual.

Roman Jakobson, even though he was a prominent structuralist linguist, insightfully argued that '[t]he uniformity of the code [...] is but a fiction'.¹² He drew a more complicated image of code that accounts for individual interactions: '[...] any overall code is multiform and comprises a hierarchy of diverse subcodes freely chosen by the speaker with regard to the function of the message, to its addressee, and to the relation between the interlocutors'.¹³ Morton's survey confirms this assertion, categorizing such an individual as a code-switcher.¹⁴

In my opinion, Roman Jakobson's idea about a hierarchy of subcodes within a culture has not been sufficiently applied to understanding individual person's role participation in the cultural (de)coding process. The speaker's switch among different subcodes jeopardizes any effort to find the universal and unchangeable code that exists throughout a cultural history from the genesis to a current stage of development. I doubt that there should exist the cultural code rooted in the depths of centuries and supposedly determining our contemporary thinking and behaviour. We need cultural codes to ensure any forms of communication. People must understand the meanings of signs, otherwise coded messages will be impossible to decipher, and the code function is not feasible. Cultural studies gives examples of cultural codes, the grammar of which has been forgotten. Therefore, intellectual efforts are required to understand their meanings again.

I have collected compelling evidence from different surveys that persons as well as communities adapt cultural codes in the way they need them. However, this concept still provokes fervent debates because of its paradoxical features. Cultural code appears to evade any individual impact on its wholeness because '[g]rowing up in a particular cultural context, individuals are socialized to understand innately the cultural code'.¹⁵ That

seeming 'innateness' creates the assumption of code's both pre-existence and resistance to individual will. But Marcel Danesi asserts that people are not 'prisoners of their sign systems'; on the contrary, 'creative users of these meanings'.¹⁶ Robert Darnton scrutinizes how lay people can creatively deal with cultural codes at hand and argue that 'workers could manipulate symbols in their idiom as effectively as poets did in print'.¹⁷ Every member of a cultural group seems to be involved in semiosis and therefore to enable or to disrupt a communication.

The impact of an individual on the functioning of cultural code asserts that the cultural code exists in dynamic relationship with its contexts. Bertrand Badie discusses the role of cultural code as a dynamic entity in the formation of European nation-states. He makes two important conclusions. First, the emergence of a new cultural code often occurs during social turmoil because societies in crisis need a new cultural language for rethinking and addressing issues at hand. Second, the societies adjust this renewed code to the further ongoing changes.¹⁸

But the opposite statement also sounds true. The cultural code must be a resistant substance because it is supposed to be used by a whole collective. The principal social function of cultural code is to serve as a mechanism to coordinate the whole society or a concrete community.¹⁹

Thus, cultural code must balance both properties – adjustability and rigidity. Overall, cultural code is a sign system that stores cultural experience through a network of cultural texts created with the help of this system. Cultural code functions to suggest socially approved or to forbid disapproved behavioural patterns for specific situations. Members take part in the emergence and readjustment of cultural code. Cultural codes combine at least two contradictory characteristics: stability in the performance of regulatory functions and plasticity in its use by members of social groups and cultural communities.

The Cultural Code of Single Motherhood in Russia

Exploring single motherhood in Russia, American scholar Jennifer Utrata single-handedly reconstructed its contemporary cultural code as a system of behavioural rules that single mothers developed through interactions with each other and in their reactions to the hardships of post-Soviet everyday life. The adaptation to a double transition – both from a socialist economy to a market economy and to single motherhood status – has forged its basic principles. Utrata calls this code 'practical realism' and goes into details about each of its elements: managing one's emotions, trying to feel the right feelings, thinking differently, and focusing on attainable goals.²⁰

The emergence of this cultural code of Soviet post-war single motherhood was determined by multiple factors. I will dwell on the three most crucial ones.

The first factor relates to a demographic imbalance because of a long period of political turmoil, including two world wars, civil war, and Stalin's repressions. The repercussions, especially of the Second World War, were clearly seen in the sex ratio. In some rural areas, the gender disproportion after the Second World War reached a ratio of 19:100.²¹ Immediately after the end of the war, approximately one third of all births took place outside marriage.²² An analysis of data from the Central Bureau of Statistics shows that the number of children born out of wedlock between 1945 and 1955

reached 8.7 million.²³ Other figures indicate a sharp increase in the number of single mothers in the USSR in the post-war years – 281,700 people in 1945 and 3,312,000 people in 1957.²⁴ By 1970 the proportion of children born out of wedlock dropped to 10.6% of the total number of births, but from this year this number begins to rise again and amounts to 12% of the total number of births in 1985.²⁵ Thus, single mothers constituted a significant part of Soviet society not only in the immediate post-war period but throughout its more than 70-year history.

The second factor is the legislative initiatives of the authorities. The Soviet state tried to replenish significantly diminished population. The USSR can be considered the first country where in 1944 single motherhood was officially recognized at the legislative level.²⁶ The state politically reacted to the massive loss in the male population. The 1944 law legalized procreative behaviour for a single woman outside marriage that contradicted traditional family values in the Russian culture: 'The legitimization of single motherhood as the site of reproduction was one of the most significant outcomes of postwar reproductive politics'.²⁷

The legislation also blurred boundaries among different types of single motherhood – widows, divorced and unwed mothers. Inadvertently, it elevated the status of unwed mothers who occupied the lowest rung in an imperceptible hierarchy to single motherhood, secretly categorized by societal norms and cultural values.

The 1944 legislation deeply impacted society up to the next reform of family and marriage laws in 1969.²⁸ From 1970 onward the demographics would dramatically change again. Because of withdrawn obstacles, marriages became less durable, leading both divorce and second marriage to become more common. Single motherhood thus became a normalized but temporary phase in someone's life course.²⁹

Before 1960 the Soviet society consisted of a mostly rural population and, therefore, retained a traditional mindset on family values. The new legal norm must have come into conflict with values, beliefs and practices of traditional family life. Soviet single mothers might feel trapped between an official permission to give birth to a child out of wedlock and cultural prejudice. On the one hand, the society was supposed to accept the inevitable increase of single mothers and their children. On the other hand, norms of the traditional culture were likely to set out boundaries of single mothers' acceptable behaviour.

The third factor relates to fundamental transformations of the labour market. The lack of men increased the presence of women in the labour market from 38% in 1940 to 55% in 1945. Between 1941 and 1950 women represented 92% of all new participants in the labour force.³⁰ Financial independence and social guarantees, albeit on a small scale, must have influenced the behavioural patterns and self-perception of Soviet women and particularly single mothers.

Materials and Methods

The main challenge in the reconstruction of cultural code is to bring syntagmatic relations of texts to paradigmatic relations of a coding system. My reconstruction of the cultural code is based on the content analysis of fiction. I chose 12 short stories and novellas written in Russian by female writers and published between 1959 and 1984. The period of their publication roughly coincides with Khrushchev's 'Thaw' and Gorbachev's

Perestroika, two turning points in Soviet history. The hallmark for the selection was a single mother as either the principal or important secondary character whose presence determines a storyline. For example, in Vera Panova's story 'Volodya' (1959), a single mother is a minor character, but her misbehaviour, an affair with a married military man and birth of a girl, triggers her son Volodya's action as he takes a trip to Leningrad in attempt to ask for help from his father.

I strictly followed these criteria and rejected some important texts that did not fit my research parameters. In particular, the short story of a key writer in post-war Soviet literature, Yuri Trifonov, entitled 'Vera and Zoika' (1966), stands out due to the gender tension between a male writer and female characters and therefore might lead away from the goal of my analysis. The purpose of the research, among others, is to come closer to understanding of female writers' individual contribution to cultural code emergence. Texts written by women might be considered as a personal statement about Soviet single motherhood made with cultural tools at hand. Purposefully or inadvertently the writers advocated patterns of culturally acceptable or unacceptable behaviour for single mothers and thus framed an axiological space of single motherhood acceptance. The fact that single mothers found a solid footing in fiction is confirmed by their recurrence in works of the same author. Given that Soviet literature underwent mandatory censorship, these statements partly reproduced official propaganda that the Soviet state instilled into their citizens' mindset. However, these texts remain evidence of women's invaluable voices in their attempt to apprehend single motherhood.

The corpus does not include the works of a few female writers who addressed the theme, such as Ludmila Petrushevskaya and Nobel prize winner Svetlana Alekseevich. Their books were mostly published during the Perestroika period when many acute social topics became available for public discussions. They largely contributed to the reassessment and dismantlement of the code. This topic is beyond the period and scope of this paper.

Nevertheless, Maya Ganina's story 'Featherhead' (1965) was included in the corpus despite the fact it refers to wartime and describes events before the indicated period. First, the text meets the formal criteria. Secondly, the story was published twenty years after the end of the war, belongs to the period under study and therefore reflects the cultural code of single motherhood at that time.

This study covers the following texts: V. Panova's 'Volodya' (1959, VP1) and 'Boy and Girl' (1960, VP2); I. Grekova's 'Summer in the City' (1962, IG); M. Ganina's 'Featherhead' (1965, MG); V. Panova's 'Synopsis of the novel' (1965, VP3); G. Shcherbakova's 'Who is one of you the general, girls?' 1966–1974, GSa, GSb; M. Khalfina's 'Fatherless' (1975, MK); N. Baranskaya's 'Witchcraft' (1976, NB1) and 'Kiss' (1981, NB2); I. Velembovskaya's 'View from the balcony' (1981, IV); V. Tokareva's 'Nothing special' (1983, VT); and V. Sidorenko's 'Marka' (1984, VS).

I use a content analysis to identify the behavioural repertoire and social portrait of the characters. The content analysis reveals repetitive elements in all texts and allows me to compile a list of the actions which significantly contribute to the depiction of characters' behaviour and social portrait. The final list contains 11 semantic facets, which are the constituent elements of the reconstructed cultural code: (I) cause of single motherhood, (II) abortion, (III) virginity, (IV) relationship with men, (V) remarriage, (VI) parenting strategies,

(VII) professional career and education, (VIII) household chores, (IX) bad habits, (X) beauty–health, and (XI) personality traits.

Results

My findings indicate that the code manifests its paradoxical functionality; that is, the flexibility of the code ensures its stability. The code's transformation appeared to follow the changing demographics. For instance, the less critical gender disproportion became during the 1960–1970s, the less strict the code became. Although negative stereotypes persisted throughout the entire Soviet era and even later,³¹ over time the code expanded to include a variety of socially acceptable behavioural patterns.

I will bring attention to two cultural devices that expose both stability and flexibility of the code and may also serve as assessment tools: (1) second thoughts and (2) significant Other. They are helpful in a display of positive and negative patterns in women's behaviour. They also allow the writers to portray more vivid and dynamic characters who make mistakes and eventually correct them. Assessments are therefore based on the appreciation that the single mother has made the right choice in a multiple of possibilities. Until an action could be interrupted or reversed, it does not validate any assessment. 'Second thought' is a device to delineate culturally acceptable and reprehensible behaviour. It also exposes the constructedness and conventionality of cultural code because it shows how the code provides with an opportunity to comply with its framework even if the single mother deliberately breaks it (VP2, IG, VT). 'Significant Other', who may comprise a beloved daughter, a close friend, female colleagues, single mother's own mother, and another single mothers, serves as the background to expose a single mother's values and moral system. For that purpose, Significant Others' behavioural patterns are usually axiologically opposed to those of single mothers. For example, in the short story by Galina Shcherbakova two single mothers are depicted as the antagonistic characters with absolutely polar social portraits (GSa/ GSb). Therefore, these two devices unveil the functionality and meaningfulness of the cultural code.

The core of code is a hierarchy of contextually dependent elements which are therefore able to communicate diverse messages about single mothers' values and ethos. This hierarchy is not rigidly fixed. In different contexts, the same semantic facets can be endowed with either positive or negative meanings and therefore change their rungs in the hierarchy. For example, love for her own child is supposed to represent a highly ranked value in the mythology of a 'good mother'.³² This love may exonerate characters from single motherhood because it is directly linked to the prime maternal function – to raise a new member of the Soviet society. But the maternal love may turn out to be burdened with physical punishment or neglect. In this case, the heroine could be forgiven, if she works most of the time to help survive the family under harsh social duress. We see labour become a higher value in the single mothers' ethos. The praise of labour in fiction was a Soviet cliché, popular as well as ubiquitous in many socialist narratives. Writers used this propagandistic tool to create a positive portrait of single mothers. Besides, it is a self-evident and believable fact of everyday culture. This detail accounts for the fact that a single mother, as a sole breadwinner in her family, does not have enough time for upbringing.

At this point, I would like to discuss the separate meaningful facets of the cultural code and to dwell on some examples from the stories. The code as a paradigmatic whole is presented in [Table 1](#).

In the country with a drastically diminished population, the woman who has second thoughts about an abortion and keeps her child, can be exonerated from her initial snap decision (IG, NB1). The list of excuses can be extended with a refused adoption (VP2) and a withdrawal from a boarding school (VT). It is worth noting that in Russia, child abandonment is perceived as an even worse practice than abortion.³³

While condemning single motherhood, the Soviet post-war culture nevertheless admits its paramount importance and seeks justification for women. Reasons for single motherhood may serve as its explanation, for example, the loss of a husband in a war (MG, VP3), his untimely demise (VS) or his infidelity (IG). In the latter case I. Grekova's heroine is endowed with high moral qualities. She does not forgive a loved one for betrayal with another woman, abandons him with a decision to get a then-prohibited abortion, changes her mind at the last moment, escapes the raid on illegal practices, and thereby strengthened the right to set moral standards. Unwed women might be sexually inexperienced and have never been in relationship with men prior to maternity (VP2). Three texts emphasize that the heroines were 17 years old at the time of pregnancy or childbirth (MK, NB1, VT). In all these texts (VP2, MK, NB1, VT) virginity appears as a both moral and cultural value; it spotlights an unanticipated transition from a status of child to a status of single mother. Virginity also serves as a marker of girl's moral purity and her endearment to a partner who takes advantage of her gullibility. Another reason is a social or cultural distance between a heroine and her partner. There is a repeated trope of a country girl seduced by a city man (VP2, MK). Viktoria Tokareva accentuates this storyline with a cultural distance between characters; the child's father is a foreigner who cannot stay in the country (VT). Single motherhood may be preceded by an unhappy experience of double (VP2, VT), paternal (MK) or maternal (NB1) orphanhood. Transformation of the cultural code in the 1970s and 1980s reflects social shifts and normalization of the phenomenon. At that time divorce (GSa, NB2) and unexplained disappearance of child's father (MK, IV, VT) become culturally acceptable causes of single motherhood.

The reasons for single motherhood indicate the existence of a hierarchy in this social group. Widowed mothers stand on the highest rung, while divorced women in turn may feel superiority in relation to unwed mothers. For example, the reader sees the young unwed mother lie about her children's father to refuse other men's attention and to hide her status (VP2). Unexplained unwed motherhood is worse than a desired divorce (GSa/GSb). Lies about fathers and marriage possess the same relative value and hugely depend on contexts in which the cultural code operates.

The code is aimed at regulating different aspects of single mothers' life. One of the most sensitive issues is relationship between the genders. The unofficial rule remained clear: a single mother is prohibited to have any relationship with a man following the birth of her child. The code is rather consistent and condemns single mothers' affair with married men (VP1, VS). But it became conflicting when the gender imbalance became less sharp. On the one hand, a single mother is supposed to reject any forms of courtship (IG, MK, NB2), even though her suitor is a bachelor (NB1) or the biological father of a child (IG). On the other hand, a single mother can date a man and marry him under certain conditions: a man does not love her (VT); she has stood an ordeal

Table 1. Cultural code of single motherhood in the post-war USSR.

	VP1	VP2	IG	MG	VP3	GSa	GSb	MK	NB1	NB2	IV	VT	VS
I	Divorce + affair with married man	City boy vs. Country girl/orphan	Infidelity	Widowhood	Widowhood	Divorce	Unknown reason	City boy vs. Country girl/fatherless	Escape from an abusive stepmother	Divorce	Partner's disappearance	Foreigner + Partner's disappearance/orphan	Husband's demise
II			Second thoughts						Second thoughts				
III		Virginity						Adolescent pregnancy	Adolescent pregnancy			Adolescent pregnancy	
IV	Affair with a married man		Rejection to stay with a biological father			Rejection of men's attention		Rejection of men's attention	Rejection of men's attention	Rejection of men's attention		Affair with a man	Affair with a married man
V					Marriage			Marriage	Marriage		Marriage		
VI	Neglectful of the first child/loving a newborn	Second thoughts on adoption	Mutual love with a daughter	Violent/clothes as a gift/neglectful	Mutual love with a son	Mutual love with a son	Cruel	Love with a son				Second thoughts: take a son from a boarding school	Mutual love with a daughter/gift
VII	Bank clerk	Waitress	Library warden	Factory worker: 2-3 shifts in a row	Tram-driver	Teacher	Teacher + principal/unprofessional	Industrious/enrolment to vocational school	Factory worker	Scientist	Librarian	Unspecified	
VIII		Extra-job	Purchase of food/cooking/laundry	Cooking/laundry				Taking care of three half-brothers/housekeeping			Disorganized		
IX			Smoking significant others: daughter, close friend				Drinks a bottle of vodka in one go		Smoking significant other	Unopened bottle of wine			Smoking
X	Beautiful clothes		Heartache	Negligent	Heartache	Getting fat	Unpretty, careless about clothes/sickness + death	Careless about appearance	Beautiful/getting sick three times	Attractive	Good looking, skinny, kind, careless about clothes	Beautiful/complicated recovery	
XI	Disorganized/lack of reading/dreams about happier life	Lie about children's father	Strong	Tearful			Unpleasant + vindictive	Strong + proud	Self-sufficient	Interesting, vivacious			Unhappy

(NB1, VT); she has been behaving chastely (MK); she has fulfilled her maternal duty (VP3); she has proved her usefulness for society (IV). Although traditional family values still matter, the paramount importance of mothering for the Soviet society primarily defines the code's harshness toward such relationship. The birth and upbringing of a decent citizen was the most honourable reason for single motherhood in the eyes of the Soviet society.

Consequently, parenting strategies come to the fore. The positive image of a single mother is imbued with love and respect for her child (VP2, IG, VP3, GSa, MK, VT, VS). This love can be pointedly mutual (IG, GSa) and express through the single mothers' actions: purchase of toys and clothes (MK), gifts for school (VS), providing a daughter with her own clothes (MG), defence of child's interest in front of others (MK). If single mother neglects her duties, she is punished by life's circumstances or directly condemned by her social environment (VP1). A 'good' single mother would not give up a child for adoption (VP2) or at least have second thoughts and take it out of the boarding school (VT). The code introduces physical punishments as a parenting strategy but requires an exonerative circumstance, e.g. the ongoing war, or loss of food ration cards. Subsequently, the single mother ought to make good gestures, e.g. she gives her clothes, does not scold for stashed from her but honestly earned money (MG). If there are no such excuses, the single mother inevitably faces repercussion, e.g. illness and subsequent death (GSb).

Household chores partly overlap with parenting strategies because this semantic facet also reflects how well the single mother takes care of her own child. A complete involvement in housework enables the positive image of single mothering (VP2, IG, MG, MK). But in respect of this meaningful facet the code demonstrates its utmost malleability. I have already mentioned how a hard-working single mother can be excused for her neglect in domesticities and parenting. In the 1970–1980s the lack of excessive domesticity turns out to be a positive trait because it means that the woman does not hold on to material things and enjoys simple pleasures of everyday life (IV). In Valentina Sidorenko's short story the single mother cannot take proper care of the house and her daughter because of her relationship with a beloved married man. The girl's grandmother carries the whole responsibility on her shoulders instead. But desertion from her domestic affairs does not destroy mutual love between the mother and daughter (VS).

Overall, it seems that the code persists in praising the social worthiness of single motherhood through upbringing and homework in order to justify the phenomenon. Despite being a cliché in all sorts of Soviet narratives, labour occupies a higher rung in the code hierarchy than child(ren) and their upbringing. Professionalism represents a beneficial outlet even for self-realization. Only one text does not say anything about a heroine's profession (VS). The positive image of industrious single mothers is emphasized by the desire to hold leadership positions (IG), or to improve their educational level (MK). The list of single mothers' professions includes a variety of occupations from a blue-collar and low-skilled worker (VP2, MG, VP3, MK) to qualified professional (VP1, IG, GSa, GSb, NB2, IV).

The cultural code develops a number of semantic facets to detail social patterns of acceptable behaviour for single mothers. They are bad habits, beauty–health that I interpret as self-perception, and personality traits.

A 'good' single mother has no bad habits. My data analysis found only one encounter with a smoking single mother (VS), which could also be explained by the flexibility of the code at the later stages of my research period. Anti-nicotine behaviour is emphasized through the smoking behaviour of significant Others, such as a daughter, close friend (IG) or suitor (NB1). In N. Baranskaya's 'Kiss', an unopened bottle of wine, bought for a date with a younger admirer, can be viewed as a symbol of single mother's integrity. But the heroine suddenly cancels the date (second thoughts), and the bottle has been deliberately forgotten at home (NB2). The single mother who drinks an entire bottle of vodka is cast under a negative social portrait (GSb).

Beauty is not a value in Soviet single mother's cultural code. She is intentionally negligent about her own appearance (MG, MK, IV). The single mother who pays attention to her clothes and make-up ends up in the most desperate position in her life (VP1). Beauty cannot guarantee a happier life (VP1, NB2, VT). In the hierarchy of values, it occupies a lower rung as compared to kindness (IV), industriousness (NB2) and her child's happiness (MK). Beauty might be balanced by a poor health (IG, VP3) or lost over the course of life (NB1, NB2).

Single mothers' culturally positive and socially approved personality traits include will-power and independence (IG, MK, NB1). The single mother who dreams of a happier life – in fact, about (re)marriage – and dares to follow her dream eventually winds up punished by social censure in a dire economic situation (VP1) and emotional devastation (VS). This is a stark contrast to the single mother who lies to evade men's attention and is therefore positively portrayed (VP2). The practice that is negative from the standpoint of the morality is justified and labelled as value-neutral or indeed positive if the goal is to maintain the functional integrity of the code.

Conclusion

A cultural code governs many things. It is an instrument to structure individual and groups' social experience. The structure of cultural code implies a repertoire of semantically correlated signs, rules for their syntagmatic operation, and specialized practices. The most effective way to fathom how cultural code works is to see it function in semiosis. This perspective allows researchers to identify two essential functions: the ways it instantiates cultural meanings in texts and how these meanings prescribe socially accepted or unaccepted behaviour. There is no universal unchangeable code in the culture, which instead represents an intricate set of subcodes. Since its utmost pragmatic function is to ensure communication among involved participants, codes adjust to ever-changing social environments. The question about the role of individual and community in the semiosis, including the genesis and subsequent transformations of cultural code, remains constant and of paramount importance. The users of the code take an active part in its adaptation to new scenarios. The polyaxiological construction of cultural code speaks for malleability to social dynamics.

The cultural code of single motherhood in post-war Russia unfolded in an exceptional historical environment: huge loss in male population, gender disproportion, legislative initiatives of the Soviet authorities, women's involvement into labour market and, therefore, their economic independence. Soviet single mothers in the post-war period faced an ambiguous situation. The colossal decrease in male population deprived many of them of

the opportunity to (re)marry. Yet the renewed Soviet legislation exonerated them from the violation of traditional family values, still strong enough in a mostly rural society, and encouraged them to have children out of wedlock.

This study was based on the methodology of content analysis and scrutinizes 12 literary texts. Eleven semantic facets were identified in the design of the cultural code of single motherhood in post-war Soviet Russia. These meaningful elements comprise the cause of single motherhood, abortion, virginity, relationship with men, remarriage, parenting strategies, professional career and education, household chores, bad habits, beauty–health, personality traits.

A cultural code's flexibility becomes the cornerstone of its sustainability. The less stressed a social environment becomes, the less strict its cultural code. The cultural code was influenced by more balanced gender ratio, an increase in divorce, and the normalization of single motherhood as a temporary phase in the life for a large number of women. Second thoughts and Significant Others account for the stability and flexibility of the code. They show the whole range of behaviour patterns the single mother is able to choose. They amplify positive or negative single mothers' behaviour. But her action might be reversed, and therefore a final assessment can be discerned.

The cultural code functions through a set of contextually dependent facets. The context defines whether a code element becomes imbued with positive or negative value. The different facets such as labour, lies, marriage, or upbringing might switch between poles of meaning and therefore enable the continuous functionality of the code.

The code provides socially sanctioned reasons for single motherhood. Previously acceptable causes of single motherhood, e.g. husband's death in a war, his untimely demise, or infidelity, extended with the addition of sexual inexperience, adolescent pregnancy, orphanhood, social or cultural differences between partners. However, the different reasons support a clear hierarchy where widowed mothers occupy a higher rung, divorced mothers the middle rung, and unwed mothers the lowest one.

Despite its adjustability, the cultural code reluctantly compromises with some facets, such as abortion, bad habits and beauty. Abortion, alcohol consumption and smoking are negatively perceived along the existence of the code. Beauty, as a cultural marker of women's self-perception, is imparted with a low value. The code carries on praising childcaring and professionalism. Surprisingly, the cultural code shows flexibility, though only relative, in regulating the relationship between men and single mothers. Although an affair with a married man is persistently condemned, the single mother can hope for a marriage, if she strictly complies with the code's rigorous requirements.

The positive social portrait of single mothers completes with a number of facets, such as unconditional love for a child, involvement in domestic affairs, kindness, hardworking, and social worthiness for the society. As long as these facets are evident, other aspects can be forgiven, thus ensuring the durability of the cultural code despite its seeming contradictions.

Notes

1. Here and further on I use the Russian translation of Eco's work: Eco, *Otsutstvuyushchaya struktura*, 57.
2. Bernstein, "Code, Modalities and the Process of Cultural Reproduction," 328, 329.
3. Eco, *Otsutstvuyushchaya struktura*, 516.

4. Geertz, *Interpretation of Cultures*, 9.
5. See the witnesses on its political misuses: Pavlovets, "Shkol'nyi kanon kak pole bitvy: kupel' bez rebenka."
6. The lately most famous and controversial work: Rapaille, *The Global Code*.
7. Samuel, *Freud on Madison Avenue Motivation Research*; and Sacks, "Crack This Code."
8. Eco, *Otsutstvuyushchaya struktura*, 406, 408, 458.
9. Nöth, "The Topography of Yuri Lotman's Semiosphere."
10. Nöth, "Yuri Lotman on Metaphors and Culture as Self-referential Semiospheres."
11. Lotman, *Semiosfera*, 254–5.
12. Jakobson, "Linguistics in its Relation to Other Sciences," 458.
13. *Ibid.*, 458.
14. Morton, "Cultural Code-Switching."
15. Shah and Barker, "Cracking the Cultural Code," 218.
16. Danesi, "On the Metaphorical Connectivity of Cultural Sign Systems," 46.
17. Darnton, *The Great Cat Massacre*, 101.
18. Badie, "Contrôle culturel et genèse de l'État," 329, 330.
19. Beyer, Lach, and Schnabel "The Cultural Code of Antifeminist Communication," 220.
20. Utrata, *Women Without Men*, 92–122.
21. Nakachi, "N. S. Khrushchev and the 1944 Soviet Family Law," 40.
22. Zakharov, "Fertility, Nuptiality, and Family Planning in Russia," 50.
23. Nakachi, "N. S. Khrushchev and the 1944 Soviet Family Law," 64.
24. Kharchev, *Brak i sem'ya v SSSR*, 169.
25. See note 27 above.
26. The 8 July 1944 law (ukaz) of the Presidium of the Supreme Soviet USSR 'on increasing government support for pregnant women, mothers with many children, single mothers, and strengthening preservation of motherhood and childhood; on the establishment of the honorary title "Mother Heroine", the foundation of the order "Motherhood Glory", and the medal "Motherhood Medal".
27. Nakachi, "N. S. Khrushchev and the 1944 Soviet Family Law," 46–7.
28. Lunyakova, "O sovremennom urovne zhizni semej odinokih materej"; and Mark Tol'c, "Ot abortnogo termidora k zakonodatel'nomu liberalizmu. Politika v oblasti brachno-semejnyh otnoshenij kak zerkalo istorii SSSR."
29. Zaharov and Churilova, "Fenomen odinokogo materinstva v Rossii: statistiko-demograficheskij analiz rasprostranennosti i mekhanizmov ego formirovaniya."
30. Sacks, *Women's Work in Soviet Russia*, 74.
31. Utrata, *Women Without Men*, 20, 27.
32. Thurer, *The Myths of Motherhood*.
33. Issoupova, "Problematic Motherhood," 84.

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