

**Being a “Bitch” in Russia: Construction of the New
Female Identity in the Popular Psychology Self-Help
Discourses**

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Abstract

This thesis focuses on the investigation of the construction of an alternative model of female identity produced in the new series of self-help books that emerged in contemporary Russia and that teach women how to become a “bitch” in order to achieve success in every aspect of life. Using a method of discourse analysis, I explore how this type of literature functions in the contemporary Russian context and how dominant discourses of femininity and ideas about women’s power are being (re)defined and contested in these books. Even though the “bitch”-books do not challenge the existing patriarchal system of power relations, sustain and reinforce gender stereotypes, reproduce discourses on individualism and consumerism, nevertheless through specific features of the proposed identity these books represent an attempt to deal with important issues in contemporary Russian society. They offer a positive image of women’s power which contests popular accusations of women as “too emancipated” and as responsible for the emasculation of Russian men today. The books provide a “solution” for existing gender inequality, redefine the conventional understanding of male/female relationship to make it compatible with contemporary context and let women participate in the contemporary capitalist society with its glamour and temptations.

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* * *

I dedicate this work to my mother with eternal love, gratefulness and admiration.

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Chapter 1 Approaching the “Bitch”: Introductions, Orientations and the Process of the Project

1.1 Project overview

“If a woman is not a bitch, she is not at all...¹”

(Shatskaya 2007a:9)

With the collapse of the Soviet Union, together with the crisis in political and economic life in the country, gender roles and identities have undergone change and redefinition in response to these new realities (Tatarkovskaya 2000). The negotiations of new meanings have taken place in media and press discourses. In this thesis, I focus on the analysis of popular psychology self-help books which construct an allegedly new model of feminine identity. Particularly, I will engage in the discussion of the new genre of self-help books in Russia which teach women how to become a bitch (*sterva*) in order to achieve success in all spheres of life.

Today, when “making the most of oneself” is represented as an ultimate goal (Macdonald 1995:91) self-help discourses play a crucial role in the reinforcement and maintenance of cultural values and beliefs (Zimmerman, *et al.* 2001:129). As some researchers (Einhorn 1993; Klimenkova 2000) point out, after the transition from state socialism to the new capitalist society in Russia, a redefinition of models of femininity is taking place. The “bitch”-book series propose an allegedly non-conventional and alternative type of femininity and according to the number of books on sale this literature is quite popular with the readers in Russia. It is especially interesting to investigate these books since there are

¹ Here and further all the translations are mine.

no studies of this kind in Russia. My project aims to fill this gap because exploring these new discourse will help to understand the sociological significance of a genre that is usually dismissed as trivial. Far from being unimportant, the “bitch”-books give insights into how dominant discourses of femininity and ideas about women’s power are being (re)defined and contested in contemporary Russia.

The common sense perspective is that the goal of self-help literature is to enhance women’s position through offering expert advice. However, the question whether self-help really brings women empowerment and better life has long been a focus of feminist scholarship. Some scholars claim that self-help has a degree of empowering. For example, if it encourages non-stereotypical behavior, non-conventional choices and roles, if it lets the readers feel that they are not alone in their problems and try to ease the pressure put on women by society through promoting the idea of choice and independence (Zimmerman et al 2001; Cameron 2000; Simonds 1992). However, the other side of the coin is that in spite of some positive effects, self-help books generally are disempowering because they do not question the existing framework of power relations and rather teach women to adjust to the situation. These discourses tend to be normalizing and lead to commodification of the self (Simonds 1992; Shrager 1993; Rimke 2000). Nevertheless, it is clear that women still read self-help books regardless of the academic debates. In the Russian case it is particularly interesting because the books offer women the identity of the “bitch” and this type of femininity is commonly frowned upon.

Therefore, my questions in this thesis are the following: What is this new female identity that the Russian “bitch”-books promote? What messages do authors give to their readers? What strategies do they propose to empower women? What function do these new discourses have? Why is this image attractive to women in this particular historical period?

What issues within the situation of contemporary Russian women do these books reflect and what solution are provided?

To answer the above questions, I have analyzed 10 books from the “bitch”-books genre employing the method of discourses analysis. In order to situate the emergence of the new “bitch”-identity in a historical and cultural context of Russia I analyzed scholarly literature which assesses the problems and issues in the Soviet and post-Soviet context

I argue that, indeed, there are several problematic aspects that the “bitch”-books contain from the point of view of a feminist scholarship. They sustain and reinforce gender stereotypes, reproduce discourses on individualism and consumerism, do not challenge the existing patriarchal system of power relations. However, these books through specific features of the proposed identity represent an attempt to deal with some important issues of the contemporary Russian context. They redefine the concept of male/female relationship and offer a positive image of women’s power which contests popular accusations of women as “too emancipated” and as responsible for the emasculation of Russian men today. The books attempt to let women participate in the contemporary capitalist society with its glamour and temptations. They provide a “solution” for existing gender inequality and redefine the conventional understanding of the relationships to make them compatible with contemporary context.

In this first chapter, I present a project overview, methodological foundations and define central concepts. In the second chapter, I discuss the issue of consumption of self-help books and outline the reasons why women read self-help. Then, I talk about the emergence of the “bitch”-book genre in Russia and situate the “bitch”-books in the debate about the potentially empowering and disempowering capacity of self-help literature. In the third chapter, I give an overview of women’s position in contemporary Russia. Additionally, I show how “bitch”-books try to redefine the image and the power strategies for women, and explain the ways this

genre deal with the issues of market and consumption. In the last chapter, I outline the strategies that the “bitch”-books offer to deal with the existing gender inequalities and show how they attempt to redefine the models of relationship, self and gender roles.

1.2 Methodological foundations: discourse analysis

In this thesis, I examine the construction of female identity through self-help discourses. Consequently, I chose to use the method of discourse analysis. The definition of discourse analysis is widely contested and in broad terms can be defined as “the close study of language in use” (Taylor 2001:5). Discourse analysis can also come to mean examination of the “structures beyond the sentence” or the “structure of argument” or the “mechanisms of discursive functioning” (ibid.). For the purposes of my study, I understand discourse analysis as a tool “to identify patterns of language and related practices” (ibid:9).

The reasons for taking this approach arise from the understanding of the concepts of discourse and identity, which are highly complex and problematic. In this study, I employ social constructionist approach, which theorizes (gender) identity as a process. From this perspective identity is seen as being fluid and changeable, constantly constructed and negotiated in the process of social and discursive interactions (de Fina *et al.* 2006). Gender identity “is non-unitary, produced in and through the intersection of a multitude of social discourses and practice... Being a woman can mean many different things, at different times and in different circumstances” (Ang 1996:119). It is a constant process of making choices rather than a set of fixed characteristics (Sunderland and Litosseliti 2002:7).

However, social context plays a crucial role in the process of identity construction. Scholars argue that although people can make choices about themselves, their behaviors and

thinking the range of these choices is more or less delimited by social practices (Sunderland and Litosseliti 2002:7). This is where discourses² come to play a significant role.

Discourses do not simply reflect the social facts. They construct and reconstruct social practices. Discourses “can be seen to give meanings to an experience” (ibid:13) and combined in the process of historical change, can produce new complex discourses as a result (Chouliaraki and Fairclough 1999:136). Feminist poststructuralist theory also outlines the importance of the fact that discourses are always embedded in the power relations framework (Weedon 1987:25).

Therefore, as part of this discourse analysis, I situate the phenomenon of the “bitch”-books in the broader historical context of the social life of Russia. It is necessary in order to analyze its place, role and the reasons for its emergence. In order to do so, I reviewed the studies done on the formation of feminine identity in Russia in Soviet times, during the transition and after the collapse of the Soviet Union (Gray 1991, Attwood 1990; Ashwin 2000 *et al.*).

As Sunderland and Litosseliti point out the discursive approach to gender has long been a lens that feminist scholars employ because it “aims to accommodate ideas of individual agency, and of gender (identity) as multiple fluctuating, and shaped in part by language” and by social context (2002:6). In other words, this perspective sees discourses not only as shaping life but also include a possibility to recognize them as a site of struggle for contesting conventional assumptions (ibid:18).

Self-help is considered a powerful and influential discourse (Simonds 1992; Shrager 1993). Since the “bitch”-book that I analyze are the product of the contemporary times,

² Discourse has been differently theorized among researchers. In this project I adopt Fairclough’s three-dimensional approach. A discursive event is “simultaneously a piece of text, an instance of discursive practice (here the process of text production and interpretation is concerned), and an instance of social practice (understanding how institutional and organizational practices shape the nature of the discursive practice)” (1992:4).

exploring these discourses can contribute to the understanding of the processes of construction of the feminine identity in contemporary Russia.

1.3 Techniques

Drawing on examples of the studies of self-help literature (Zimmerman *et al.* 2001, Shrager 1993; Simonds 1992) in analyzing the contents of the self-help books I employ the following stages and strategies and techniques of discourse analysis.

First, I identify several patterns that were used in the previous study (Zimmerman *et al.* 2001:124-125) to identify the degree to which the book is empowering or disempowering. The criteria that was used in order to place the books under a certain category is the following: whether the book encourages or discourages stereotypical behavior and how it presents the main concerns of women; whether the book supports non-traditional choices in women's life; whether the contents of the book make women aware and help them resist the influence of oppression in certain situations (for example, how to resist sexism). It is important to use this strategy because it will show whether this range of characteristics proposed by researchers is exhaustive, whether it works if applied to my data and whether the reading of "bitch"-books will bring any new aspects and reveal other strategies of empowering/disempowering which are specific and differ these books from other self-help books in the genre.

Therefore, in the second stage of my analysis I concentrate on the examination of what is specific to these books and how this particular "new" feminine identity constructed in these books fits into the contemporary Russian context. I pose the following questions. How is this image of a "bitch" presented? What messages do the authors give to their readers and why is this image appealing? What strategies of empowerment are proposed? What is the function of these discourses? What do they offer women and what problems of the contemporary society do they reflect?

In order to answer the above questions and following the techniques proposed by Ryan and Bernard (2003) for identifying themes and coding I identified several categories of themes in the investigated literature. They are the following: suggested behavior, characteristics of the image, reasons for and consequences of the employment of the “bitch”-identity, comparison to the other types of femininity, portraying men. Applying these schemes of the analysis to the text will help me see how often some particular themes arise, how they are articulated, how they are linked to the Russian context, and what determine them.

After exploring my data, I situate the revealed information in the contemporary social context by trying to answer the following questions. What is different is this new identity in comparison to the other models of femininity? Why might it have emerged at this particular time? What is achieved with this kind of discourse? To what extent is this “Bitch” identity appropriating feminist values or to what extent is it a backlash or reproduction of the stereotypes?

1.4 My position as a researcher and limitations of the methods

I am aware that my position and the methods I use influences my study in several ways. First, the method of discourse analysis cannot be considered a neutral method since it “involves theoretical background and decision making” (Taylor 2001). Therefore, the research questions that I ask while reading these books are different from those that non academic readers ask. In a way, my questions are theory-laden and as a result, my conclusions about the books’ contents might be different from a common reader’s view. Second, since the object and the subject of the study cannot be fully separated (Stacey 1988), my analysis is limited in the sense that I offer my own interpretation, which is subjective. I understand that I make the choice, which books to explore and I do not cover the whole range of publications. Consequently my conclusions may not be covering the whole scale of themes, which may arise in the books, however the information that I find can still point out several specific

trends and tendencies. Finally, my identity as Russian can influence my reading of the books in a specific way, for example, in comparison with a researcher who's native language is different. However, my position can also have positive influence on the study because I am aware of the specific nuances of the language. Being Russian also makes my position closer to the one of the regular reader of this literature in the sense that I have the experience of being raised in Russia, I live there and I know the contemporary situation in the country. This does not necessarily make my research less subjective but still makes me capable of noticing certain specific details.

Another limitation of this project is that I do not have the possibility to analyze how regular readers perceive these books. The analysis of the reader responses can be a valuable source of information about women's attitudes towards the messages of these books and make it possible to identify other patterns. However, it is still possible for me to assess the new image of femininity produced through the "bitch"-books discourses and based on theoretical assumptions I can make certain conclusions. Therefore, exploring interviews and reader responses will be out of the scope of my thesis, due to time and resources constraints. Thus, it can become the focus of further research.

Chapter 2 Getting Acquainted: Feminine Identity and Self-Help

Discourses

In this chapter, I discuss the extent of consumption of self-help books and show that the discourses are socially important to the construction and contestation of gender in Russia. Then, I talk about the emergence and the popularity of the “bitch”-book genre in Russia and outline the reasons why women read self-help and “bitch”-books in particular. Next, I turn to the issue of self-help capacity to empower women. Finally, using the review of scholarly literature and the example of “bitch”-books, I show that the debate on empowerment is complicated and that we gain additional insight about the function and appeal of these discourses when we analyze them in the specific historical context of post-state socialist Russia.

2.1 Women and consumption of self-help literature

As I have already discussed in the previous chapter discourses are produced in and influenced by particular historical contexts and they do not only represent specific gender practices but constitute and maintain them (Sunderland and Litosseliti 2002:13). That said the question is: how do people consume these discourses? If self-help literature is a kind of commodified discourse which is intended to be sold to women, to what extent is it powerful in regulating feminine identity? Discussing the issue of consumption is relevant to this topic since women are the main consumers of self-help. Further, the “bitch”-books that I researched also claim that they are mainly for women (see Kronna 2002).

The question of women’s relation to consumption is complex and highly debated in terms of whether the products of consumer culture shape and normalize gender identity reproducing patriarchal values or whether they can also be seen as a site of resistance and

there is no reason to picture women as plain victims of these discourses (see Ang 1996; Lunt and Livingstone 1992).

Ang argues that “textually inscribed feminine subject positions are not uniformly and mechanically adopted” by women (1996:113). She states that reading is an active process. Meanings are negotiated and filtered through the personal experiences and women are not “cultural dupes” and victims who are boldly manipulated (ibid:114). However, as Frazer points out although personal experience can contradict the ideology, nevertheless, experience will not necessarily dominate (cited in Macdonald 1995:19). People usually balance “two competing sets of ideas about the world”: their own experience and observations and their understanding of what and how reality is expected to be from the point of view of the prevailing ideology (ibid:19). Thus, it maybe not that the subject is completely “interpellated” in the full sense of the Althusserian term (Althusser 1972), but still the texts “invite” people to adopt certain patterns and identities (Macdonald 1995:36).

As Simonds (1992) points out self-help books do function as a form of normalizing discourse. In other words, they offer “consumers a norm against which to judge themselves” (Cameron 2000:216). Furthermore, it is a common practice that well-known journalists and authoritative psychologists usually write self-help books. Psychology is a powerful discourse, which many people believe, consider an authority and turn to for answers. Consequently, this can serve as another reason why the reader may be tempted to take the contents of the book seriously.

Thus, self-help can be considered a powerful discourse and a tool through which meanings are reflected, produced and sustained. Moreover, the common assumption is that self-help assists people, and women in particular since they are the primary audience, in constructing themselves. For these reasons, feminist scholarship has put the self-help under critical examination in order to identify the ways in which it constructs female identity and to

asses the strategies that this genre offers women in terms of enhancement and empowerment of the self. Self-help can mirror problems which exist in society and point out to urgent questions for which people seek answers. Therefore, it is important as well as interesting to explore the phenomenon of the “bitch”-books in Russia.

2.2 “Bitch”-books boom in Russia

Given the number of published copies and the availability of the books, “bitch”-series has secured a stable place on the market of self-help literature in Russia. Today, there are more than 50 different “bitch”-books which contain advice on almost every sphere of life from pursuing career to cooking and gardening. In each book store that I visited, there were about 10 different books available. They are usually situated in the section of Psychological Literature and are usually displayed on a separate shelf. Most of the books are hard cover copies, some are available in paperback. The prices range from about 3 US dollars to 15 US dollars (with about 6-8 US dollars being an average price for other popular books). The covers of the books usually display a young very sexy woman. Some covers picture a man as a marionette puppet or a man in a leash and a woman’s hand controlling it.

The language in the books is very informal and easy to read. In most of the books the reader is addressed with the informal “you” form (the form which in Russian language is used to address friends, relatives or those whom you know very well). All the books state that their final goal to help the reader become “a real bitch” and to achieve success in every aspect of life.

What is interesting and what points to the popularity of the genre is that some books just take the name “bitch” while their contents concern other matters rather than “bitch”-identity. For example, the book *Business Bitch: or How to Survive in a Men’s World* (Vladimirskaia 2003) is a good guide on how to become a more successful manager and worker and contains advice about communication, promotion of ideas, dealing with tensions

at work. However, the interesting thing is that it has very little relation to the “bitch” in the sense how this identity was described at the beginning of the book or in other books. Sometimes, the word “bitch” is not used at all throughout several chapters and when it is finally used it looks like it was done in order to just correspond to the title because it has nothing to do with the contents. Another such examples are the books *The Bitch Is Getting a Divorce* (Mezhevkina 2006) and *The Last Bitch* (Maksimuk 2006). In the first book, there are lot of psychological recommendations and advice on legislation. Yet, except in the introduction there is not much information on who a bitch is and what it means to be one. The word itself is used occasionally only at the end of every chapter (Mezhevkina 2006:35). The second book has a ten-page introduction about the allegedly “bitchy” characteristics and the rest of it is a collection of popular psychology tests (“What is your character?” “Find out your style,” “What erotic type are you?” “What type of man do you need?” *etc.*). This means that under the trendy brand of a “bitch” something else can be “sold” to women.

Another interesting aspect of the “bitch”-books is the very name of the series: “*bitch*.” The Russian translation of the word is “*sterva*” and the connotations of it are slightly different from the English translation. So in order to present a full picture I here give the etymology of the word “*sterva*”.

Vladimir Dahl’s dictionary of Russian Language says that the word “*sterva*” in the old Russian used to mean a corpse of a dead animal, carrion. The word “*sterv-yatnik*” (the word with the same root) means a kind of hawk eagle that eats offal, dead animals, a vulture, predator, carnivore. The verb “*sterv-enet*” means to fall into fury, rage, vehemence³. Later the word *sterva* was used for prostitutes. Nowadays the word acquired some traits of the notion of femme fatale.⁴ The word is mostly used to address women, although there is a word “*sterv-ets*” (male gender) which in the Russian Language Dictionary of S.I.Ozhegov means a sneaky

³ <http://vidahl.agava.ru/cgi-bin/dic.cgi?p=220&t=38811> (accessed April, 26 2007).

⁴ http://www.psychology.ru/biblio/technologies/events/izvestnye_rugatelstva.html, (accessed April, 26 2007).

person, a scoundrel,⁵ but in slang most of the time it comes to mean a trouble-maker, a prankster, a brawler. It is not a very popular term and is usually used to address teenage boys and the meaning is less negative than in the case of female. In *The Beginner School for Bitches* Shatskaya (2007a) writes that lately the word “*sterva*” stopped being a derogatory term. “Now if someone calls you *sterva* it means that you have overridden someone, managed to do something better” (ibid:8). This is partially true, although the negative connotation is still widely present.

For the sake of making this thesis easier to comprehend by non-Russian speaking audience, I find it suitable to use the word “bitch” rather than the Russian equivalent. Another reason, is that there are “bitch”-books published by foreign authors (for example, *The Bitch* by Jackie Collins) thus it is difficult to say whether Russian authors had some inspiration from these publications and the “bitch” was translated into “*sterva*” or whether the authors came up with it on their own.

Thus, the “bitch”-books are a popular genre. So why did suddenly this identity with such an ambiguous name become a new popular brand? What is there so attractive in it? Why did it emerge? To answer these and other questions it is necessary to understand why women read self-help in general.

2.3 Why do women read self-help: the specificity of the “bitch”-genre

It is a truism that where there is a demand, there will be a supply. By this logic, if self-help literature is published then it obviously meets a prior need of people. In the study of self-help literature researchers found, that women more often buy and read this kind of literature than men and find it more helpful (Simonds 1992). There have been no studies of this genre in the Russian context however for several reasons, I argue that women are primary readers of the “bitch”-books genre.

⁵ <http://ozhegov.ru/slovo/51339.html>, (accessed April 26 2007)

First, the “bitch”-books explicitly say that their audiences are women. For instance, in the book *Business Bitch* the author writes that “[T]his book is the collection of women-only secrets, mysteries and cunnings. Therefore if you are a man – I advise you to close this book” (Vladimirskaia 2003:14). Second, the name of the series “how to become a bitch” already automatically excludes men from the audience it targets because the word “bitch” itself is used to define a type of femininity and is not used to address men. Finally, according to the recent statistics published on-line women in Russia in general buy more books and read more than men⁶.

As I have pointed out, judging by the popularity of this literature, quite a lot of women in Russia seem to be interested in these new books. As Simonds points out, there is a great deal of mockery about women’s tendency to read self-help literature. The claims are that it is a waste of time and that women do not really get any real and exhaustive answers to their questions (1992:173). The author cites critics, who argue that the advice women get is shallow, not trustworthy and do not give satisfactory decisions about how to overcome difficulties (ibid).

Another argument for not reading self-help is that there is an abundance of same kinds of advice for women in media and magazines. Journals like *Cosmopolitan*, *Elle*, *Good Housekeeping* are published in most of countries including Russia, and they also promote a kind of a new global female identity (Nicolaescu 2001), including on their glossy image-filled pages all sort of materials and recommendations on what women are supposed to be, how they should behave, dress and engage in relationships. Nevertheless, self-help books are still published and women still read them. So why is reading self-help and particularly “bitch”-books is appealing to women?

⁶ <http://rulit.org/read/4>, (accessed: April 24th, 2007)

Simond's research shows that women mainly "hope to find some comfort, some insight, some information in self-help literature" (1992:174). In the short-term the books can ease depression and give hope, teaching how to become more tolerant to the situational differences (ibid:37). They can help to solve conflicts at work or at home, to understand problematic areas in relationships (ibid:36).

Simond's interviewees also reported that they trusted the books rather than magazines because they granted authority power to the books since historically books, in general, have been around for a long time and therefore there is a "respect for the printed word" (ibid:27). A spoken word could be a mistake, a wrong advice, but the books are trusted more in this sense – the information is not perceived to be wrong but is just as a fact with which one can disagree (ibid).

Another possible reason for the readers' trust is that self-help books usually are published and sold under the category of "psychology." As Gessen (1995) points out there is a tendency to believe this kind of "expert" knowledge. Today in Russia psychology is a popularized as a reliable and scientific source of advice – psychologists participate in TV shows as experts, there is a new magazine "Psychologies" which is translated and published in Russia, more and more psychological help-centers open every year. Thus, even though the authors may not be psychologists (as is in the case with the "bitch"-books) the discourse is still powerful for the simple reason that it is associated with psychology.

The above arguments can be the reasons for women's interest in the "bitch"-books in Russia. However, there are also some differences that I see between the "bitch"-books and other self-help literature which make the question "why women read these books?" even more interesting and controversial. First, usually self-help provides different strategies to improve or eliminate certain qualities to make life or a relationship work in a better way (see Simonds 1992, Cameron 2000, Shrager 1993). The "bitch"-books offer a complete new identity,

employing which is said to result in eradicating all the drawbacks of the previous life. they suggest everything should be changed in the self when you decide to become a “bitch”. This, however, can make the advice sound simplistic since only one and ultimate cure is offered. It also makes the advice more rigid: it gives the feeling that either you take up the whole “package” and change or there is no chance to succeed.

Another interesting point is that, a great deal of self-help literature is written by professional psychologists who provide information based on research or a therapeutical method. However, “bitch”-books are mainly based on the authors’ experiences and personal ideas that the writers present as universal, authentic and the only effective solution to the problems. The books are written in a very self-assured tone. The authors present themselves as experts in every sphere of life, providing advice and guidance which is allegedly unique. This can sound less trustworthy because usually it is difficult to be an expert in all domains.

Thus, the above differences could make the “bitch”-books look as less professional or less scientific source of advice. However, this fact does not affect the popularity of the genre. Therefore, as I would argue further, that apart from the reasons for the appeal of self-help that other authors (Simonds 1992; Cameron 2000) mention, there are some specific features about the image of the bitch and specific issues that these books address that make them attractive to the reader in the Russian context. Self-help, by definition, attempts to help to achieve something. So what is it that Russian women want to accomplish? And can this “something” really help them to cope with their problems? To answer these questions, I now turn to the issue about the self-help’s capacity to empower women.

2.4 Self-help and women’s empowerment

The debate about the effects of self-help literature and on whether it is empowering or disempowering for women have been the focus of feminist study for quite a while (Cameron

2000). The question is also, how and why exactly do these books empower women? What strategies do they employ and what assumptions lie beneath these ideas?

The common assumption is that self-help is meant to *help*. Buying a popular version of feminism in the form of self-help literature can probably be the empowering strategy. However, as Faludi (1991) argues, and I agree with this point, not all self-help literature promotes the ideas of empowerment, which go in line with feminist agenda of challenging the patriarchal framework. On the one hand, as Macdonald argues some discourses seemed to have “caught up with the message of freedom and self-fulfillment advocated by feminism,” on the other hand, these messages were either transformed into “atomized acts of individual consumption” or simply were rejected on the bases of criticizing feminist ideas as outdated and harmful (1995:91). This debate is worth turning to in order to define the position of the “bitch”-book genre in this framework and to understand which ideas it reproduces.

At a certain point, as Faludi points out, self-help literature has joined the backlash accusing the feminist movement of women’s personal troubles such as loneliness or on the contrary an obsessive desire to get married, which supposedly results from the fact that women gave up personal relationships for a career (1991:336). She claims that self-help genre in the US promoted real empowerment for women as “surrendering and submitting to your man” (ibid:338). The books state that there is a feminism-induced androphobia and a fear of intimacy and marriage (ibid). Consequently, instead of the “outdated” feminist ideals a new course for “female individualization” must be encouraged (McRobbie 2004). “Individuals must now choose the kind of life they want to live” (ibid:261). Thus, making the “right choice” and “making the most of oneself” became a new fetish (Macdonald 1995:91). Self-help literature took up this idea and immediately started to offer the ways in which it is better to enhance certain characteristics or to deal with certain problems and situations. Therefore, in the rush for letting women have the possibility not to choose anymore “between being sexual

and serious” (Wolf cited in Sorisio 1997:139) self-help in the US embraced post-feminist ideals which resulted in ignoring of the acknowledgement of many structural factors that prevent women’s advancement.

The above examples illustrate that not all self-help literature promotes feminism-based ideas of women’s empowerment. Moreover, not all the books may even have such intentions. Therefore, most of the feminist scholars (see Cameron 2000; Simonds 1996; *et al.*) point out that self-help is disempowering for women and do not rest on feminist ideas even if they claim to do so. However, I would argue that the question looks more complex than just empowering/disempowering binary and reading “bitch”-books adds more controversy to it.

One of the reasons why self-help literature is considered disempowering is because these books usually contain gender-related messages and they do not question stereotypical gender expectations, do not resist the gendered nature of socialization and behavior (Simonds 1992). Shrager argues that self-help can lead to disempowerment because its main goal “is to produce a female subject better situated to inhabiting a gender-asymmetrical society rather than to challenge its political and social biases” (1993:180). In this case, the power relations are not questioned, thus most of the books therefore cannot be considered as based on the fundamental feminist grounds of questioning the existing order of power relations.

Simonds states that another problematic area of the self-help genre is that that the readers of self-help are constructed as incomplete, broken, and searching for a new and better identity. The controversy that exists in this kind of literature is that on the one hand, it lets one construct a new “improved” self, on the other hand, it promises a woman a revelation of her true and essential identity, her “true” self (1996:16). Most of the books present simultaneously essentialist and constructionist views of the selfhood. Thus, the author argues that one cannot restore some essence of self if s/he uses the ideas and texts of others (*ibid*). “Bitch”-books however, claim that the new identity they promote is not an innate one – one is

not born a bitch but should learn how to become one (see Kronna 2002; Shatskaya 2007a), thus, they do not seem to appeal to an “essential” or “natural” femininity.

Another aspect which Simonds argues is disempowering is that these books teach women to make their “self” a commodity in the market. Self-help books are “ideologically powerful instruments of cultural commerce” (1992:7). The focus is on the self as a product which should be under constant improvement through different and new means. Not only books *per se* are bought in order to improve oneself, but self-help can also instigate the emergence of various self-help groups and training sessions guided by professional therapists (Faludi 1991). Simonds points out that some authors of the self-help books explicitly recommend therapy as one of the ways to deal with the problems discussed in the book (1992:203). Another example can be brought from the “bitch”-books which suggest that women should take care of themselves in a certain manner, for example visit beauty salons, buy certain kind of clothing. The authors try to persuade women to sell themselves at the best price since this is the way it works in capitalist society (Shatskaya 2007a). This also implies that the reader have to be taught consumption and self-enhancement strategies and that s/he is not capable of doing it without the guidance of the “expert” advice. I therefore argue (in the following chapter) that consumption of ideas goes hand in hand with materiality as it is a part of the “bitch”-image and self-help can be disempowering through linking identity to consumer practices, however in contemporary Russian context it can give women a feeling of participation in the modern capitalist society.

Deborah Cameron in her study found that when reading self-help literature women do not really look for strategies to overcome. Rather the readers search for a proof that that they are not alone in their problematic experience. The researcher argues that women search for “understanding of their condition” (2000:220). Nevertheless, she states that on the one hand, realizing and understanding oneself can be empowering, but on the other hand, it can be

deceptive, because in this case it does not lead to any changes (ibid). In other words, I would say that the reader is left to reside in the belief that the way things are described in the books is “normal” and since other people also have similar problems then there is no need to worry about it much. I think it is relevant for the “bitch”-books because they explicitly state that the descriptions or the world order they provide are true and authentic.

Considering all the arguments outlined above, the debate on empowerment of self-help literature looks as a complex issue since different arguments are given for and against the capacity of these books to empower women. In their research of popular self-help books Zimmerman *et al.* (2001) offer a tool for classification of the *extent* of empowering of disempowering capacity of self-help books depending on whether they meet certain criteria. They argue that the books are empowering if they advise women to care for themselves, to pursue goals and personal interests, encourage the exploration of non-conventional choices for women and helped to effectively resist different forms of oppression. However, I would argue that applying this clear categorization to the books in the Russian context adds an interesting new dimension and complexity to the existing assessment of the purpose and degree of empowerment of women’s self-help books.

2.5 “Bitch-books”: “the same old story...”?

As I have mentioned in the last section, Zimmerman *et al.* in their research on empowering/disempowering potential of self-help literature identified certain criteria that the contents and messages of the book should meet in order to fall into one of the above categories. As I outlined previously, the criteria are the following: encouraging (non-)stereotypical behavior, presenting women’s concerns; supporting (non-)traditional choices for women; bringing awareness and tools to resist oppression (2001:124-125). I would argue that from the perspective of this research, some of the ideas in the “bitch”-books could be

considered empowering. Yet, there are many contradictions present that complicate matching these criteria and the strategies described in the “bitch”-books.

The first thing the “bitch”-books state is that the new woman should not preserve the image of a “good girl” anymore. Most of the books start with a personal introduction where the author usually tells a story of the series of events in life, which lead to the gradual or sudden realization that having “an angel-like character” is not a rewarding experience and there is a need for a change (Maksimuk 2006:4). The conventionally “appropriate” ways of behavior are criticized. Being a “good girl”, working too hard, submitting to men’s desires, humility, passivity and self-sacrificing behavior are shown as being ineffective patterns in the achievement of happiness and satisfaction in personal relationships or career path. Therefore, the books advise the reader to follow supposedly non-conventional strategies. In this sense, it seems like the authors try to overcome the clichéd behaviors that is imposed on a woman by society: a bitch is not a good girl anymore.

However, most of these situations that brought the authors to the realization of the need to change are about the relationships with men (see Shatskaya 2007a; Kronna 2002). Although the books argue that changing behavior will bring personal happiness, the “ultimate goal” does not seem to change – it is still to get a man to make life meaningful. The difference from conventional image however is that there is not that much emphasis on family and household as a center of a woman’s life and another divergence is that for a bitch not any man will do, it should be “the Man”. However, once “she gets him” the strategies that are suggested to “hold on to him” are same stereotypical behaviors of submission and following his desires (although it is described not as a “real” submission but as a manipulation). Thus, I would argue that most of the stereotypes seem to be negated only on the surface level. Therefore, the fact that stereotypes are encouraged or discouraged does not necessarily result in empowerment or disempowerment.

Another aspect in the “bitch”-books that seems to be responding to the criteria of “encouraging non-traditional choices and women pursues” (see above) is talking about career. The messages conveyed to women through media and press discourses under the state socialism were that they should simply have any job and not aspire for more, that they are guilty of leaving children and family without care *etc.* (see Ashwin 2000; Einhorn 1993). On the contrary, “bitch”-books tell women that they should take up any profession they like, go into business, management or politics. Moreover, it should not be just a regular job but women should aspire for a real career and achieving professional success. For example, Shatskaya writes: “a bitch should always work” (2007a:86) because it is the main contribution to her self-sufficiency and independence. No matter what sphere of life a bitch chooses the most important thing is “to be the best in what she does” (ibid). The authors also point out the importance of finding pleasure in work. The “bitch” should not become “an exhausted workaholic who does same boring paper work from day to day” (Shatskaya 2007b:244). Women in Russia are often to take mediocre jobs which supposedly will allow them to combine family and work (Gray 1991) and therefore many women end up doing some dull routine job and still working long hours. The Soviet propaganda also taught women that working for the state (no matter what job it is) should be the meaning of their life and that “personal life was to come second” (Kiblitckaya 2000:55). Another line of agenda was that women should work because they are “responsible for the comfort of the family” (ibid). The “bitch”-books switch the focus and say that career is a woman’s personal concern. Thus, the books do tackle women’s concerns and produce the discourse which is different from the “conventional” one. Therefore the advice they give may be helpful in the sense that women may feel encouraged to pursue a career that interests them, which will be a rewarding experience and bring pleasure.

However, several problems arise when the author starts talking about concrete aspect of pursuing a career. First, it seems like the range of careers “suitable” for a “bitch” is very narrow. Most of the times when the authors address the career path they give many examples of how to behave at negotiations, on a business trip, with the clients *etc.* (Vladimirskaya 2003). It is not clearly articulated that a woman should necessarily be in business. Yet, since there are no examples of other possible occupations it implies that business is constructed as the most desirable area of concentration for a *real* “bitch”. The rest are often not as good. Second, the main strategy to achieve career success is to manipulate men who are in power, thus the access to the goals is mediated through men. Third, the authors say that a “bitch can achieve everything if she wants it, it all depends on her effort. Thus, these are individualistic discourses and the structural aspects of pursuing career are ignored in the books (I will elaborate more on these arguments in the following chapters). Failure to provide the complex picture of the situations in a way makes these strategies distant from the reality. Sex discriminations, labor segregation (Hutton 1996), dominance of men in business sphere and politics (Ocharova 2001) and other inequalities in the sphere of work are not mentioned. Thus, the advice that the books provide may seem appealing because they diverge from traditional agenda, however, they provide an oversimplified picture of reality and exaggerate the power of a personal choice.

Consequently, although some positive and new aspects are present in the books, there are certain problems that the advice in the books seem to overlook. That it why it is difficult to classify these suggestion into categories of “denying stereotypes” or “pursuing non-traditional choices.” Moreover, the examples from these books makes it possible to see that depending on the context the mentioned categories can even cease being empowering if they do not correspond to the real situation in the society. A woman can choose to pursue non-traditional career but it may not necessarily entail bringing success or more money. Therefore,

it may be empowering in terms of broader sociological context as it is probably challenging the conventional framework, but then the question is whether it is empowering in personal terms or in the particular cultural context. Thus, the very categorization of empowerment/disempowerment starts to look different and the definition of these categories seem to be dependant on the context and difficult to assess equivocally.

Therefore, as I have pointed out that the analysis of the “bitch”-books will not be very effective in terms of assessing whether it empowering or disempowering. Now I will proceed to the analysis of the specific features of the “bitch”-genre and focus on what function these books have in the vision of femininity and what advice they offer Russian women in the new cultural and economic context in which they now find themselves.

Chapter 3 The “Bitch”: Glamour, Power and the Right Handbag

In this chapter, I give a brief overview of women’s situation in the contemporary Russia and show that the emergence of the alternative model of femininity is its logical outcome. Then, I argue that, in spite of the fact that the “bitch”-books reproduce the ideas of individualism and suggest traditional female behaviors, they redefine and present a positive image of women’s power and beauty. Finally, I argue that, although the books overlook many structural factors, the image they present offers women a way to participating in the contemporary consumer culture and capitalist society on some level and that can be attractive.

3.1 *Russia: feminine identity in transition*

In order to understand what the specificities of self-help books in the Russian context are and why they are attractive to women, it is important to assess the situation in the country during the period when these books started to become popular. Doing so is important because self-help discourses are embedded in the cultural and historical framework and they reframe social issues in particular ways. The transition from the Soviet period to the new democracy begot a dramatic crisis in economic, political and cultural terms. “Westernization”, globalization, the introduction of market economy, the rejection of the Soviet values and the need to maintain Russians’ own unique identity led to a period of searching for new meanings, new ways of expression (Klimenkova 1994). Since gender “was always a key organizing principle of the Soviet system” (Ashwin 2000:1) and since the Soviet models of femininity and masculinity have been subjected to critique after the fall of state socialism, it is fair to say that there was a search for alternative models of gender identities. Particularly this concerned the models of femininity, because as scholars argue, women’s role in the “formation and reproduction of the nations” is crucial (ibid:3) and they are, most of the time,

manipulated by the existing state ideology (Voronina 1994a). Therefore, in light of arising changes in the society new models of feminine identity were to evolve.

The redefinition of the ideals of femininity was also a complex and contradictory issue. On the one hand, the economic and demographic crisis led to the emergence of discourses encouraging women's return to domesticity and maternity (Ashwin and Bowers 1997). Women's employment was posited by media as a cause for the increase of divorce rate and the abandonment of children (Gray 1989). Soviet "overemancipation" was presented as a reason for the "masculinization" of women" and the loss of femininity (Ashwin 2000). Therefore, the model of a good housewife and a proper mother was widely "advertised." On the other hand, women themselves did not eagerly support the revival of domesticity and the state still was in need of the women's labor (Ashwin and Bowers 1997). Thus the image of the woman-worker was still present, although in the image of a "tractor driver" was frowned upon and considered the unfortunate consequence of the Soviet times. However, in financial terms women were not well-off so they had to be workers, but now feminine and beautiful (Einhorn 1993). This created the situation when women got under a greater deal of pressure to live up to often contradictory standards.

Discourses on women's beauty and sexuality widely discussed in media and press are also controversial. On the one hand, the abundance of sexual images and information after the introduction of *Glasnost* and withdrawal of censorship lead to the proliferation of a sexist media (Gessen 1995). On the other hand, there was a strong resistance and the tendency to revive morality as crucial to womanhood (Kay 2000). As Kay states, the views on "ideal" gender roles and qualities expressed by people in the surveys and promoted in media showed the desire for the "reassertion of masculinity and femininity" (2000, 88). The nostalgia for the "real" man, "a knight in shining armour" (ibid:89) and for the "real" woman – a feminine and caring mother and wife seem to be present in the society.

Moreover, another consequence of the “overemacipation” of women widely emphasized in psychological discourses was the “weakness of today’s men” (Voronina 1994b:139). Soviet men were portrayed in the mass media as “inappropriately feminine, drunk, irresponsible” (Ashwin 2000:17). Furthermore, the main blame for it, according to many expert psychologists, was put on masculinized “women ‘carried away’ away by their careers and forgetting their mission in life” (Voronina 1994b:138). So, the solution proclaimed in media was to “quiet our women down, make them more capable of reassuring men” (Gray 1991:48).

However, the situation was complicated by the introduction of market economy, individualistic discourses of success and the influence “of western norms and values, with their own set of ambiguities” (Ashwin 2000:18). The new self-help joined the neo-liberal agenda on individuation and the encouragement for women to be in control of their lives, to make the right choices and to pursue a successful career while also trying to fulfill household duties and maintain good relationship with their man. Nevertheless, the values in the contemporary Russian society remain patriarchal, where women are ascribed secondary roles both in the private and public sphere (Ritter 2001) therefore the structural factors make it difficult for women to advance in terms of economic success and power.

Thus, although Einhorn in her study of literature discourses states that the letter “did not offer much in terms of role models for the mass of today’s Russian women” (1993:228) I would argue that it was the abundance of the uncertainties in the discourses and ambiguity of the social situation that made the situation or redefining women’s femininity complex. The self-sacrificed but “de-sexed mother-worker of state socialism” (ibid) was gone. The prostitute, although sometimes pictured as a suffering savior of the nation (Borenstein 2006) was not an “appropriate” model for the reasons of morality. The image of the “happy housewife and mother” which was widely promoted did not seem to respond to women’s

needs and aspirations. Powerful “superwomen” was blamed for men’s weakness (Ashwin 2000). Therefore, the picture of an “appropriate” femininity started to look like a complete kaleidoscope of images that seem to be completely confusing and impossible to combine in one person. This was the situation when the first “bitch”-books started to appear. Moreover, I would argue that this situation of the need to reconcile several contradictory standards of identity in part resulted in the attractiveness of the new image of a bitch.

3.2 *The power of the “bitch”*

As I have outlined above, the descriptions of what a woman should be in contemporary Russia are so complicated and controversial that women seem to be torn by the need to fulfill the expectations of being essentially feminine, moral, caring and submissive mothers and wives and at the same time the need to be successful and beautiful workers. The situation was also complicated by women’s disagreement and perhaps ambivalence about whether to assume a completely submissive role versus a “persistent longing for ‘strong shoulders’ on which to lean” (Ashwin 2000:20). Therefore, I would argue that in this situation the image of a “bitch” can be attractive for several reasons. Although it upholds the discourses of individualism and sustains numerous conventional stereotypes, it tries to redefine and offer women the positive image of power. It presents the possibility to reconcile the image with beauty and makes the identity compatible with contemporary popular culture tendencies.

As I have discussed in the previous section, women in Russia in spite of the domesticity agenda and gender inequality in the society neither desire to give up their jobs nor their power, although scarce. However, media discourses strongly reiterated the idea that women should remember their “place and mission in life”, which is (in the end) to submit to men and stop being an “overemancipated” superwoman (Voronina 1994b:138). I would argue that in spite of the fact that the “bitch”-books suggest stereotypical conventional strategies of behavior like manipulation and pretence, they still try to redefine the image of power and

make it possible for women to kill two birds with one stone: preserve powerful and beautiful image and escape the blame and guilt for it.

A “bitch” is a stunning, sexy and successful career woman, who is in charge of her life and can achieve everything she desires. The idea of this image is not original or new in so far as, for example, in the US discourses of “the executive superwoman, always on the move and always in complete control” (Macdonald 1995:90) were predominant in the late 80s. Nevertheless, in the Russian context, compared to the widespread images of a loving mother, eminent socialist worker, modest and caring wife that dominated Soviet discourses (Ashwin 2000), the model is novel.

Although the “bitch”-books are “othering” the categories of “regular women”, nevertheless they celebrate women’s power instead of renouncing it. A bitch is described as an “extraordinary, bright and tough contemporary woman” (Vladimirskaia 2003:9). She prefers to get things as soon as possible. She has a strong character (ibid:10). She is definitely powerful. The “bitch” is represented as someone who is superior to both “ordinary women” and men, “she is not like anybody else” (Kronna 2002:60). In *The Beginner School for Bitches* there is a “placement” of the “bitch” in the categories of women. The author says that there are two (obviously bad) extremes: a housewife and a feminist, and the bitch is right in the “golden” middle ground – incorporating all the best qualities and wisdom of the (wo)mankind (Shatskaya 2007a:7). Housewives are shown as brainless women who do not want anything in life except soap operas and cooking. A feminist is said to be “disappointed in life and in men lady, who is full of psychological complexes..., [she] doesn’t know how to approach men” (ibid:6). The bitch has her own style and manner of doing things, which is distinct from others. “She is a vulture, who wants all the best for herself, she is independent and glamorous (Shatskaya 2007a:66). Although this division made by the books homogenize of the categories of women, it nevertheless makes the “bitch”-image look powerful.

As Nicolaescu points out such techniques of “othering” are also common in the popular magazines’ discourses where “the traditional, ‘old fashioned’ identity is othered” (2001:271). This strategy usually serves to make the new image more attractive. However, in the case of “bitch”-books it is not only the mere comparison with “other” women that makes the image attractive, but also the fact that power strategies of the “bitch” are redefined in the way that they start to look more attractive.

The “new” power is exercised through the change of patterns of behavior. Bitch gains power by being a surprise, a change and a challenge for men. “Ordinary women” are said to be “boring and predictable” (Shatskaya 2007a:3), “too modest and quiet” (Vladimirskaya 2003:9). They are dull in most spheres of life: at work, in relationship, in sex. They are pictured as being in a constant state of envy of the bitch and trying to set her up somehow (Kronna 2002). The bitch however, is different. She knows how “to use weak sides of other people to her advantage, how to lure and flirt, how to be interesting” (Shatskaya 2007a:4). “She is surprise. She is mysterious. She is difficult to be with” (Kronna 2002:60). Shatskaya writes that men are “conquerors by nature” and that if a woman wants to hold on to a man she should always be a challenge for him. At the same time, a bitch knows what she is worth, she is “egoistic, she lives for herself, and on the way to her happiness, welfare and pleasure breaks men’s hearts” (Shatskaya 2007a:40).

One of the main strategies of power for a bitch is manipulation. She can manipulate people so they don’t know it” (Shatskaya 2007a:66). The strategy is of course not new. As Ritter points out the credo for most Russian women was “you better and easier get what you want by manipulating a man in a way that he thinks it is his own idea, so he likes to do it and feels good (2001:139). However, the difference that the “bitch”-books make is that they romanticize this power strategy, direct women to take pride in it, and put it in more “modern” terms as connected to the glamour, professionalism and popular culture. “Bitch”-books

suggest women should be proud because this behavior is not the one that a Soviet-type “overemancipated” woman exercises. “Bitchy” manipulation are very skillful and invisible. She is able to predict and perfectly manage any difficult situation. Shatskaya writes that manipulation “does not deform people’s mind, it develops it” (2007b:16).

Moreover, the “new” type of manipulation is only said to be effective when a “bitch” is in control of her life and does not manipulate with any envy, despite or vicious intentions. She should be frank with herself and although she manipulates, she cares for people. If exercised in such a way manipulation is said to help a woman gain control over her life and the self (2007b:9-14). The description seems to reproduce the neo-liberal discourses of individual responsibility and being in charge of your life. Considering Russia’s experience of collective past, these ideas probably strike Russian women as “modern” and appealing. As Ritter argues “hegemonic concept of identity in the Soviet case was connected to the collective” (2001:138), the lack of the ideas of privacy in Soviet Union and the omnipresence of the state control lead to the dubious perception of ideas of capitalist individualization (ibid). However, the “bitch”-books try to reconcile these ideas with the concepts of sincerity which makes the identity look not like “Western selfish self-love which leads to alienation” (Shatskaya 2007a:81) but as a “wise power” and at the same time quite compatible with modernity.

3.3 *New beauty*

Besides the attempt to redefine the concept of power the “bitch”-books place an emphasis on the idea of women’s beauty. As Azhgikhina and Coscilo point out the idea of female beauty is highly valued in Russian society (1996:106). A female body was a constant site of political struggle during the Soviet era. Thus, women’s preoccupation with beauty was a type of resistance to the Soviet system. At the same time it was a struggle against exhausting reality of life and a means of self-expression (ibid:107). On the other hand, the scholars argue

that after getting the “forbidden pleasures” when during the post-Soviet period the abundance of the beauty products arrived, consuming beauty became less of a joy for women (ibid:117). However, I argue that the “bitch”-image still responds to women’s aspiration for beauty because it seems to depoliticize it and reconcile beauty with smartness.

Beauty and looks are proclaimed to be very important part of the “bitch”-identity. Although the image of the bitch seems to be pretty detailed and determined in the books, there are still ideas of uniqueness and free choice. In *The Beginner School for Bitches* there are several chapters devoted to addressing such questions as doing manicures and pedicures, wearing glasses, performing facial and body care, buying fragrances and make-up; walking, talking and dressing in the “right” way and what nail polish colors are “better” to use. There are even tips on what should be inside the “bitch’s” handbag (Shatskaya 2007a). On each topic the authors give a wide range of advice of how and what is appropriate for the bitch’s image and style. For example: “A bitch should always no matter what wear make-up” (ibid:204); “A bitch should always have her manicure done” (ibid:239); “Never buy fake jewelry” (ibid:288) and many other advice/prescriptions like this. However, most of the books (Kronna 2002, Shatskaya 2007a, Vladimirskaia 2003) constantly emphasize that a “bitch” can afford not to care about other people’s opinions about her outfit; that she is the one to choose what how to look like. Therefore, in spite of the fact that the books do construct another framework by articulating what is “normal,” I would argue that by converting the beauty into a personal choice they in a way depoliticize it, makes it belong to the private sphere and therefore creates another sphere where a women can be in control.

Another interesting aspect is that the books promote a “stunning beauty” and not a “natural” one as it used to be in the Soviet discourses. Soviet women were supposed to be pretty and care about appearance, but they were supposed to “manage to convey impression that her beauty was not something she had worked at, but was entirely natural” (Attwood

2001:167). Modesty in make-up and “good taste” in clothing were encouraged (Stitiel 2005). On the contrary, the “bitch”-books state that a “bitch” should be stunning and sexy, seductive and give up the old socialist behavior of dressing in ugly clothes or not wearing make-up. She should start to take care of herself. She should be spectacular.

However, as Azhgikhina and Coscilo point out that the Soviet “modest girl without makeup” was opposed to the “evil sculptured beauty” of the West (1995:95-96). “Incredible” beauty in Russian discourses historically was always opposed to charm, spirituality and “natural” attractiveness (ibid:95). The “bitch”-books however say that the two sides are completely compatible in the “bitch”-identity because the bitch is wise. She is not a hysterical yammerer, who is artificially trying to show off copying some femme fatale outfit and manners, she is not a “silly doll” but she has undergone an important internal personal change (Shatskaya 2007a:66). Therefore, the “bitch”-books persuade the reader that such “stunning” type of beauty will not be punished because the looks of the bitch are joined with her smartness and wisdom (Shatskaya 2007a, Kronna 2002, Maksimuk 2006). The beauty is not “demonized” in the books, on the contrary, Shatskaya says that “nowadays there are no ultimate beauty standards” (ibid:84) and taking into consideration that a “real bitch” does not care what other people think she can choose to be whatever she wants and feel no guilt for it.

Thus, although the new image seems to have a great deal of “old” strategies, however, the way they are represented have changed. “Bitch”-books attempt to redefine the ways and the image of women’s power which lets women preserve control but in a manner that resists the accusations of women’s “overemansipation”, “masculinization” and making men weak, and I will come back to this last point in the next chapter. The image gives credit to the “Russian” value of beauty. It makes it possible for women to reconcile the looks, the wit and the “Russianness” and present it as personal choice. I would also argue that it lets women follow popular tendencies of contemporary Russian society.

3.4 Participating in modernity

Women's economic position in the contemporary Russian society leaves much to be desired. Unstable economic situation caused mass unemployment of women (Bridger *et al.* 1996). Recent governmental statistics show that in 2003 women on average were earning about 60% of men's wage, it takes them longer to find jobs, and there is a consistent tendency of gender discrimination (Roshjin 2005). At the same time, the impossibility of sustaining a family with just a husband as a wage earner is apparent (Attwood 1996). Thus, most women still work, even if for low wages. Additionally, the fall of the Soviet regime resulted in the collapse of the social welfare system (*ibid.*). Therefore, women are one of the most vulnerable categories in terms of economic conditions because of high unemployment rate, low wages, scarce redundancy payments, no laws against discrimination and sexual harassment.

Another problem is that after the years of transition the gap between rich and poor expanded (Ovcharova 2001). Therefore, the new class of extremely rich people (rich men and their wives) emerged, who are "free to live as they choose" (Meshcherkina 2000), while most of the people and predominantly women are experiencing financial difficulties. Still, the market is flooded with the abundance of various consumer goods, which are tempting (but mostly unaffordable). There are variety of colorful commercials featuring glamorous life; fancy restaurants and clubs tempt with first-class atmosphere and posh; fancy stores display haute couture and shining jewelry. Most of the above the average Russian citizen cannot afford, however the images are luring and tempting. Therefore, it is logical that people may try to somehow participate in this fantasy even if it just reading a book or an article about the "good life". For example, recently Oksana Robski⁷, the ex-wife of a "new Russian" businessman wrote a book about the life of wives in *Rublevka* – a "millionaire's district" in

⁷ Robski, Oksana. 2006. *Casual*. Moscow: Rosman, P-Plus.

Moscow. The book was an absolute bestseller.⁸ The newspapers are full of articles describing such news as the new yacht of Abramovich or the favorite restaurants of oligarchs and celebrities. Thus, besides the interest in the gossips about celebrities there is a high interest in society about the life styles of rich people in general.

How does all the above relate to the “bitch”-identity? I argue that although the books teach women to be the “right” consumers, ignore many structural factors and promote an image which is hardly achievable for most, nevertheless, by linking identity to consumer practices they give women means to participate in the contemporary capitalistic society and popular culture by appropriating certain features of the “bitch”-image.

The “bitch”-image is outlined in details in the books. A bitch should dress in a special way – high quality clothes and make-up. Kronna for instance suggests that cheap markets and fake brands should not be used because “the bitch doesn’t go humiliate herself with cheap fakes” (2002:29). The books encourage women to follow the examples of celebrities, famous pop and movie stars, watch soap operas and take up the style and manners of those “ideal bitches” (Kronna 2002; Shatskaya 2007a, 2007c). The identity therefore is closely connected to material practices: you are what you wear and how you behave. All these options are said to be easily achievable if you are a “bitch”.

Therefore, I would argue that the books let women at least “touch” the new way of glamorous life and the freedom of modernity, even if through fantasy or imagination rather than materiality. As Hellman (2004) points out, in public discourse the idea of diversity and the right to choose is closely related to the notions of freedom, capitalism and emancipation. It was a long tradition in Soviet Union to educate women to be “proper” consumers, to let them know what is best to wear and how to behave appropriately (Stitiel 2005). However, since the times of the USSR were associated with a powerful state rule and lack of personal

⁸ http://www.rosman.ru/news.php?nid=370&year_id=2006 (accessed May 30, 2007)

agency the abundance and availability of consumer goods in recent times seem to produce an impression of alternatives. The idea that “consumer choice expresses one’s identity, and differences from others” (True 2003:106) becomes very influential. Making women “proper consumers” is problematic because it objectifies them, leads to commodification of the self, gives the message that women are not good enough as they are (ibid). However, “bitch”-books through constant emphasis of the idea of the freedom of choice for the new woman and by making identity linked to consumer goods make the image seem as easier to reach.

The “bitch”-books offer the reader a fantasy identity, often akin to a soap opera stars, to relate to and imagine herself to be one. The books invite the reader to feel that her true “bitchy” identity is a woman of exceptional taste, beauty and cunning. Self-recognition, rather than money, is the ticket to the glamorous life style the self-help books offer. Thus, buying a “bitch”-book and the image of a “bitch” gives the average Russian woman a way to take part in the “new Russia” and the consumer economy - through fantasy and self-identification - which they could never afford with their monthly paycheck.

The idea that one is able to be in full control over life goes in line with the neo-liberal discourses of individuation (McRobbie 2004). Rimke argues that promotion of individuality and self-autonomy also resulted from psychological discourses that promote personal agency and responsibility for the choices people make (2000:62). Since the society in Russia now is presumed to be based on democratic values (compared to the Soviet regime when everything was under the control of the state) advertising the idea of possibility to achieve everything in her/his life seems to be logical. The bitch is a presented to be in complete control of her life and she always has the possibility to choose, be that her clothes, behavior or men. There are, however, several problematic aspects in the way these ideas are presented in the “bitch”-books.

In a way, as I have already pointed out, the “bitch”-image is a fantasy. Kronna writes: “At the elite ball, at the expensive car exhibition you’ll always recognize her. She is surrounded by most handsome men, she is accompanied by envious looks of other women” (2002:58). The “bitch” always aspires for the best. However, the easy way that is proposed to achieve this image overlooks important structural factors. The authors do acknowledge that certain problems may arise, for example, while looking for a job or trying to buy what you want with a low salary, however the books usually imply that these problems are very easy to overcome and if you are a “real bitch” you would know how to do it. The books then give numerous advice about the “winning” behavior at the job interviews, of the “proper” outfit at work, provides advice about managing difficult situations at the work place. Nevertheless, there is no mention of such factors such as discrimination, glass ceiling, sexism and everyday difficulties in sustaining the household.

Another such example is the discussion about children. Shatskaya says that having children is a desired thing, but it is not something which will prevent the bitch from further pursue of her successful life. The author suggests that it is necessary to “get back into shape again as soon as possible” (2007c:29) and lead the regular life. Interestingly enough she does not mention such factors as the bad state of welfare system, low maternity leave payments, the lack of men’s desire to help around the house and with the baby. I assume that most of the women living in Russia are aware of these complications and look for the strategies to overcome them. Thus, the detailed description of the step-by-step process of achievements and the redefinition of the power strategies outlined in the previous section may still give women a hope to overcome the above obstacles. Especially, since the identity is presented as absolutely possible to gain: you just have to get the right handbag.

Chapter 4 Beating Patriarchy at Its Own Game

In this chapter, I argue that although the “bitch”-books do not really question the patriarchal framework of power relations and reinforce traditional stereotypes, nevertheless they give women a strategy to cope with the existing gender inequalities. Furthermore, the “bitch”-books attempt to redefine the concept of male/female relationship and the attitudes towards it. This alleviates the burden of women’s guilt for emasculation of Russian men, makes it possible to reconcile glamorous and powerful image with being in a relationship.

4.1 *Playing a “bitch”*

As I have already mentioned in the previous chapter, although the myths of the complete equality and emancipation of women during the Soviet times is widely present, women’s position in the contemporary Russia is still poor in economic terms. Moreover, as Ritter argues “the cultural patterns of meaning” although contested and contradicted still remains. Russia is a patriarchal society (2001:133).

The “bitch”-books indeed do not question the existing power relations in the society, in the sense that they do not offer to challenge the system, they reinforce many “conventional” stereotypes of femininity and masculinity. However, I would argue that they do offer women a strategy to cope with gender inequality and difficult situation, although it may be only a short-term solution. I now focus on the discussion of the feature, which appears to be new in the “bitch”-image in comparison to other models of femininity in Russia, which is the offer to turn your life, behavior, image and attitudes into a constant game.

As researchers argue, most self-help books suggest that a person should take personal responsibility, enhance certain qualities and change behavior in order to live a better life (see Shrager 1993, Rimke 2000). In other words, the books suggest to treat the transition to the new “better self” seriously, meaning that s/he should really work at incorporating certain new

patterns into identity. On the contrary, the “bitch”-books say that in spite of the systematic and thorough approach to the personal changes (becoming a bitch) the attitude towards life that a “bitch” leads and towards herself should be a constant play.

Shatskaya writes: “To get to know a person, to feel him (her), to play with him as a cat plays with the mouse. Isn’t it a real power?” (2007b:7). The “bitch”-books picture life as a constant challenge, a competition. These are a many examples which demonstrate how easily a “bitch” handles the most difficult situations through skillful manipulation and pretence. It is constantly emphasized that there can be no clichés for all the situations and that is why is it important to play the game creatively, to improvise and take it as fun (Shatskaya 2007b:30). The authors do not deny that it is not always an easy game. For instance, Kronna says that a bitch would never show the “dark side of her life”, she should conceal vexation or disappointment in many cases in order to produce a better impression (2002:7) and no matter what she should always look glamorous and shiny. However, compared to the everyday life dreary the image really tries to introduce a change. Life is difficult in any case but playing, imagining it differently sounds easier and more fun.

The “bitch”-books also represent a controversial picture when they talk about strategies of behavior during this game that a bitch plays. On the one hand, some types of behaviors are proposed which obviously do not correspond to the “traditional” femininity “norms.” For example, as I have already mentioned in the second chapter, the authors encourage assertiveness, goal-oriented behavior, self-respect, self-love, initiative *etc.* However, the strategies that are offered. for example, to “hold on to your man” are in line with conventional feminine conduct. Kronna writes that “women were made by the Creator to please, to satisfy, to bring delight to the men they love” (2002:87), she even suggests that women should simulate orgasm from time to time in order to reassure the man “that he is a genius in bed” (ibid:93). Shatskaya (2007b) suggests that women should learn sexual

techniques from porn movies because behaviors that are shown there is what men really want. Thus, obviously there is no feminist agenda here. However, what makes these offers different from the regular press or media propaganda is that now women should perform this behavior as a part of a game. In other words, they should be aware that they do it deliberately with a certain purpose. This change of attitudes does not necessarily lead to the challenge of these stereotypes, but nevertheless, instead of making them a belief turn them into a strategy.

One more significant aspect of the bitch's game is that indeed many achievements of the bitch are mediated through men. Most of the described means of reaching success in relationships, career and other spheres of life are manipulations of men who are in power (see Vladimirskaia 2003). There is numerous advice about how to lure your colleague, or boss or any other man and use him to your advantage (see Shatskaya 2007b). Thus, although self-autonomy and independence of the bitch is encouraged her life is nevertheless focused around men. But then again, managing men is described as a fun and easy game and men are portrayed as not being aware of the fact that they are manipulated (Kronna 2000). Therefore, I would argue that in the light of women's difficult position in the contemporary Russian context where, in spite of women's struggle, men still have control and the situation is not likely to change soon, showing the reader that it is easy to manage men could potentially look as a very appealing statement. The situation is made more attractive by being presented as a fun process, which additionally brings achievement of the goals.

The "bitch"-books do not represent an attempt to challenge the patriarchal society through structural means such as politics or laws. However, they "modernize" the individualist discourses on self-efficiency and the possibility of individual achievement of power and success by turning the personal struggle into a fun and easy game. Therefore, although the "bitch"-books do not propose explicit resistance, they propose a strategy to make it easier for women to handle the situation of gender inequality in the society.

4.2 The new “bitch” and her Man

Another aspect of the “bitch”-books is that they try to redefine the conventional understanding of the relationship and attitudes towards it. I would argue that although the books do portray men as a commodity and a part of the image, they redefine the notion of relationship. This makes it possible to resist the blame put on women for “demasculinizing” men. At the same time the new type of attitudes (towards yourself and towards men) make it feasible to reconcile self-respect and having power with the women’s aspiration for a “strong shoulders” (Ashwin 2000:20).

One of the main features of the “bitch”-books is that they promise to teach women how to gain control over men. The reader is guaranteed to get to know men very well, to understand their behavior and way of thinking. Numerous chapters are devoted to the descriptions of men and bitch’s relationships with them. Men are presented as obviously inferior of the bitch.

Several authors write that men are like grown-up babies (Kronna 2002:18, Shatskaya 2007c:18). They are also describes as “species” or “kinds”. For example, the subtitle of the 2nd book of the trilogy of the School of Bitch is “*Men: the Guide for Obtaining, Use and Maintenance*”. Although the author says that she likes men and wants to understand them, men are still represented as the objects of study. Thus, men are commoditized in a way. Looking for a man is described as a “hunt” (Kronna 2002:61). The word that is mostly used when talking about establishing relationship with men is to “domesticate”, to “tame”, to “train” and there is a persistent analogy with animals. Getting to know men is seen as a type of science called “man-ology” (ibid:13). Although such images of men oversimplified and the books “convert” them into a commodity which is a part of the “bitch”-image, nevertheless, such representations can enhance the reader’s feeling of the easiness of gaining control over such “simple creatures”. Thus, power of women over men is not denied, but encouraged.

However, as I have pointed out in the previous chapter the powerful superwoman is exactly the type that was blamed in discourses for making men weak (see Gray 1991; Voronina 1994b). This contradiction is solved in the books by redefinition of the relationship style. In order not to “suppress” men a bitch should be very conscious and “picky” and choose the “right” one. Once she found one, he would be the type she respects and he will not be inferior of her, but an equal partner.

Since a bitch is an extraordinary woman, she “doesn’t need a mediocre person by her side”. The man she gets “is a king or even an ace” (Kronna 2002:60). Shatskaya (2007c) gives the classification of men and provide advice about which “kinds” are suitable for a bitch and which are not. Many chapters are devoted to the advice on how to identify the right man, how to understand what he wants in order to “tie him up and make him love you” (Shatskaya 2007c:25). The characteristics that the “right man” should possess are clearly outlined. There is an unambiguous distinction between “manly” and “non-manly” behavior (of course, the bitch does not need the man showing the latter).

If the man is still not exactly what she wants she should adjust herself and change him as well. Men are said to be a game for a bitch, thus it should not be difficult (Shatskaya 2007a:11). Shatskaya writes that a bitch “doesn’t await something impossible from a man, but should be happy with the occasional manifestations of noble behavior” (2007c:15). The author says that men should be forgiven for many drawbacks because nowadays women themselves do not represent men’s ideal either (Ibid). So a bitch should not complain but try to “make her own Prince” (Ibid). The strategy is to persuading oneself that the man one has is the One and the best.

What is more interesting, Shatskaya writes that a bitch should not “really” pretend or fake love because it is visible. Instead she should make herself believe that she feels, wants and desires what she pretends (2007b:28). For example, the author gives direct instructions

how to make yourself fall in love with the man who is “suitable” or “useful”. Shatskaya states that it should be “real” love otherwise a man will feel the “fraud”. At the same time, a bitch should not “wear rainbow glasses” and should always control her feelings in the relationship (ibid:94). Thus, the new type of relationship is proposed – the one which lets a woman be in control and at the same time have a strong support by her side, the men who she will respect and will not feel the guilt for subordinating and controlling him because there will be no need for it. The proposed strategy also alleviates the anxiety of being strong but lonely.

Being single for a woman in Russia is problematic for several reasons. First, it is difficult to manage the household and finance. Second, single women are not in favor in the patriarchal society, they are looked down upon and pitied (Gray 1991). Therefore, there is an anxiety to be left alone especially when the “choice” of men is not too wide (ibid:38). As Faludi points out one of the main accusation of the feminist movement was that it caused women to be alone and lonely. Self-help joined the backlash exactly through proposing that the solution for women’s problems is to “change the single status” (1991:339). In this sense “bitch”-books can be considered a post-feminist agenda. They construct loneliness as an inappropriate thing. However, they reconcile the importance of having a man with women’s independence, power and self-value. The books promise women to be able get any men they like and not to be afraid that being powerful, glamorous and independent will “scare him away”.

Kronna writes that a bitch should not be without a man, “loneliness is a bad fate”, “if you have no man – you have to find one” (2002:80). Thus, on the one hand, loneliness is represented as a bad thing. The author says that a woman should “stop lying to herself that she can live happily without a man” (ibid). Shatskaya writes: “[A] woman is made in a way that she feels happy, beautiful and needed, only if she is loved...A lonely woman *cannot* be happy no matter how much she would try to convince herself that it is possible” (2007a:4, my

italics). Vladimirskaia also points out that even when a woman achieves success in the sphere of work, no matter how hard she would try to play a “woman touched by feminism” (which means being the one who does not need a man) these ideas cannot be true (2003:321). Therefore, in the end on the day personal happiness of the bitch seems to be dependant on men. Kronna writes: “you are a goddess, but what are you without him?” (2002:91). Thus, what actually makes a bitch a “goddess” is not her attempts to change, not her inner “bitchy” self, not her success in career, but the Man. On the other hand, the authors say that a “real man”, the one that a bitch really needs is not afraid of being in the relationship with a stunning, smart and powerful woman (Kronna 2000:45). Therefore, the appreciation of such a man is not a “charity” for a woman but something that will increase her self-esteem. The pressure for “finding a man” is partly alleviated by the promise that if you are a real bitch you will know men well and it will not be hard to find one. Therefore, the “bitch”-books admit that many Russian men (those not suitable for the “bitch”) are “losers”. The books therefore try to help women find “appropriate” ones and at the same time adjust their expectations and attitudes, and thus deflect the blame and the guilt for emasculating men.

Another aspect that is constantly emphasized is that if, however, it happens that the man left, a bitch should not hold herself responsible for it. Kronna (2002) suggests that there is no point of blaming yourself that the man deserted you. This advice at one point alleviates the pressure from women’s shoulders. In comparison, Simonds (2002) points out that most of self-help books that she researched usually make a woman see her own imperfection as the main reason for every failure relationship. The “bitch”-books on the contrary emphasize that it is not worth holding on to a man and a bitch should be the first one “to drop the wrong guy” (Shatskaya 2007b:153). Therefore, not only the attitudes to men are proposed to be reconsidered, but also to the self.

It is constantly stressed that the bitch should know what she is worth. This discourse seems to contest the conventional Soviet socialization. In general, traditional Russian socialization tells the girl that she should care less about personal desires and should rather pay attention to the needs of others, be it the in the family or at work (Tartakovskaya 2000; Attwood 1990). The “bitch”-books on the contrary, stress the importance of self-value. In the “bitch”-books several chapters are usually about importance of self-love, self-respect and self-fulfillment. Shatskaya defines self-love as caring about one’s personality: it is about small pleasures, about appreciating oneself and finally, it is about self-sufficiency, which comes from a successful career, wanting the best for oneself. However keeping the values of warmth, kindness and hospitality is also essential (2007a:86). In this sense, what the “bitch”-identity is offering seems to be something new, something that was considered “inappropriate” before. Moreover, through combining the new concept of self-love with such traditional values as “warmth” or “spirituality” the books make it more suitable for the Russian context.

Thus, the “bitch”-books attempt to construct a redefined type of relationships between men and women. Women can preserve power, self-respect and be in control of themselves. At the same time they are promised to have a man who will be a strong shoulder, whom there will be no need to control but whom a woman will understand. Thus, as Shatskaya puts it “bitches are women who started to think as men, but they still stayed feminine” (2007a:5). Of course in the society where (as I have pointed out in theoretical chapter) women’s position leaves much to be desired and the situation is not very likely to change what is suggested can look like a good strategy for success, even though it appears to work only for a short-term perspective because there is no challenge of the system.

The “bitch”-books do not give any illusions about the situation in the contemporary Russian society. They admit, that mostly men are in charge of the public sphere in the contemporary Russian society. They also do not advocate to openly contest the patriarchal

order of society and at this point these books as most of the other self-help are subjected to feminist scholarship criticism of accommodating existing power relations (see Shrager 1993; Simonds 1996; *et al.*). However, they do try to address the issues and anxieties of women in contemporary society.

The image that the “bitch”-books present is relatively “modern” and compatible with today’s capitalist society in Russia where men still dominate but where women are promised to succeed if they are powerful, assertive and know what they are worth. The books in a way represent the attempt to incorporate “good” features of individualism and at the same time preserve the “Russianness” through sustaining several “traditionally” important traits and values. The authors defend women’s need to have power, even though it is obviously scarce and according to the books should not be too visible. At the same time the “bitch”-books address such crucial issues as women’s desire to be independent, to participate in the contemporary consumer society, the need to deal with inequalities, blames, guilt and critiques produced by contemporary discourses in Russia.

Conclusion

In my thesis, I researched the emergence of the “bitch”-book genre in contemporary Russian context. Self-help discourses are inevitably a part and a product of the processes that take place in the given cultural and historical context. This literature is mainly targeting women since they are usually one of the most vulnerable categories in the society and as Simonds (1992) points out, they are encouraged to follow the expert advice. Although women are not just plain consumers of the self-help advice these discourses are still very influential (Ang 1996) and they construct certain models and strategies that the readers may follow. Therefore, studying these discourses can reveal the crucial problems that women face since self-help is oriented towards addressing and dealing with these issues.

In the situation of contemporary Russian society the discourses on what is a “proper” femininity are controversial and there is a need for women to reconcile traditionally imposed values of maternity, family, care and at the same time adjust to the competitive contemporary capitalist consumer society. Moreover, in the Russian society where the framework of power relations remains traditionally patriarchal women are still in an unfavorable economic position. This brings women to the crossroads where they are in a search of help to cope with this situation. Although self-help discourses have been criticized by many feminist scholars (see Simonds 1992; Shrager 1993; Cameron 2000) for accommodating and reproducing the existing patriarchal framework of power relations, women still read these books and look for answers to their problems.

“Bitch”-books as I have pointed out can be indeed subjected to these criticisms and are problematic from the point of view of a feminist researcher because they teach women to adjust rather than challenge the existing situation, reinforce many traditional gender stereotypes, reproduce neo-liberal discourses of individualism, encourage consumption, contain sometimes simplistic and shallow advice and in a way construct another type of

“normal” femininity. The assessment of the style and manner of writing *per se* which is not included in this project due to the limitation of time and space could have been an object of a separate study and should be further investigated because from the linguistic perspective it is incredibly interesting, confusing and sometimes shocking.

However, as assessing this literature in terms of how it functions in a particular historical and cultural context revealed the significant role these discourses play in (re)defining female identity in contemporary Russia. As I have argued, what potentially makes the “bitch”-identity appealing to the readers is that through framing this image of a “bitch” the books address many concerns and anxieties of women in contemporary Russia. The “bitch”-books contest certain “conventional” feminine behaviors, encourage new choices, give women hope that there is a way to achieve what they aspire to. By redefining the image of power these discourses let women preserve it and at the same deal with the common blame for being overemancipated, not feminine and for emasculating Russian men. The books make it possible for women through acquiring certain features of the image to take part in the modern and glamorous life that many women cannot afford due to the economic difficulties. They create an image of living life as a game and being able to get in a relationship and manage personal concerns easily and with fun. Of course, largely, the image is a fantasy, another ideal which is probably impossible to reach in the full degree. But after all, seeking for a ideal model and dreaming to achieve it is a common practice at all times. One just has to make sure that it is a good one, but what is good is always a matter of negotiation.

In this sense, the new genre of bitch books represents an interesting mixture of contradictions. There are attempts to give techniques to cope with the existing situation and at the same time, there is a feeling of its inevitability and permanence. The contents of the books are also sometimes as contradictory as the discourses on the female identity that circulate in contemporary Russia.

One of my Russian friends (who is not from Gender Department) told me: “Wow! You’ve read so many “bitch”-books! Now you must know for sure how to be a real bitch! Can you brief me on what I should do?..” She seemed really interested and I am sure that is she had read these books she would have had her own opinion about them. It is difficult to say unequivocally how exactly women perceive the strategies offered by the “bitch”-books. Shatskaya writes that “being a bitch is like a new skin, a new philosophy and life style” (2007a:79). Whether this philosophy is successful or not can be seen from further study of women’s opinions of this literature. The questions of how women read, interpret and use the ideas promoted but the “bitch”-books remain open for further investigation.

My study showed that this literature can point out to certain problems, desires and aspirations that women have and the popularity of the genre shows that women are really looking for the solutions of their problems. Assessing the “bitch”-books in terms of how these discourses function in the contemporary Russian society, what issues they reflect and how they do it brought new insights about the situation, difficulties and dilemmas of women in Russia and about the specificities of the processes of shaping and reshaping of the category of female identity in the contemporary Russian context.

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