



A Paradoxical Reality:
Exploring Maternal Identity in Nora Ikstena's *Soviet Milk*

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Abstract

Nora Ikstena's semi-autobiographical novel *Soviet Milk* has gained a significant amount of critical acclaim and international recognition since its publication in 2015. Through its exploration of three generations of women in Latvia under Soviet rule, the novel delves into the complexities of maternal identity and societal constraints. This thesis situates Ikstena's novel within the broader context of post-Soviet literary tradition and examines the novel's nuanced exploration of maternal identity amidst the backdrop of Soviet repression. Through an analysis of paradoxes, the thesis offers insights into the complex construction of Selfhood within the Soviet and post-Soviet contexts, particularly focusing on the central figure of the mother and her struggle to reconcile societal expectations with personal realities. This exploration of contradictions resonates on multiple levels, reflecting broader trends in post-Soviet literature and aligning with Adrienne Rich's critique of patriarchal societies. Ultimately, this research aims to deepen our understanding of maternal identity within the context of Latvia's socio-cultural landscape.

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Introduction

In the landscape of Latvia, the imagery of the mother is prominently displayed in monumental sculptures like the “Mother-Homeland,” which commemorates World War II fallen soldiers, and the well-known “Mother Latvia” with her fallen sons at the Riga Brothers’ Cemetery. These sculptures depict a large feminine figure, her head bowed in mourning, standing on a podium overlooking the scene. She possesses an almost primordial quality.

In these instances, and many others, the state is likened to the image of a mother, seemingly embodying the same attributes and roles: an unconditional, strong source of love and nurture, where all human life originates. The words “mother” and “homeland” seem to hold equal power and influence in shaping societal expectations of women. The attributes of the ideal mother are embedded in nationalistic symbols, folklore, culture, and politics, permeating every aspect of how women are viewed and shaped as mothers, as wives, as individuals.

A perfect subject for exploring maternal symbols and maternal identity in Latvia is Nora Ikstena’s *Soviet Milk*, a work of autofiction that centers on the experiences of three generations of women. Through their interconnected narratives, this literary work explores the impact of the Soviet regime on these women’s lives, professional trajectories, sense of self, and mental well-being. Since its release almost a decade ago, Ikstena’s work has been translated into at least 38 languages with reports of additional translations currently underway. Notably, it is the first Latvian work translated into Dutch; it has made a substantial contribution to elevating Latvia’s literary presence on the global stage. Given the widespread international recognition of *Soviet Milk*, this narrative stands as a unique subject of study and warrants an in-depth examination.

In the novel, the mother (unnamed), who is an accomplished gynecologist, navigates the complexities of her identity. In the eyes of Soviet ideology, the mother character should be the embodiment of the Soviet ideal woman: a working mother, committed to advancing scientific knowledge. During the Soviet era, it was commonly believed that the ideal woman “successfully combined home and work” (Ashwin 126), and this was perceived as an aspirational model. Yet, in

the pursuit of her ambitions, she finds herself unable to fulfill either role and ends up living a life in exile, restrained both in her physical and mental confinement. This serves as one of the many paradoxes that envelop the mother character's narrative voice. Firstly, she believes her breast milk is contaminated and unsuitable for nursing her infant daughter, despite her medical expertise indicating otherwise. Then, despite her skill and knowledge as a gynecologist, she lacks autonomy in her reproductive practices due to state intervention. She also perceives herself as possessed by demons, haunted by visions of hell, yet others frequently liken her to symbols of holiness or holy beings. Lastly, she shuns her child and mother, denying her role in their lives yet her internal monologue fixates on different maternal figure symbols that continually resurface in her psyche. Readers and critics alike have found resonance in *Soviet Milk*, yet merely attributing its appeal to its portrayal of a universal mother-daughter relationship seems insufficient. Instead, this thesis will delve deeper into the work's significance, exploring its intricate portrayal of maternal identity and its broader socio-political implications. Firstly, I will aim to contextualize the narrative within its literary tradition, upon which I aim to examine how and why it illuminates one of its central themes: the formation of maternal identity amidst the constraints of a repressive Soviet regime. Secondly, this thesis intends to analyze how the narrative's use of paradoxes contributes to the discourse surrounding maternal identity and the construction of self within both the Soviet and post-Soviet contexts. The central research question of this thesis is: how do the paradoxes in Nora Ikstena's *Soviet Milk* contribute to the exploration of maternal identity within the socio-cultural context of Latvia? In this thesis, I will argue that the paradoxes in *Soviet Milk* reflect a complex sense of the mother's self, which is further complicated by the roles imposed on her by the regime. I will also argue the narrative simultaneously portrays the experience of living in a paradoxical reality that persists into the present day.

The introductory theoretical chapter aims to engage with various scholarly perspectives on the predominant trends, patterns, themes, and frameworks found in post-Soviet autobiographical writing in Latvia and the broader post-Soviet context. The first section of this thesis seeks to uncover the significance of these trends, providing a comprehensive understanding of their development. Drawing

upon insights from post-Soviet studies and post-colonial theory, this chapter will explore Stefanescu's theory of the "post-communist void," Skulte's concept of the "moral vacuum," and Kaprāns's interpretation of social representations theory. By analyzing *Soviet Milk* through this theoretical framework, we can gain a deeper understanding of the novel's focus on women's experiences and its commentary on those experiences. This approach also helps to position the work within the broader context of post-Soviet Latvian female literary tradition. The chapter then transitions to a discussion of motherhood within societal contexts and narratives. Initially, it establishes the ideas of feminist theorist Adrienne Rich, particularly her concept of motherhood as an institution, as a foundational framework of this thesis. Subsequently, I will examine the evolution of Rich's feminist theory through the perspectives of her successors, reflecting on concepts such as matrophobia and maternal ambivalence.

My literary analysis of *Soviet Milk* will be grounded in feminist theory for two key reasons. Firstly, the novel centers on the experiences of women across generations, with the narrators being the grandmother, mother, and daughter. Feminist theory is well-suited to analyze such narratives because it prioritizes women's lived realities over societal norms and imposed ideals. Secondly, Adrienne Rich's critique of patriarchal structures aligns closely with the portrayal of women in Soviet society, both during the historical period and potentially even in contemporary contexts.

The analytical chapter will explore each paradox depicted in the narrative and investigate the maternal ideals that emerge in the mother character's psyche, drawing upon various theories outlined in Chapter One. By dissecting the contradictions and juxtapositions present in the narrative, in the chapter, I will argue how these elements effectively portray the paradoxical reality experienced by society during the time of the Soviet regime. In this section, I will also posit how these insights extend to post-Soviet discourse: by shedding light on the lasting impact of Soviet-era dynamics on contemporary societal narratives.

In my thesis, I intend to primarily employ the method of literary analysis, examining in-depth the themes of motherhood in the novel and paying attention to how these themes contribute to the

overall message and meaning of the work. To execute a detailed examination of the text, I will use close reading as one of the methods, analyzing and quoting specific passages, and noting patterns and ambiguities that convey deeper meaning. I plan on also using the approach of historical contextualization, which will involve situating the text within its historical context to better understand its existence and relevance.

Chapter One: Theoretical Framework

1.1 Setting the Stage: Exploring History, Memory, and Paradox in Post-Soviet Latvian Literary Tradition

Throughout history, literature has functioned as a vehicle for individuals to explore identities, comprehend the experiences of others, interpret historical contexts, and make sense of the world around them. In countries such as Latvia, where historical narratives are diversified due to changing regimes, occupations, policies, and religious and ideological influences, literature emerges as a tool for fostering collective memory and as a methodological framework for defining national, social, and ideological identity. Several notable contemporary Latvian literary works, including Nora Ikstena's *Soviet Milk*, Sandra Kalniete's "With Dance Shoes in Siberian Snows," Māra Zālīte's "Five Fingers," and Māris Bērziņš's "Svina Garša," navigate personal autofiction narratives reflecting the lived experiences of Latvia's tumultuous periods marked by war, exile and the totalitarian regime. In the search for meaning, identity, and comprehension of Latvia's historical legacy ingrained within Latvian culture and society, such literary works represent a distinct literary tradition emerging since the turn of the millennium.

A significant share of post-Soviet Latvian literature is concerned with the nation's history, frequently interweaving autobiographical elements. This trend is just one among several predominant themes within post-Soviet prose. In his text "Soviet Colonial Modernity and Every Day in Twenty-First Century Latvian Literature", Benedikts Kalnačs uncovers how post-Soviet perspectives surface in contemporary Latvian literature. Using postcolonial theory, Kalnačs explores the coloniality and decoloniality under Soviet rule, zooming in on the identity formation that persevered in Latvian literature and culture at the turn of the twenty-first century. Compared to earlier portrayals of history in literature, which tended to illustrate more heroic acts and figures, post-Socialist Latvian literature is "more focused on the depiction of the everyday and historical situations and representations as seen through the perspective of ordinary people in daily circumstances" (Kalnačs 410).

Following Latvia's independence from 1991 onward, there was a surge in memoir and autobiographical literature in Latvia, particularly among female authors. Many of these autobiographical writings appear to intertwine personal stories with significant historical events, often drawing upon the broader context of Eastern European history for recognition and resonance. Sandra Meškova's exploration of post-Soviet Latvian autobiographical writing by women sheds light on the manner in which these texts unfold. As she observes, "these authors feel compelled to bear historical evidence of the history which became part of their lives" (145). The narrative of Latvian autobiographical writing aligns with the practice of rewriting history, which characterized the literary tradition of Central and Eastern Europe during the "transition period" of the 1990s.

Meškova, for example, elaborates that while these authors adopt individual perspectives on their personal recollections, they share a common starting point: their shared historical legacy, to which they are deeply committed to "bearing evidence" (145). The testimonial fashion of writing evident in Latvian autobiographical works since the 1990s fit into the post-Soviet discourse, exemplifying the "revisionary tendencies of rewriting history" and reshaping the previously imposed narratives and ideologies (Meškova 145). Meškova observes that autobiography serves as a mechanism for reimagining Latvian history and national customs through a consistent shifting of focus. During the years following Latvia's second independence, the testimonial approach to autobiographical writing was particularly emphasized, as it allowed authors to unveil truths that were largely suppressed during the Soviet era (Meškova 155). Consequently, Latvia's regained independence marks a significant turn in literature, as new narratives emerged to retell Soviet experiences.

Post-Soviet literature often entails attitudes that potentially reflect broader social sentiments, and this literary tradition's very existence prompts comparisons between the past and the present — the Soviet and the post-Soviet. Reflecting on the nature of Latvian autobiographies in the post-Soviet context, researcher Mārtiņš Kaprāns (2009) employs social representations theory to explain what roles autobiographies—and by extension, autobiographers—take on within a societal framework.

Social representations theory, formulated by Serge Moscovici, explores how individuals and groups construct shared meanings and understandings of reality (Höijer 3). The theory predicates that people collectively create cognitive frameworks, or representations, to interpret and make sense of various aspects of the social world, such as objects, events, and phenomena. Social representations serve as a means for individuals to organize information, shaping their attitudes, beliefs, and behaviors (Höijer 4-5). By applying social representations theory, Kaprāns argues that post-Soviet autobiographers essentially represent a particular social group that is concerned with the past as a social object. Consequently, according to Kaprāns, “their autobiographies develop into the biographical representation of a shared experience” (2009). This implies that autobiographies are not merely personal – they become collective stories.

When autobiographers reflect on their experiences across different political regimes, it initiates a conversation between the past and present. This way scholars can focus on predominant framing methods used in autobiographical narratives. In his article, Kaprāns uses “frame” as an analytical tool to explore both the Soviet and post-Soviet narratives. He identifies different cultural contexts as frames, categorizing them as the nostalgic frame, progressive frame, and continuation frame. Within the scope of this paper, the continuation frame might be a more significant focal point. The continuation frame signifies the presence of a positive, negative, or neutral experiential continuity evident in post-Soviet autobiographical narratives (Kaprāns 2009). However, Kaprāns contends that in most instances, this continuity tends to be negative. Post-Soviet writers that use this frame underline disruptive societal paradigms, shortcomings from institutions, and, on a more personal level, an ongoing grapple with Soviet heritage, disparaging living conditions, decreased well-being, and deeply ingrained personality traits that persist from the Soviet era as if inherited. This perspective stands in contrast to the nostalgic frame that romanticizes the Soviet experience as more positive than the post-Soviet one (Kaprāns 2009). The negative continuation frame is particularly significant in my study since it helps explain how narratives of the Soviet past are used to convey lasting negative impacts on individuals, such as trauma, loss of identity, mental health issues and

complex familial relationships. Additionally, it correlates with how different scholars reflect on the impact of the Soviet era, linking the past with the present.

A case in point would be what Romanian academic Bogdan Stefanescu termed as the “void” in post-communist societies. In his studies, Ștefănescu describes “the void” as a sense of uncertainty, inadequacy, and loss of ideological direction prompted by the collapse of the communist regime (120). Stefanescu uses post-colonial theory and concludes that post-communist countries exhibit a compromised cultural identity and an impaired national pride due to “the symbolic damage done by Soviet and Western Colonization” (120). Kaprāns identifies former Soviet intelligentsia as the primary advocates of the continuation frame, offering a striking insight. He observes that in their efforts to defend their social identity against misinterpretations, autobiographers tend to create a paradoxical narrative about the Soviet era. They simultaneously claim that it was not as bad as commonly believed (nostalgic frame), yet worse than presently perceived (continuation frame). Kaprāns aims to explain this contradiction through the theory of cognitive poliphasia, which suggests that individuals and groups can maintain multiple, conflicting cognitive styles and forms of knowledge at the same time. This sets the stage for exploring the paradoxical nature of Soviet past narratives, a theme that will recur throughout this study.

Similar to Stefanescu’s concept of the void, in the afterword of *Soviet Milk* professor Ilva Skulte defines the latter part of the Soviet era as a “moral vacuum” (174), paradoxically filled with “principles of logical precision and technical efficiency” (174) yet devoid of personal fulfillment and sense of purpose. Skulte suggests that this very concept is woven into the conflicts and dilemmas experienced by the protagonists of *Soviet Milk*. Drawing upon Skulte’s arguments, Kalnačs demonstrates that narratives in post-Soviet literary works, such as *Soviet Milk*, often include paradoxical elements intentionally. Kalnačs implies that “the events represented in the novel give a thorough insight into the contradictory experience of coming to terms with the new reality” (416), further explaining that “Soviet rule creates a strange and paradoxical world order, where the flow of events points to the absurdity of the dominating mechanisms of social life” (417). What both Kalnačs

and Skulte suggest here is that these paradoxical elements are not merely literary devices, but reflections of deeper societal and existential contradictions that were present in Soviet and post-Soviet times.

Exploring post-Soviet literary discourse, where contradictions, moral conflicts, and contested identities are prevalent themes, it becomes evident that the complexities of reality are also depicted through narrative form, methods, and literary devices. Conflicting attitudes reflected in post-Soviet literature are also something that Karl E. Jirgens is concerned with. Examining particularities in post-independence Latvian writing, Jirgens notices “not only an ironic tone [...] but also a tendency toward narrative disjunction” (273). Jirgens also acknowledges the tendency of contemporary Latvian writers to not only mix fact with fiction, but find ways to interweave fantasy, mythology, science fiction, magic realism, and real history. In so doing, literary works “transcend matters of forensic “truth” and instead pursue a higher “mythic” truth” (Jirgens 273). Jirgens argues that mythic truth is a foundational aspect of the Latvian worldview and aims to overcome the difficulties caused by distorting years of censorship and propaganda. Therefore, it is unsurprising that post-Soviet literary works, particularly those exploring the self in relation to the past, often abandon straightforward truth in favor of metaphorical exploration. By employing metaphor and symbolism, post-Soviet works tend to tackle especially difficult subjects.

Considering the commonalities in how scholars discuss post-Soviet literary trends, it is now more feasible to map out this literary tradition. In this tradition, the past becomes an object of interpretation, viewed through the lens of personal experience, approached with a more experimental writing style and greater artistic freedom than under Soviet regime.

1.2 Negotiating Motherhood: A Dialogue of Post-Soviet Perspectives in Narrative and Society

Before examining motherhood depictions within post-Soviet literature and society, it is imperative to acknowledge the nuanced implications that such a study has. As demonstrated in the discussion in the previous chapter, literature, particularly within the post-Soviet context, often mirrors and

amplifies broader social sentiments. Thus, an analysis of motherhood necessitates a dual approach - exploring themes of motherhood within the narratives, while simultaneously contextualizing them within the societal frameworks from which these narratives emerge. In this chapter, my focus does not lie on motherhood as a biological phenomenon, but rather as a multifaceted social construct. It serves as a pivotal mechanism for shaping individual and collective identities, used as both a tool for political manipulation, and as a reflection of cultural values and a medium for the negotiation of identities.

The concept of motherhood has been extensively analyzed through various theoretical perspectives, but perhaps most notably through the lens of feminist theory. In 1976, Adrienne Rich, a prominent American feminist thinker, released "Of Woman Born: Motherhood as Experience and Institution". Rich contends that motherhood is not just a natural female state but rather an institution shaped by patriarchal norms. She articulates how societal expectations, ideologies, and structures constrain women's autonomy by imposing rigid definitions and limitations on their roles as mothers. According to Rich, motherhood "has a history, it has an ideology" (33). In her scholarship, Rich repeatedly emphasizes how patriarchal norms construct an idealized image of mothers and motherhood. As observed by Argaiz, Rich underscores the notion that motherhood transcends mere biological functions, as it is intertwined with social constructs and expectations (127). Rich makes a clear distinction between "the potential relationship of any woman to her powers of reproduction and to children, and the institution - which aims at ensuring that the potential - and all women- shall remain under male control" (Rich 44). As a result, she highlights the difference between motherhood, the institution, and mothering - the experience. Rich explores the myths of motherhood that are deeply rooted in society, stating that:

Throughout patriarchal mythology, dream-symbolism, theology, language, two ideas flow side by side: one, that the female body is impure, corrupt, the site of discharges, bleedings, dangerous to masculinity, a source of moral and physical contamination, "the devil's

gateway.” On the other hand, as mother the woman is beneficent, sacred, pure, asexual, nourishing; and the physical potential for motherhood—that same body with its bleedings and mysteries—is her single destiny and justification in life. These two ideas have become deeply internalized in women, even in the most independent of us, those who seem to lead the freest lives.” (Rich 70-71)

Rich uncovers an interesting dichotomy in which women simultaneously possess sacred attributes and are demonized as being associated with the devil. What is more, her assertion that limiting societal perceptions of motherhood encompasses all women is important for this discussion. Despite Rich’s text primarily critiquing lasting patriarchal values in Western capitalistic societies, her ideas are also applicable to the context of Soviet ideologies surrounding motherhood. Just as society became an object to be studied, shaped, and improved by social scientists and government officials, reproduction opened opportunities for government intervention (Hoffmann 37). Already during the Stalinist era of pronatalism that outlawed abortion, regulated reproduction, and made divorces difficult, the Soviet government launched motherhood propaganda, promoting a woman’s “natural role” as a mother (Hoffmann 42). According to Swartz “In Soviet ideology woman was central to preserving the family and the woman's role was retained to a traditional one, that of a mother, upbringer and wife” (81). Even though the dictatorship eras in the Soviet Union and their pro-family policies varied over time, the ideal of women and the emphasis on their “natural” roles as mothers and caretakers remained consistently strong.

However, the mother’s identity was not to be enacted in silence. Choi Chatterjee theorizes that when a Soviet woman had a child, she fulfilled an important national and social function (13). Despite its private nature, motherhood became a public act. Soviet mothers “fulfilled the prime obligation of good citizens” (Chatterjee 12). Reproduction and caregiving, however, were not the only functions Soviet women had. Soviet mothers were working mothers, and to the public eye these multiple roles of motherhood were not to be perceived as a burden, but rather a “testimonial both to

the Bolshevik “can-do” spirit and the innate superiority of Soviet women over their international counterparts” (Chatterjee 13). Thus, Soviet ideology elevated motherhood to a central civic duty by associating it with national pride and superiority.

Rich’s work in motherhood studies has since become a cornerstone for feminist scholars across the globe who are interested in the study of motherhood. The conceptualization of motherhood as an institution has sparked a tradition among feminist thinkers to advocate for and expand upon her insights. One such example is Andrea O’Reilly, who, drawing upon Rich’s ideas on motherhood, categorized motherhood into three interconnected categories of inquiry: motherhood as institution, motherhood as experience, and motherhood as identity (O’Reilly). In O’Reilly’s book, various scholars offer insights into the three categories of motherhood, with Ivana Brown focusing on motherhood as identity. Brown’s contribution challenges the prevalent notion of motherhood as synonymous with happiness. Instead, she underscores the complex and often contradictory nature of maternal experiences (121). Brown refers to this as maternal ambivalence, defining it as the “coexistence of conflicting and opposing thoughts or feelings; in the case of mothers, these are usually described as a coexistence of love and hatred” (122). This theorization of maternal ambivalence adds another dimension to our understanding of motherhood, echoing Rich’s assertions that the female experience is fundamentally characterized by deep-rooted paradoxes.

Maternal ambivalence is central to Brown’s argument. She notes how any mother’s less-than-positive experience is perceived as problematic and deviant, despite it being depicted and explored quite widely in popular culture. Brown supports her arguments on psychoanalytic theories by Sigmund Freud, Klein, and Donald W. Winnicott, asserting that cultural ideals of the perfect mother breed internal conflict and role confusion for mothers. Drawing on psychotherapist Rozsika Parker’s findings, Brown posits that by recognizing the intersection of culture and maternal roles, we can highlight the “sociocultural conditions of mothering” (123). She contends that the internalization of maternal ideals often distorts mothers’ self-perception and their emotions towards their children.

Brown concludes that sociologists often identify maternal ambivalence as stemming from historical, cultural and social contexts that clash with social norms imposed upon individuals. From this perspective, mothers emerge as active participants in conflicting societal dynamics, grappling with contradictory social norms and expectations surrounding maternal roles. In her research, Brown further delves into the impact of conflicting expectations on maternal narratives of 21st-century American memoirs, determining that maternal ambivalence is not inherently tied to the mother-child relationship but rather is “socially and culturally based” (136). While Brown’s theoretical framework was originally developed within a different literary context, Zita Kārkla’s work serves as evidence for its applicability in Latvian literary scene.

Kārkla draws parallels when exploring mother-daughter relationships in Latvian women’s writing, characterizing them as ambivalent as well (253). In her analysis, Kārkla examines a range of Latvian literary works, including Nora Ikstena’s “A Celebration of Life” and “Education of the Virgin,” Repše’s “Red” and “Thumbelina,” and Ezera’s “Bella’s Story.” Throughout these narratives, mother-daughter relationships are portrayed as nuanced and complex. The mothers depicted in these stories exhibit a variety of roles: some have abandoned their daughters, others have passed away during their daughters’ childhoods, while others are physically present but emotionally distant or exert a dominating, all-knowing influence (253). Kārkla’s study highlights a continuity of themes between contemporary and earlier generations of Latvian women writers. One such theme is that “women’s sense of self derives from the problematic private sphere and not public life” (257), suggesting that women’s domestic experiences are often relegated to a passive role in Western culture. Latvian women writers, however, privilege domestic settings as crucial arenas for exploring and addressing overlooked societal issues.

Another enduring theme that Kārkla identifies among Latvian female writers across generations is the portrayal of the mother-daughter relationship as a vehicle for women’s quest for identity (257). In Latvian prose, the genealogical bond between mother and daughter often undergoes a dramatic conflict, as an inherent aspect of self-discovery through the lens of female lineage is

emphasized. Therefore, narratives centered around motherhood not only depict the mother's quest for identity but also that of the daughters'. This aligns with Rosalind Marsh's focus on mother-daughter relationships in post-Soviet prose. Marsh's research reveals that autobiographical and semi-autobiographical texts by post-Soviet women authors often adopt the narrative viewpoint of a child raised during the Soviet era (1202). Such a method serves to explore the self and the formation of one's identity through the image of the mother figure. Building upon earlier insights into post-Soviet literature, particularly those featuring autobiographical elements and an awareness of the past's relevance to the present, it is reasonable to infer that such narratives serve as a means for writer-daughters to navigate and explore their own identities.

Interestingly enough, Marsh's research on post-Soviet Russian women's writings sheds light on a notable shift in the portrayal of mothers. Contrary to prior depictions, these narratives often involve a dominant, absent mother figure rather than a caring, supportive one (Marsh 1202). These narratives seemingly move towards a more realistic portrayal of mother-daughter relationships, frequently showcasing dysfunctionality (Marsh 1202). The daughter characters' psychological journey towards their own identities and these feelings of severing ties from their mother to form their own identity in post-Soviet stories is closely intertwined with another concept Rich examines in "Of Woman Born" - namely, matrophobia. Drawing upon the term coined by American poet Lynn Sukenick, Adrienne Rich deepens the exploration of matrophobia within a feminist framework:

Matrophobia can be seen as a womanly splitting of the self, in the desire to become purged once and for all of our mothers' bondage, to become individuated and free. The mother stands for the victim in ourselves, the unfree woman, the martyr. Our personalities seem dangerously to blur and overlap with our mothers'; and, in a desperate attempt to know where mother ends and daughter begins, we perform radical surgery. (198)

According to Rich, matrophobia discusses not the fear of one's mother, but rather the fear of becoming one's mother (333). Although in her 1976 work, Rich claims that the "cathexis between mother and daughter - essential, distorted, misused - is the great unwritten story" (225), studies of late-twentieth-century and early twenty-first-century female literature may suggest otherwise. In recent decades, matrophobic portraits of mother-daughter relationships have been extensively explored across diverse cultures and numerous literary traditions.

Marsh employs Rich's concept of matrophobia to investigate how these narratives liberate the daughter's character from her past, particularly from the influence of her mother. A significant observation Marsh makes is the emergence of the "bad mother" archetype, serving as a radical departure from the idealized mother figure that was prevalent in Soviet culture (Marsh 1205-1206). This portrayal of the "bad mother" resurfaces in particularly stark depictions in the works of Liudmila Petrushevskaja and, as Marsh analyzes, aligns with the psychoanalytical perspectives of Melanie Klein and Nancy Chodorow with the theories of the "bad mother" and "bad breast". Although controversial and subject to extensive debate and analysis, Melanie Klein's theories propose that during infancy, there exists a developmental stage where infants perceive the world in extremes, viewing everything as either wholly good or entirely bad, driven by complete love or complete hatred (Harris 11-13).

Klein's theories suggest that during this stage the infant's relationship with their mother, particularly through breastfeeding, is central. The mother's breast in the infant's mind becomes split into the "good breast" and the "bad breast". The good breast represents the gratifying and nourishing aspects of the feeding experience. When the baby is fed and comforted, they associate the breast with love, nourishment, and security. On the other hand, the bad breast symbolizes frustration, deprivation, and aggression. When the feeding experience is negative and the infant is unable to obtain satisfaction, the breast is perceived as withholding, rejecting, and persecutory (Harris 27-28). Klein's concept of "good" and "bad breast" (also extended to the "good" and "bad mother" in a similar line of thought) is not merely directed toward the physical breast, but rather it is about the infant's

internalized representations surrounding the feeding experience. Klein believed that these early encounters with the mother's breast play a pivotal role in shaping an individual's psyche and relationships later in life (Harris 31-34). If we combine Rich's established dichotomy of women being viewed in extremes with Klein's theory, a pattern emerges: the mother cannot seem to exist outside these two opposing categories, invariably falling into one extreme or the other.

While Klein's concepts have faced a lot of criticism and reinterpretation in the field of psychoanalysis, it remains interesting to witness the resonant symbolism of these ideas within the late twentieth-century and early twenty-first-century female writings. Revento notes that some of the most striking examples of matrophobic writing occur through powerful imagery of maternal milk (286). She exemplifies this claim by British historian Carolyn Steedman's memoir "Landscape for a Good Woman" where Steedman unpacks the "'refusal' of her mother's body" (Rutland ed. 66), explaining that:

What came free could be given freely, like her milk: loving a baby costs very little. But feeding us during our later childhood was a tense struggle between giving and denial....I knew this, I think, when I conjured her under the kitchen table, the thin wounds across her breasts pouring forth blood, not milk. (Steedman 93)

Revento further strengthens her argument by drawing a parallel to the milk symbolism that appears in feminist Luce Irigaray's philosophical writings. Irigaray's quote: "With your milk, Mother, I swallowed ice" (60), suggests a complex and contradictory nature of the mother-daughter bond, where warmth and nourishment coexist with coldness and distance. Revento's two examples have a common thread: daughters rebel against their mothers upon realizing they inherit a legacy of resignation, low expectations, and a devalued self-image. This struggle for identity is a defining feature of daughters. They seek simultaneously independence from their mothers and a connection to their familial roots, which creates tensions between separation and acknowledgment of their lineage.

Rich demonstrates the complex web of emotions surrounding the mother-daughter bond. She argues that two contradictory instincts operate simultaneously: daughters receive their “first knowledge [..] of warmth and nourishment” (218) from their mothers, yet they may also view them as rivals or threats. And according to Rich, the daughters’ anger stems from their mothers’ powerlessness or struggles to break free from societal constraints. Ultimately, these complexities illustrate just how multi-faceted the mother-daughter relationship is in society and narrative - marked by love, frustration, and a constant negotiation of identity.

By examining how motherhood is depicted as a multifaceted social construct both in literature and real life, we gain a deeper understanding of its pivotal role in shaping individual and collective identities. Themes explored in this chapter, such as the institutionalization of motherhood, maternal ambivalence, and matrophobia, will be further applied to the analysis of Nora Ikstena’s *Soviet Milk*. This analysis will particularly emphasize the persistent oppositions in how the past and the female experience are depicted in the novel.

Chapter Two: Literary Analysis

2.1 The Paradoxes

Building on the insights of Chapter One, contemporary female authors from post-Soviet societies are known for addressing previously silenced, often personal narratives concerning the Soviet regime. In a departure from the traditional focus on grand historical narratives, this literature is more concerned with the domestic sphere, exploring themes of family dynamics, individual identity formation, and personal fulfillment. Post-Soviet literature blends fact and fiction to serve as a testament to experiences that have been well documented by historians yet lacked personal narratives. Similar to the contradictions inherent in the Soviet system itself, post-Soviet narratives grapple with paradoxes, present both in the stories themselves and in the very act of creating these works to communicate unresolved societal tensions. According to Egamnazarova, paradox as a literary device propels thematic exploration, “allowing authors to delve into profound existential questions, challenge societal norms, and critique established beliefs” (27). This subchapter will conduct a close reading and analysis of the paradoxes in the narrative of *Soviet Milk*. Drawing upon the theoretical frameworks established in Chapter One, it will then explore how these paradoxes contribute to the ongoing discourse of post-Soviet literature.

Nora Ikstena’s semi-autobiographical work *Soviet Milk* has gained much local and international traction. The story in *Soviet Milk* revolves around three generations of women - the grandmother, the mother and the daughter - all nameless. The novel spans several generations, transporting readers from the aftermath of Riga’s liberations from Nazi control in the 1940s to the Soviet Union’s impending collapse in the 1990s. Within this historical sweep, the mother, an accomplished gynecologist, grapples with the complexities of her maternal identity and life’s purpose. Early on the mother character develops discontent with the hypocrisy she witnesses at home and in society (Ikstena 21)¹. She is bewildered: enjoying privileges granted to her family because of her stepfather’s role in the “Great Patriotic War” (21), while overhearing her stepfather’s secret

¹ All citations of *Nora Ikstena* are from 2018 English edition unless otherwise noted.

condemnation and curses directed at Russians for executing his brother, branded a traitor. The stark difference between public displays and private convictions compels the mother to seek solace in medicine. The quiet, solitary passing of her father further strengthens her resolve to pursue medicine (Ikstena 16). Witnessing her father's suffering and death leads her to suspect the presence of a "self-destructive gene" (16) within herself, which she fears will only worsen. The medical encyclopedia she acquires from a deceased professor-neighbor becomes a response to her existential questions about humanity. She commences on the study of the human body, driven by the desire to understand the truth about the "wretched, hypocritical creature we call man" (22). The mother's traumatic experience seems to propel her toward exploring the physical and existential realities.

The fundamental mysteries of life - birth, death, and fertility - often appear in a duel between coincidence and predetermined forces. For the mother character, the quest to uncover these mysteries becomes a pursuit of scientific knowledge. This near-religious faith in science takes on an all-encompassing presence in her life. This mirrors post-war Soviet ideologies that emphasized the power of science. As Kojevnikov (115) highlights, the Soviet regime placed exceptionally high value and expectations on science. While a general fascination with science spread across Europe in the early twentieth century, the Bolsheviks' dedication to science in the aftermath of World War 1 took on a new intensity, fuelled by a "combination of ideological, cultural, and pragmatic reasons" (Kojevnikov 118). Drawing on their intellectual foundations in classical Marxism, the Enlightenment, and the intelligentsia's cultural tradition, the Bolsheviks adopted science as an "important ideological ally and a major force of not merely economic but also social and political progress" (Kojevnikov 118). The intense devotion to science, further cultivated under the Communist regime, served as the perfect substitute for religious faith. Moreover, the Soviet regime significantly expanded employment opportunities in scientific fields. They made scientific education more accessible and boosted scientific research by offering researchers salaried full-time positions, along with social and political prestige (Kojevnikov, 122). Following her successful admission to the Riga Medical Institute, the mother's dedication to her studies and scientific advancement granted her the ultimate prize: an

opportunity to get an education supplement in gynecology and endocrinology in Leningrad (Ikstena 27). Just as medicine books gave her solace and escape from the hypocritical world around her, the prospect of study supplement in Leningrad ignited a similar effect: “Leningrad was waiting for me with its new scientific discoveries and free spirit, which oppressed Riga was not allowed.” (27). She views this opportunity as “paradise”, yet acknowledges the potential steep price associated with unlocking it.

During her time in Leningrad, the protagonist encounters Serafima, a Russian neighbor married to an abusive war veteran. Serafima desperately desires a child but struggles with infertility. Recognizing an opportunity to utilize her expertise for good, the mother character makes a career-altering decision: she artificially inseminates Serafima with her husband’s sperm. When she notices a now-pregnant Serafima bearing fresh injuries from her husband’s abuse, the mother reacts impulsively by physically assaulting the husband, striking him on the head. Returning to Riga, the mother faces harsh consequences for her actions. The head doctor delivers the verdict: criminal prosecution and permanent ban from practicing medicine in any Riga hospital. This is the ultimate exile, “banished from my paradise,” (46) as she reflects. Confined to a small rural town, her practice is limited to working in an ambulatory center. The remainder of her life is marked by physical and mental confinement, with her internal conflict between her identities as a doctor and a mother intensifying as her psychological state deteriorates.

The central question posed by the head doctor - “A doctor, a woman, a mother, beats up an ex-soldier and hero of the Great Patriotic War. How do you justify your actions?” (45) - captures an exasperation with the conflict of interest. This quote highlights the perceived disconnect between the societal expectations associated with the mother’s roles (doctor, woman, mother) and her actions (beating up a war hero). The surprise in the question suggests that the head doctor finds it inappropriate for a woman entrusted with nurturing life (mother and doctor) to commit such a seemingly violent and treacherous act.

The narrative contains another pivotal instance: the mother's attempted suicide. Admitted to the hospital, she is then transferred to a psychiatric facility. The doctors justify this action with the rationale, "We have no choice [...] She tried to take her life. Consciously tried, despite being a mother and a doctor" (161). Expected to embody the vitality extolled by persistent Soviet ideology, she is reminded of her two esteemed roles - a doctor and mother - and is expected to prioritize her life, career, and daughter. Within the social context described in the novel, Ivana Brown's concept of maternal ambivalence becomes relevant. The protagonist's less-than-positive feelings about her life and roles are considered deviant. As her ambivalence, the coexistence of love and hatred towards motherhood (and by extension, her medical career in exile), deepens into pessimism, she is once again ostracized by the authorities. Their response is one of confusion and suspicion, as exhibited by the questioning she faces.

Despite her dedication to scientific exploration in Leningrad, her passion for medicine, and the God-given "talent" (46) ascribed to her by the head doctor, the mother's perceived indifference to the regime results in the stripping away of her professional autonomy. A similar situation occurs when at the rural ambulatory center, she is surprised to examine a young patient, Jesse, who appears to be intersex. Having been rejected by other gynecologists, Jesse seems deeply distressed. The character also grapples with the knowledge that she was abandoned by her mother and raised in an orphanage. The mother yearns to help Jesse, even perceiving her as a "God's gift" (Ikstena 109). However, she is filled with bitter frustration, acknowledging her helplessness. Leningrad, where new hormone therapies are being tested, is "unreachable" (109), and her exile has "bound [her] hands" (109) in this situation. Soviet ideology, as outlined by Kojevnikov (122), prioritized the ideal of science: a science with direct applications for social, political, and economic goals, as opposed to pure science driven by curiosity. While this practical approach to science was in line with the broader objectives of the state, it might have overshadowed individual bright minds.

The mother's predicament demonstrates the first paradox of the novel. Despite a passion for medicine, which aligns perfectly with the state's agenda, she lacks professional autonomy. But the

paradox here is twofold. It also appears in the metaphorical language: her “bound hands” symbolize both her physical confinement and the mental and professional restrictions imposed on her.

Another layer of paradox emerges in the novel’s exploration of maternal milk as a symbol of contamination. The protagonist experiences an unexpected pregnancy after a one-night encounter at a village dance. The father figure is absent throughout the narrative. Following childbirth, the mother abandons her maternal duties, disappearing for five days. Upon her return, “aching breasts. Her milk had stopped flowing” (Ikstena 8) powerfully conveys the physical and emotional disconnect. The mother terms her milk “bitter: milk of incomprehension, of extinction. I protected my child from it” (Ikstena 33). This act of denying breast milk becomes a recurring motif throughout the novel. It reappears with a near-mythical quality, manifesting in the daughter’s dreams and serving as a symbol of the chasm in the mother-daughter relationship.

The motif extends beyond dreams, it becomes a persisting metaphor infused into the characters’ speech and internal monologue. It even becomes a metric for measuring “motherliness” or its absence. The implication is that the ability to lactate and nurse a child is not just a physical act, but a marker passed down through generations. It becomes a way to gauge whether a child has been “properly” raised. Breastfeeding as a marker of maternal success is further exemplified by the grandmother’s response to one of the mother’s depressive episodes. In a fit of despair, the grandmother exclaims, “She sucked mother’s milk until she was three years old. She was a healthy, strong child. What happened to her?” (Ikstena). This outburst demonstrates the ingrained belief that a mother’s ability to breastfeed is not only a sign of physical nourishment but also of a nurturing bond that lays the foundation for a child’s mental and emotional well-being.

The mother’s refusal to breastfeed seems to stem from a steadfast conviction that her self-destructive tendencies could be transmitted through her milk. In a conversation with Serafima about her perceived lack of maternal instinct, she reiterates her stance: “I didn’t want to give my daughter milk, so that she doesn’t suck my vileness with it” (Ikstena 37). Interestingly, the Latvian edition employs the word “*lietuvēns*” instead of “vileness.” In Latvian folklore, *lietuvēns* is a harmful spirit

that torments both humans and livestock during the night (Anča 236). Traditional folk beliefs associate *lietuvēns* with the restless soul of a deceased person, doomed to wander the earth until its lifespan is complete (Stauga 116). When Serafima expresses confusion with this analogy, the mother clarifies, stating, “the *bes* - the devil, as it’s called in your language” (Ikstena 37).

The protagonist’s belief is seemingly reinforced by the noticeable differences between her and her daughter. She observes her daughter’s meticulously organized room, healthy habits, and vibrant personality, noting, “That was a different world. I had not contaminated it with my milk” (Ikstena 21, Latvian edition). Such observation suggests a sense of responsibility, or perhaps a justification, for her decision to withhold breast milk. It reflects her deep-seated fear of her capacity for motherhood. In her mind, any influence she has on her daughter risks transmitting the “darkness” she associates with her own lineage. The stark contrast between them serves as a form of validation for her choice to remain emotionally distant. She convinces herself that detachment is the most nurturing act she can offer as a mother.

This unwavering belief in the corruptive nature of her breast milk presents a fascinating paradox. The mother, with her extensive medical expertise, particularly in the human reproductive system, evidently holds an illogical assumption. Logically, one would expect her upbringing and the environment in which her daughter is raised to exert a more significant influence on the child’s life trajectory. What is more, from a scientific perspective, the transmission of psychological issues would likely occur during the biological process of childbirth, not through breastfeeding. What further supports the paradoxical nature of the situation is that the mother’s decision not to breastfeed seems to be implicitly validated by the people around her due to her standing as a medical professional. This regard of her expertise, stemming from the unspoken assumption of her superior knowledge, largely shapes the daughter’s perception of reality. As exhibited by her internal monologue, the daughter aims to justify her mother’s actions: “My mother was a young doctor. Perhaps she knew that her milk would have caused more harm than good to her child. How else to explain her disappearance from home immediately after giving birth?” (Ikstena 8). In contrast to the daughter’s view, the grandmother

holds a more critical perspective. She appears resolute that the protagonist's refusal to breastfeed was a deliberate and uncaring act, emphasizing this through her harsh language: "[she] left our Sweet Pea. Disappeared, ran away, abandoned her child. Denied her breast" (Ikstena 34, Latvian).

The daughter's aversion to milk further complicates things. As part of a mandatory school program, she is forced to drink milk daily, yet experiences violent nausea in response. When summoned to address this issue, the mother suggests a potential milk allergy, but her explanation is met with skepticism by the teacher: "Don't make me laugh. You're a doctor. Is there such a thing as an allergy to milk, the healthiest, most noble of foods? Do you not, as a mother, fear that without milk she might not develop fully?" (Ikstena 57). This scene echoes the previously analyzed paradox by further challenging the reader's expectations about the protagonist's roles. Firstly, the teacher questions her knowledge as a doctor by suggesting there is no such thing as a milk allergy. Secondly, the teacher expects the mother to be interested in providing her child with the "best" nourishment possible. Through this interaction, the teacher challenges the protagonist's authority both as a medical professional and as a mother. Despite the teacher's skepticism, the mother remains confident: "I didn't want to live, and I didn't want her to have milk from a mother who didn't want to live" (Ikstena 57). With such bluntness and certainty, the mother's decision continues to defy societal expectations enforced on her.

2.2 Biblical Intertextuality in *Soviet Milk*

The mother's negative assessment of her own life leads to a distorted sense of self, presenting yet another paradox. While she clings to a belief of being demon-possessed, the narrative also portrays her as a figure of near-holiness, occasionally even likened to the Virgin Mary. The mother believes in the contamination of her breast milk by the "bes," a harmful spirit from Slavic mythology often associated with shapeshifting and embodying evil (Ivanits 10). Similarly, the Latvian folkloric "lietuvēns" embodies evil forces and possesses shapeshifting abilities. In her exile, the mother feels perpetually tormented by these demons, unable to escape their influence. However, the narrative suggests a potential source of redemption. External positive influences, particularly her daughter,

seem to have the power to “chase away [her] *bes*” (Ikstena 129). During episodes of extreme mental distress, the mother becomes fixated on the concept of hell and the evil worm. While not explicitly stated, the imagery of the worm appears to hold a biblical reference. In Mark 9:48, Jesus employs a striking image of hell, describing it as a place where “their worm does not die, and the fire is not quenched” (New International Version). In the Bible this imagery is metaphorical, symbolizing the unending suffering in hell as a consequence of sin (Linscomb 18-19). However, in the mother’s internal monologue, the worms take on a more ominous and inevitable character, foreshadowing her own demise. It is important to note that the narrative subtly suggests a connection between the protagonist’s inner darkness and her inability to fulfill her roles under a repressive regime. The repeated references to being “locked in a cage” emphasize the sense of meaninglessness that seems ingrained in her very existence, a consequence of being born into such a restrictive environment.

Contrary to the mother’s self-perception, those around her often ascribe near-saintly qualities to her. Upon learning about the pregnancy, Serafima embraces the protagonist’s legs, uttering “*svjataja, svjataja, svjataja*” (Russian for “saint, saint, saint”) (Ikstena 33, Latvian edition). Serafima’s strong faith in the mother’s inherent goodness, bordering on naivety, stands in stark contrast to the protagonist’s self-loathing. This dissonance leaves the mother “stunned” (37). A similar dynamic unfolds with a devout patient who expresses her gratitude by gifting the protagonist an icon of the Virgin Mary inscribed with the words “Just like you” (103). This Orthodox woman is awestruck by the mother’s seemingly supernatural observational skills and inquires about her “miraculous ability.” (Ikstena 103). The protagonist, however, downplays her expertise, attributing it to mere “medical experience” (103). The patient dismisses this explanation, insisting, “No, no... I see that you can see more clearly” (103). These interactions reveal a recurring pattern: others perceive the mother’s skills and presence as divine intervention or a form of miraculous insight. But the protagonist remains incapable of internalizing this and struggles to acknowledge her own worth.

2.2 The Mother vs. the Maternal Ideal

Perhaps the most central paradox in *Soviet Milk* and the core of this analysis is this: the mother shuns her own child and mother, denying her role in their lives yet her internal monologue fixates on motherhood, more specifically, different maternal figures, symbols and ideals that continually resurface in her psyche. They become omnipresent forces shaping her internal world. This is evident in the symbol of breast milk, which traditionally represents maternal love and nourishment. Similarly, Serafima, a woman that the mother encounters only once, continues to haunt her thoughts and dreams. Finally, the small picture of the Virgin Mary gifted by her patient transforms into a dominant presence within her mind.

The protagonist's relationship with motherhood presents a perplexing puzzle. While she actively avoids the realities of her own motherhood by abandoning her newborn, she displays a fixation on other representations of motherhood. These maternal figures and symbols, rather than being feared, become objects of her obsession. The only aspects of motherhood the protagonist actively rejects are those tied to her domestic environment. She becomes distant from her own mother at a young age, likely a consequence of being pressured by her to excel at school and conform to communist youth organizations. Similarly, she avoids engaging with her daughter, fearful of tainting her life with her own negativity. The emotional detachment is highlighted in the daughter's reflection: "My mother stood somewhere outside the family" (Ikstena 17). Upon returning from Leningrad unemployed, the emotional distance intensifies, she is described as "withdrawn", her and her family's lives existing "in two parallel worlds" (Ikstena 29). Despite the distance, the mother remains preoccupied with the concept of motherhood within her internal world. Serafima becomes a persistent presence in the protagonist's thoughts and dreams. This figure transforms from a "real woman" (Ikstena 67) into a "vague image," her dream persona taking on a goddess-like quality. Described as "beautiful, splendid butterfly" (Ikstena 67) bathed in "white light" (67), the mother embraces Serafima, experiencing a "sensation of happiness" (Ikstena 67) akin to death and entering paradise.

The figure of Serafima in the dream also bears a vivid description of her physical form. Words like "naked and beautiful" (66), "supple and round breasts" (66), and "legs slim" (66) paint a picture

of an idealized female body. This idealized image seems to be an unspoken fantasy and fascination of Serafima as the ideal mother. In her internal monologue, the protagonist silently wishes: “Your breasts will be rich, and the milk will flow. Your child will cling onto your nipple, and your milk will feed him happiness” (Ikstena 42, Latvian ed.). This striking imagery sharply differs from the mother’s perception of her own physique.

The Virgin Mary, specifically her title “Giver of Life,” becomes another powerful maternal ideal within the protagonist’s psyche. The mother becomes fixated on the Virgin Mary’s symbolic meaning. In her internal world, the Giver of Life transcends mere religious figure, transforming into an all-encompassing dictator of life and death. This symbolic entity is perceived as omnipresent, overlooking both the beginning and the end of life with absolute authority. The Virgin Mary herself, depicted “with a halo of light around her head and a child in her arms” (Ikstena 89), embodies the ideal mother for the protagonist. She represents the ultimate force of good, capable of conquering evil: “The Giver of Life had given and that was a lot more than hell and evil worm could take” (Ikstena 107, Latvian ed.) Similarly, the protagonist reflects: “Giver of Life. A powerful title, against which words “hell” and “evil worm” sounded trivial and insignificant” (Ikstena 87).

The title “Giver of Life” becomes a motif in the narrative. This moniker transcends its original religious context and evolved into a personal mantra for the mother, serving as a coping mechanism and offering a glimmer of hope amidst the challenges she faces: “The Giver of Life takes what she had given” (Ikstena, Latvian ed.). Adding a layer of complexity, the characteristics the protagonist associates with the Virgin Mary bear a striking resemblance to Māra, a fertility goddess in Latvian mythology. Sources depict Māra as a powerful figure who controls individual destinies, overlooks childbirth, promotes fertility, and possesses healing abilities (Muktupāvela 86). While Māra is also commonly referred to as the “Giver of Life”, other attributes also closely align with the protagonist’s internalized concept of the Virgin Mary.

Some scholars argue that the influence of Christianity has blurred the lines between these two figures due to their identifiable etymological and functional similarities (Barovskis 30-31). This

potential overlap within Latvian cultural memory might justify why the narrative seems to employ these two maternal icons interchangeably. In *Soviet Milk*, The Virgin Mary and Māra merge into a singular, all-encompassing entity that offers solace and perhaps, a sense of control over the uncertainties of life.

A common thread among all instances of these maternal ideals in the narrative is their juxtaposition with how the mother character is portrayed. The attributes of maternal ideals, whether physical (such as “supple breasts” and “abundant breast milk”) or transcendental (association with light, symbolizing fertility and maternal love, and being all-encompassing), are contrasted with the characteristics of the mother: her milk is described as “repulsive” (8), “burnt out” (8, Latvian ed.), her presence is overshadowed by the *bes* and her thoughts clouded by darkness, the evil worm, and hell. The portrayal of maternal ideals, with their associated functions and attributes, demonstrates how the female body is depicted through a patriarchal lens, as outlined in Rich’s theory, where women’s bodies are viewed as either pure or corrupt. If maternal ideals symbolize purity, then the mother character embodies the opposite category. Joining her in this opposing category is Jesse’s mother, who the protagonist likens herself to - Jesse’s mother gave her child up for adoption, symbolically rejecting the gift of motherhood with a note stating, “I don’t want this gift” (122).

This binary paradigm, as articulated by Rich, becomes deeply internalized in women, leading to speculation that it is similarly internalized by the mother character. Consequently, she may find herself unable to envision herself beyond this predetermined category, which deems her “unfit” as a mother. Essentially, this label suggests that she possesses a deficiency that prevents her from properly caring for her child. It could also be argued that this binary framework contributes to the concepts of the “bad mother” and the “good mother” as theorized by Marsh drawing from Melanie Klein’s theory. These perceptions are intertwined with the daughter’s view of the mother and their respective explorations of identity, which will be further discussed in the following section.

2.3 Where Mother Ends and Daughter Begins

An analysis of motherhood themes in *Soviet Milk* would be incomplete without examining the fluctuating mother-daughter relationship depicted throughout the narrative. Echoing conventions found in post-Soviet female literature, the bond between mother and daughter here delves into not only their relationship dynamics but also the individualities of each, explored separately. Using Rich's concept of matrophobia and by extension, Rosalind Marsh's applications of psychoanalytic terms such as "bad mother" and "bad breast", this section will analyze two particularly striking scenes from the beginning and the end of the novel. Employing the bookend narrative technique, the story opens with the daughter's description of her dream:

Now and then I have a dream from which I awake feeling sick. I'm clinging onto my mother's breast and trying to suck on it. The breast is large, full of milk, but I can't get any out. I don't see my mother, she doesn't help me, and I am left to struggle with her breast on my own. Then suddenly I succeed and a bitter, repulsive liquid spurts into my mouth. I gag and wake with a start (Ikstena 8)

As the book draws to a close, the daughter experiences a dream similar to the one at the beginning, yet marked by one significant difference:

Sleep brought a dream I had had before. I'm clinging to my mother's breast and trying to suck on it. The breast is large, full of milk, but I can't get any out. I don't see my mother, she doesn't help me, and I'm left to struggle with her breast on my own. Suddenly I succeed and a liquid flows into my mouth. But this time it's not bitter - it's as sweet as camomile tea with honey. I suck and drink to my heart's content from my mother's soft, warm breast (Ikstena 172-173)

Without delving deeply into dream symbolism, one can observe here a concept proposed by Rosalind Marsh in her analysis of narratives: the dichotomy of the “good breast” and the “bad breast,” as extreme opposites that are registered in an infant mind, conceptualized by Melanie Klein. In the first dream, the “bad breast” is depicted—it seemingly possesses the right appearance to provide nourishment, yet it fails to satisfy. Instead, it creates a struggle within the daughter, who must battle alone to extract the milk. However, what stands out even more in this scene is not just the depiction of the breast itself, but rather the conspicuous absence of the mother. It’s not merely that she is attempting but incapable of providing milk; rather, she is completely absent, depriving the daughter not only of her milk but also of her love and care. Consequently, instead of nourishing milk, a bitter substance comes out—so repulsive that the daughter is compelled to reject it. This scene establishes a fundamental dynamic of the mother-daughter relationship. The narrative implies that the mother’s mental state and emotional distance forces the daughter to be self-sufficient.

The physical separation at birth, combined with the mother’s episodes of distress, seems to cultivate fear in the daughter. The fear is directly addressed in this quote: “I wasn’t afraid of Uncle Sam, or of nuclear war; I was afraid of my mother” (Ikstena 14). Despite the distance and the daughter’s separate path in life, the narrative suggests an underlying love that seems unconditional. This is evidenced by the daughter’s inability to abandon her mother, as she constantly worries and cares for her. They acknowledge this bond as being akin to “a sort of transparent but very strong cord” (Ikstena 183). This imagery resonates with the daughter from her childhood, as one of her few positive memories of her mother involves a drawing of a mother and child happily dancing, “joined only by the umbilical cord” (Ikstena 15). The daughter clings to this picture, interpreting it as a symbol of their unbreakable connection. However, as an adult, he acknowledges a more complex reality: “for us the cord is cut - yet it seems you still hold me with it” (Ikstena 183). This quote suggests a sense of disconnect despite the lingering bond. This tension could be interpreted as the “radical surgery” Adrienne Rich theorized, representing the daughter’s attempt to create an independent identity separate from her mother’s influence. Right after this realization, the daughter experiences a new

dream, a subversion of the previous one. In this iteration, the nurturing breast finally yields, providing sustenance to her infant self. However, a critical detail emerges: the nourishment is not breast milk, but rather chamomile tea. This detail is significant because it represents the intervention of the daughter's grandmother during a period of abandonment. The grandmother, with no access to formula, offered chamomile tea as a substitute. This dream sequence can be interpreted on two levels. Firstly, it might symbolize the daughter's growing recognition of her own self-sufficiency and her ability to thrive even in the absence of her mother's care. Secondly, the chamomile tea in the dream suggests that the daughter did receive a form of maternal love and care, albeit indirectly, through the actions of her grandmother.

The mother-daughter relationship in *Soviet Milk* is characterized by a complex interplay of contradicting emotions. Fear and love, rejection and acceptance, coexist within this dynamic. This ambiguity reflects on the broader themes identified in my research, which suggests that post-Soviet narratives, particularly those written by women, frequently explore similar complexities of human relationships.

Conclusion

This thesis has explored the deeper layers of Nora Ikstena's *Soviet Milk*, situating it within its literary tradition and examining its nuanced exploration of maternal identity formation amidst the backdrop of Soviet repression, intending to answer the research question: How do the paradoxes in Nora Ikstena's *Soviet Milk* contribute to the exploration of maternal identity within the socio-cultural context of Latvia?

Soviet Milk is a literary work marked by juxtapositions and paradoxes, as evidenced through contrasting images of milk in the daughter's dreams, the absent mother's obsessions over maternal ideals, her identity challenges, and her lack of autonomy as a doctor. This ambiguity allows for the coexistence of seemingly contradictory emotions, where love intertwines with hate, closeness with distance, and the sacred with the sinful. Kalnačs contends that these paradoxes are rooted in the author's attempt to grapple with individual struggles against reality, resonating with Stefanescu's concept of the "post-communist void" and Skulte's idea of a "moral vacuum" in post-Soviet society.

The exploration of contradictions resonates on two key levels. Firstly, it reflects a broader trend in post-Soviet literature, where experimentation with form, narrative voice and meaning often conveys conflicting messages. Secondly, this ambiguity aligns with Adrienne Rich's critique of patriarchal societies, where women often internalize conflicting expectations. Although Rich's theories may require some nuance, their application to *Soviet Milk* reveals a lasting impact of patriarchal values on women's sense of self. This internalized conflict manifests as a distorted and fragmented self-perception.

If the narrative's paradoxes aim to address an existential void, it aligns with the broader trajectory of post-Soviet literature, which often seeks to cultivate new cultural memory and a fresh understanding of the past in relation to present-day realities. By exploring maternal identity and family dynamics against the backdrop of the repressive Soviet regime, *Soviet Milk* illuminates the challenges of fulfilling societal, familial, and professional roles under such political constraints.

Ikstena's narrative, by telling a partly fictionalized family story from today's perspective, demonstrates how the ambiguous sense of self persists in contemporary post-Soviet society.

Furthermore, the significance and international recognition of the work can be attributed to its mode of messaging and the framework it operates within. According to Kaprāns' theorization, as a post-Soviet semi-autobiographical piece, the work emphasizes the detrimental legacies inherited from the Soviet regime, manifesting genealogically in *Soviet Milk*. This aligns with the mother's belief that such traits can be passed to her daughter through her milk, echoing the theme of negative continuation and the concept of the void.

The simultaneous existence of multiple maternal ideals in the mother's mind, such as the Virgin Mary, Serafima, the Giver of Life, and the ideal Soviet mother, contributes to this concept of the void. These maternal symbols, upheld as perfect examples, fail to provide a cohesive framework for the mother's search for identity, instead nullifying each other. This phenomenon, demonstrated through the mother's inner monologue, reduces these ideals to mere delusions, distancing her further from her true self and maternal responsibilities.

Further study could explore how this link from past to present might be behind the novel's unexpected international success, highlighting its relevance under the current political climate. Such an analysis would deepen our understanding of how *Soviet Milk* addresses lasting impacts of the Soviet regime, making it an important narrative for contemporary readers. Ultimately, *Soviet Milk* stands as a testament to the power of literature to speak on the human condition and provoke thought long after its initial publication.

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Appendix

Interview with the author Nora Ikstena

Interviewer: It's hard to find exact information on how many languages your novel *Soviet Milk* has been translated into. But isn't it the most translated Latvian work?

Ikstena: I'm not sure of the exact number, but it seems to be around 38 languages. And yes, it is the most translated work in Latvian literature.

Interviewer: You've been open about the personal nature of this story, which also weaves in Latvia's history, a seemingly small entity in the global context. In your opinion, what universal themes or common threads make *Soviet Milk* relatable and beloved worldwide?

Ikstena: I pondered this even while in London. People there, of course, asked about "Soviet Milk," the English title. I read a story from the anthology "Baltic Belle," which I wrote at 26. I believe there's a saying that a writer spends a lifetime writing one book. While that's not exactly my case since I've written many books, *Soviet Milk* stands out because it's so personal. It's an honest portrayal of my mother and the era. When you write something deeply personal and autobiographical without hiding it, people recognize its authenticity. This realness has touched many, showing that my personal story resonates across generations and countries. Eastern European stories often share these themes. Although *Soviet Milk* is historical, its added value lies in the human relationships, particularly the mother-daughter bond and unconditional love, which readers immediately identify with. It's not just the power of literature but the power of real life that resonates, making this book so widely read. Interestingly, the snowball effect with this book happened without a literary agent. It just gained momentum on its own, and I followed along (laughs).

Interviewer: The story is written quite directly and openly. Despite using metaphorical language, have you ever been surprised by a reader's interpretation?

Ikstena: Yes, I have. It's surprising when people who lived through that time say, after reading the book, "It wasn't that bad." Time makes them see it differently, like a bursting soap bubble. That's

on a historical level. What surprises and inspires me is how readers from different countries, including Latvia, grasp the literary allusions. Winston is there not just for the sake of it; it's a real story from a banned book in our library (George Orwell's *1984*). Similarly, the character of Jese resonates, especially with Spanish readers, perhaps due to their Catholic background. This character embodies a message that people might not immediately understand, reflecting the power of inner love in various forms. The interpretations are truly diverse.

Interviewer: *Soviet Milk* is indeed very multilayered, sufficient for academic analysis. I'm not the only one studying it from an academic perspective.

Ikstena: I can't keep track of all the paths it has taken, the school projects, and academic studies. It shows that the book's layers allow for exploring the complex nature of human relationships, historical interpretation, and literary allusions.

Interviewer: My goal in my thesis is to explore the landscape of post-Soviet literature in Latvia to better understand the context of *Soviet Milk*. Post-Soviet, Latvian literature has thrived in rethinking the past with a personal perspective. What do you think of this literary direction?

Ikstena: When I entered the literary scene in the 90s as a new author, we wanted to tell something other than true, real stories. We aimed for more metaphorical narratives. To write a book like *Soviet Milk*, one needs to traverse a certain path in literary school. We initially embraced literature written in exile. Then came memoirs and stories like Melānija Vanaga's tales of Siberia. These memory stories, combined with the works from the series "20th Century," allowed authors to reflect on history in a powerful literary form. Initially, we, the new authors, were often criticized for not writing about real events. But over time, with distance, we can see what really happened and include emotional depth in our stories.

Interviewer: All the characters in *Soviet Milk* are nameless. What was the purpose of not naming the characters?

Ikstena: The narrator's voice came to me naturally. I knew I would tell the story as if seeing what happens to the main character. This voice intertwined three generations into one. Some readers

find it initially challenging to follow, but once they immerse themselves, they understand why it is so.

Interviewer: You mentioned the narrative form of *Soviet Milk*. The book is written without chapters, divided by viewpoints, and without quotation marks for direct speech. How did you decide on this structure?

Ikstena: The story flowed naturally, much like how someone recounts their memories. Punctuation and quotation marks are imposed frameworks. To achieve a natural effect, I let the story flow this way. It wasn't a particularly joyous process, but it created a psychotherapeutic effect for many Latvian readers.

Interviewer: In the book, milk as a motif recurs, appearing in the title, dialogue, dreams, and imagination, tying closely to motherhood. Why does milk hold such significance in telling the story of motherhood and mother-daughter relationships?

Ikstena: Mother's milk is the first life guarantee, the first food and liquid a child receives. It's a vital life-giving fluid. In this case, there's ambivalence, as the mother fears passing on a tainted legacy. The metaphor of poisoned milk extends to a poisoned homeland. The milk metaphor naturally grew to represent survival and the mother-daughter bond.

Interviewer: The English title "Soviet Milk" emerged during the translation process for the English publisher. Do you think the focus of the story shifts from a personal to a political one under this title?

Ikstena: Initially, it was a joke calling it "Soviet Milk," but the English publisher liked it. The title hasn't hindered the deeper metaphor of the book. It might even have helped it succeed in the English-speaking world. With time, the political nuance has become more relevant, especially with recent events in Ukraine. This book remains significant, reflecting ongoing realities.

Interviewer: The English version has entire paragraphs omitted. What was the reasoning behind these omissions?

Ikstena: The initial translation was done by Canadian Latvian Margita Gailītis, who captured the book's essence. The English editor worked on this text, and I trusted her judgment. I might not have compared every detail scrupulously, but I believe the story's essence remains intact despite the changes.

Interviewer: My master's thesis focuses on several paradoxes in *Soviet Milk*. For instance, the mother believes her milk is tainted despite her medical knowledge suggesting otherwise. Also, despite the Soviet Union's emphasis on scientific advancement, the mother's role as a gynecologist lacks autonomy. Lastly, she perceives herself as demon-possessed but is often likened to holy symbols. These paradoxes seem tied to her identity search and societal contradictions. What are your thoughts on my findings?

Ikstena: It's wonderful to highlight these paradoxes. Life is often based on paradoxes. We know what we should do, yet we do the opposite. The mother in the book tries to give life to others despite her struggles. This reflects our constant striving for a better reality, hindered by our own actions. Understanding these contradictions is crucial, as they mirror our lives.

Interviewer: Throughout the novel, the mother is haunted by female ideals like the Virgin Mary and Serafima, symbolizing an idealized mother's body. This vision seems similar to the functions of Māra from Latvian mythology. Does this imply a perspective where a woman's body is seen only through its reproductive role?

Ikstena: That's a brilliant interpretation. Women are often valued primarily for their reproductive roles. However, women are much more than that. They possess spirit and intellect beyond their physical bodies. Recognizing this is vital.

Interviewer: In your opinion, how do current Latvian views on women's bodies reflect these ideas?

Ikstena: Latvia is quite conservative, holding traditional views on gender roles. However, these roles are changing. Women are increasingly recognized for their strength and capabilities beyond motherhood. This shift reflects a broader change in society.

Interviewer: In the English-speaking world, there's a genre called autofiction, where writers base stories on personal experiences while allowing creative liberties. Would *Soviet Milk* fit into this genre?

Ikstena: Autofiction! That's brilliant. Yes, *Soviet Milk* fits perfectly into this genre. It's a wonderful blend of personal experience and artistic freedom.

Interviewer: Yes, this genre seems to encourage exploring the flow of thoughts and emotions.

Ikstena: That's fantastic! Autofiction captures the essence of a writer's life and imagination. It's the best way to write, blending reality and creativity. This term in English really grasps the fluid nature of our experiences and literature's pulse so naturally.

Reflection

My goal with this interview was to gain the author's insights on my findings and to inquire about the possible reasons why the book has significantly raised Latvia's profile. I had four main topics I wanted to discuss with Ikstena and weave into our conversation: 1) her perspective on the place of *Soviet Milk* in both local and global literary scenes, 2) the intentions behind the novel's form and language, 3) the English edition of the novel, and 4) how the themes of the book, as I have interpreted and analyzed them in my thesis, resonate with broader sentiments in Latvia.

In the interview, Ikstena openly shared her writing experience and the whirlwind of attention following the book's success. Discussing the themes of motherhood and womanhood in the novel was particularly valuable, as it provided deeper insight into the author's thought process when she portrayed these themes in the novel. Additionally, I was able to confirm my main thesis statements that the paradoxes in the novel reflect the realities of Soviet times and continue to resonate with the complexities of contemporary life under today's political climate.