

## The Displaced Female Voice: Poetry of Natalya Gorbanevskaya

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### Abstract

Natalya Gorbanevskaya's poetry uses unanchored imagery, direct address, and other specific means of creating a mood of rootlessness that is ambiguous and echoes her own experience as a Russian exile. Her work focuses on themes of displacement and trauma that are common to those who are forcibly made to leave their homes. This article is one of the first close readings of selected poems by Gorbanevskaya that is to merit attention to her displacement, marginalized feminine identity and resistance to the hegemony of political repression. The loss of her home in a literal and a geographical sense, and her status as an expatriate in Paris, can be understood as a complete displacement for Gorbanevskaya, forging her identity as a political refugee poet. Her work further reveals the power of poetry in reclaiming identity, asserting memory, and resisting the patriarchal system.

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### Introduction

Words will not become heavens,  
as wood is not to be made of grass.<sup>1</sup>

Natalya Gorbanevskaya was displaced from her home when she was sent to a Soviet psychiatric hospital for dissident activities in 1969 (Gorbanevskaya xiii). During this period, artists who were critical of the state frequently faced persecution by authorities. For example, following the rise of Stalinism, fellow Russian poet Anna Ahmatova was censored and her first husband executed; another renowned female Russian poet, Marina Tsvetaeva, committed suicide following the execution of her husband and the starvation of her daughter in a state orphanage. Gorbanevskaya was born in 1936, and she passed away in 2013. She was a translator, a dissident and a civil-rights activist who became known in the West after a 1968 Moscow protest against the state's crushing of the Prague Spring. Kolla summarises:

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<sup>1</sup> Natalya Gorbanevskaya, *Selected Poems*. Trans. Daniel Weissbort (Manchester: Carcanet, 2011) 26. Subsequent references to this work will be included in parentheses in the text.

Poet, editor, and translator, young Gorbanevskaya first commanded the attention of the government with the publication of her highly controversial poems in Soviet periodicals. However, it was not until Gorbanevskaya's participation in a demonstration condemning the USSR's 1968 invasion of Czechoslovakia and the subsequent publication of a book on the subject that Soviet authorities promptly arrested her.<sup>2</sup>

As were some other artists in this social context, she was separated from her own domestic environment and even her freedom. Following her release, she was 'expelled from the Soviet Union, taking up residence in Paris' (Gorbanevskaya xiii). From Paris, Gorbanevskaya contributed to the paper *Russkaya mysl'* (*Russian Thought*), and thus remained engaged with her Russian identity; however, she was not able or allowed to take up residence in Russia again and remained displaced from her homeland. Therefore, the poet can be seen to have experienced two distinct, forced displacements: one from her own home when she was sent to the psychiatric hospital, and another when she was ejected from her home country, Russia. The loss of her geographical home, and her status as an expatriate, can be understood as a quite complete displacement of Gorbanevskaya by the patriarchal system.

Gorbanevskaya's poems demonstrate a focus on displacement, trauma, and Russian identity from a particularly female perspective; this mirrors her biographical experience. Perhaps she is the most known and visible female poet in the Soviet civil-rights movement, since Gorbanevskaya's writings express her belief in human rights, and in human freedom. As a female poet and mother, Gorbanevskaya experienced significant trauma at the hands of the Soviet state, and this trauma is connected to displacement as she was taken away from her home and committed to a psychiatric hospital as a form of prison sentence. After being expelled from the Soviet Union and making Paris her home, Gorbanevskaya was examined by French psychiatrists who declared her mentally healthy; they indicated that her confinement in the psychiatric hospital had been for political rather than medical reasons.<sup>3</sup> The poet remained officially stateless for three decades after moving to Paris; eventually, in 2005, she was granted Polish citizenship. Her displacement from Russia was clearly not only geographical, but also cultural and in some ways linguistic – Gorbanevskaya had worked as a Polish translator, then lived in France among French-speaking culture while writing poetry in Russian. This article seeks to reveal how displacement forms and informs Gorbanevskaya's poetic voice and style.

### **Ambivalence, Oppression, and Poetic Elements**

Overall, Gorbanevskaya's poetic style and voice are often quite spare. Her poems tend to be relatively short, and the lines within each stanza are likewise often short. It is not uncommon for a line of poetry in Gorbanevskaya's work to comprise between two and five words; she wrote many eight-line poems – although in translation some of the 'eight-liners' contain more than eight lines of text. Her poetry, overall, is the opposite of florid, and there are relatively few adjectives but rather sparse noun-heavy descriptions. When Gorbanevskaya's narrator is in dialogue with another character, or with the world, or with God, this is often in a discursive or oppositional mode, and in terms of poetic voice, this choice mirrors Gorbanevskaya's activist, dissident background. Because of her exile from Russia and the fact she lived for thirty years as a stateless person,

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<sup>2</sup> Nathan Kolla, 'Soviet Psychiatry in the Cold War Era: Uses and Abuses'. *History of Medicine Days* (2001) 257.

<sup>3</sup> Sidney Bloch and Peter Reddaway, *Soviet Psychiatric Abuse: The Shadow Over World Psychiatry* (Boulder: Colorado, 1985) 201.

Gorbanevskaya's can be understood to be a displaced poetic and political voice engaged in argumentative dialogue with the state that expelled her and isolated her from her home, heritage, and family.

The institutional oppression Gorbanevskaya experienced can be seen as a kind of colonising force, and her identity as demonstrated in her poetry contains an oppositional response to the oppressive events and treatment she endured. Gorbanevskaya's identity as represented in language also contains elements of French culture and vocabulary, from her experience living in Paris as a stateless person for three decades. Her work as a Polish translator, and her ultimate conferral gaining of Polish citizenship, reflect ambiguity and ambivalence about her transnational identity in terms of the language that she uses. Of course, reading Gorbanevskaya's poetry in English translation also inherently contains another displacement in terms of language, as the best translations of poetry can only ever approximate the meaning of the original, while re-shaping elements of vocabulary and poetic form. In a poetic vocabulary and perspective such as Gorbanevskaya's, which contains elements of Russian, French, Polish and other cultural backgrounds, there is already a highly ambiguous and ambivalent linguistic 'space' open before English translation. Ultimately, Gorbanevskaya's physical and cultural displacement from her homeland sharpens the hybridity and ambiguities inherent in her work.

Perhaps for this reason, and undoubtedly additionally for others, Gorbanevskaya's poetry has an overall sense of being unmoored or unanchored in terms of its setting, imagery and subject matter. The narrator is often in dialogue with another character, whose identity is again unclear to the reader, evoking ambiguity. To take an example, in her series of poems *Another 13 Eight-Liners*, setting is initially unclear:

A metro station,  
named after a saint –  
cannot be made out  
which one.  
The morning, like mineral water,  
sparkling all the way down.  
Never mind!  
If only there were some honour' (Gorbanevskaya 62).

The opening image of the 'metro station' is quite universal – the station could be in Paris or Moscow or anywhere in between. The naming of the station after a saint – and the impossibility of ascertaining which saint – places the reader in further ambiguity, which is grounded in a sense of history in relation to places being named after saints and the pre-Soviet religious traditions of Russia or other countries. Thus, this station is also a modern place steeped in the past, a sort of modernity that Boym characterizes as 'contradictory, critical, ambivalent, and reflective on the nature of time; it combines fascination with the present with longing for another time'.<sup>4</sup> The stark modernity of the station, devoid of specific location, is juxtaposed against cues from a lost cultural history.

Additionally, the imagery of morning like mineral water is powerful, and the phrase 'sparkling all the way down' gives the reader an almost visceral physical memory of the sensation of drinking sparkling water. Gorbanevskaya references a near-universal physical experience and sensation as a means to draw the reader into the universality of the scene, although the physical and

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<sup>4</sup> Svetlana Boym, *The Future of Nostalgia* (New York: Perseus Books, 2001) 22.

geographical or historical grounding of the poem's setting never becomes clear. In this way, the reader relates and has a sensory connection to the experience, but the reader is also disconnected from a particular time or place, which creates a tension or possible sense of unease in relation to the unfixed familiarity, an 'anxiety about the vanishing past'.<sup>5</sup>

Additionally, Gorbanevskaya further draws the reader into the poetic experience by her habit of 'breaking the fourth wall' – the metaphorical wall between the reader and the poetic scene. In film and other art forms, this 'wall' is taken to mean that it is not acknowledged by the reader or the viewer who is being told a story – when this wall is up, the narrative is presented as its own experience, one that is to be regarded by the viewer or reader, but which is not directly participatory. Gorbanevskaya breaks this wall and acknowledges the created nature of the poem by referring to her own poetic technique, process and peers throughout her work. This instils in the reader an awareness of the ambivalent and ambiguous nature of the poet-narrator-reader relationships; the sense of identity and belonging is rendered unclear. For instance, Gorbanevskaya's poetic narrator enters into dialogue with her own poetic art later in *Another 13 Eight-Liners*:

Don't limp,  
my trochees,  
don't go lame,  
or roll up,  
like Boreas, beginning to limp,  
beyond April,  
and May,  
lame,  
limping,  
like March,  
like death (Gorbanevskaya 62).

In addition to breaking the 'fourth wall', Gorbanevskaya plays with temporal ambiguity, progressing from April and May back to March and associating this previous month with 'death'. Perhaps of greater note, the close proximity of 'March' and 'death' also evokes the association of 'death march', which connects to governmental force; through force and ambiguity being placed in close association, Gorbanevskaya's own experience of displacement and dislocated identity is referenced.

Ambivalence in setting and ambivalence in terms of identity are encapsulated in another poem from the same series. Gorbanevskaya questions identity: 'Is it I? – It is, you, and I myself as well / withdrawing from non-being' (Gorbanevskaya 63). It is unclear who is the 'I' speaker, or the 'you' subject in this poem, and the wording captures the ambivalence of identity Gorbanevskaya undoubtedly experienced as a displaced person and as a woman. The phrase 'withdrawing from non-being' provides an interesting take on identity and existence, as withdrawing *into* being is an unusual use of a directional metaphor as it relates to identity.

## Memory, Displacement, and Resistance in Gorbanevskaya's Work

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<sup>5</sup> Boym 19.

Gorbanevskaya's poetry encompasses elements of what can be referred to as cogitocide or historicide -- an urge to forget history, to rewrite it once more, and in doing so, she is able to challenge it and assume some degree of control. Boym writes that communism is inherently threatened by nostalgia, as communism is oriented toward modernity: it is, she writes, 'future-oriented, utopian and teleological'.<sup>6</sup> Thus, Gorbanevskaya's insistence on sentimental revisiting of her memory can be understood as an act of resistance. She draws on her experiences of displacement in writing about the past, and so her poetry encompasses a form of memoir that is related to ambivalent identity as a displaced person. Memory itself does not preserve history, but rather transforms it – as memories are recalled time and again, they take on particular aspects that may not be accurate to objective reality, and they assume a new form. Gorbanevskaya's choices regarding poetic subject, voice, imagery and narrative do much to transform the memories that she commits to paper. Such reimagining, re-framing and re-remembering of personal and more general history allows her to retain a position of resistance, of dissent, in relation to the official narratives formed by the Soviet regime and others seeking to control the historical narrative. To some extent, she assumes control over her own narrative, which may be read as an act of resistance.

The received historical narrative is commonly presented from a male point of view and by male historians, so Gorbanevskaya's telling of history in ambivalent terms, and from a female perspective, adds a different identity and perspective to the narrative as it has traditionally been told and retold by those with power.<sup>7</sup> Poetry becomes a means of resistance for Gorbanevskaya and others, and linguicide allows for a breakthrough via a breaking-down of received narratives and identities. Apparently, Gorbanevskaya's displacement influences her poetic language and her poetic voice – through displacement, the act of withdrawal into a self-determined identity can be interpreted as a way of reasserting personal power in the face of oppression and trauma suffered at the hands of a powerful and brutal state.

Poetic themes relating to displacement can readily be detected in Gorbanevskaya's work including the recurring themes of isolation, the battle for human civil rights, and tension between the individual and the larger group. Although Gorbanevskaya stayed current with Russian thought through the diaspora and through the written word, the images of Russia she evokes in her poetry are necessarily historical and drawn from her own memory or the collective memory of the time in which she lived there. At the same time, Boym points out that in the context of nostalgia, a sense of 'home' is not dependent on a specific place, but more in a feeling of comfort and familiarity: 'The object of longing, then, is not really a place called home but this sense of intimacy with the world; it is not the past in general, but that imaginary moment when we had time and didn't know the temptation of nostalgia'.<sup>8</sup> In this way, an interesting sense of temporal displacement is evident in her poetry, as it is poetry of memory and also of loss, or displacement, through, time.

Imagery illustrates this temporal displacement. For example, Gorbanevskaya's imagery of snow can be seen as one way in which Russia is represented in her poems as lost and temporally displaced in relation to the author. In her *Unfinished Poems*, Gorbanevskaya writes of 'a January Monday, / and the pealing of the bells, / floating among the snow-hills'. Snow is a significant part of the Russian literary psyche and history, as the amount and coverage of snow received in parts of Russia each year is far greater than that of European countries such as France. Gorbanevskaya's repeated references to snow in this poem – and in others of her work – can be seen as longing for

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<sup>6</sup> Boym 60.

<sup>7</sup> Cathy Caruth, *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative and History* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1996).

<sup>8</sup> Boym 253.

the uniquely Russian landscape and its particular climate, and also as a poetic reference to nostalgia itself: in French, the phrase ‘ou sont les neiges’ is used to refer to nostalgia and a longing for times past.<sup>9</sup> In Gorbanevskaya’s case, the poetic imagery of snow relates to displacement in geographical terms, in the linguistic connotation, and also more universally because snow is impermanent and melts. Imagery of snow can be seen as a thematic concern with impermanence and transience, which links to Gorbanevskaya’s identity as a stateless exile and a displaced person. She laments her identity and citizenship that are rooted in the Russian earth by birth right; she laments her status as a refugee and émigré in foreign lands:

My mother was born in Russia  
and died there,  
four days after the demise  
of the USSR.

But I was born in the Soviet Union  
and shall probably die in France,  
labelled ‘Refugee, stateless,  
a former Soviet citizen’ (Gorbanevskaya 74).

Gorbanevskaya makes use of certain other emblems of Russian identity, and the Russian landscape and culture, in her poetic imagery. For instance, from her collection *Flying Over the Snowy Frontier*, Gorbanevskaya poetically sketches the image of ‘wood... brought in by sleighs, as in the olden times / firewood to the yard. / Obviously from the forest. And you’ll not utter / creation in the yard, in the grass’ (Gorbanevskaya 26). The forest is central in mythology and imagery of Russianness over the centuries, and the poet makes reference to forest landscapes and creatures in her poetry. Billington refers to the forest and its associated forces as central to the Russian collective psyche, its fears and fascinations including bears, insects and the potential for – or experience of – forest fire.<sup>10</sup> Likewise, the image and sound of bells is very important to Russian artists, composers and writers alike, as an emblem of Russian identity and the Orthodox church that pre-dated the Soviet era. Gorbanevskaya’s references to bells in *Unfinished Poems*, for example, reinforces the importance of bells as an emblem of Russianness through repetition: ‘the pealing of the bells, / floating among the snow-hills... and the pealing of the bells / drowns in the snow... while the bells peal, melt and drown, / but touch us, brush us, / with their wings’ (Gorbanevskaya 9). The repetitiousness of her mentioning the bells provides a sense of repeated bell-ringing tones, and therefore a visual image with a strong sonic component. Additionally, the rhythm of the short, one-syllable words in some lines reinforces the association of the sound made by bells. The insistent referring to the bells and the evocation of bells – which are assumed by the reader to be church bells – is another way in which Gorbanevskaya can express dissent and resistance to the Soviet state and its official policy of atheism. Her poetic voice is often grief-stricken, and some of her poetry can be read as a delayed-release mourning for the time she spent incarcerated, and the loss of the country – Russia – that was her birth right and her home. Gorbanevskaya’s homesickness for pre-Soviet Russia is, as mentioned previously, shot through her poetry in iconic images and resonances relating to old Russian identity and mythology.

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<sup>9</sup> Amy Hollywood, ‘Review: Françoise Meltzer “Joan of Arc and the Politics of Nostalgia”’. *Journal of Religion* (2003) 94.

<sup>10</sup> James Billington, *Icon and Axe: An Interpretive History of Russian Culture* (New York: Vintage, 2010) 12.

Gorbanevskaya's displacement can correspondingly be understood in the context of the Russian diaspora as it relates to poetry, literature and broader artistic culture and aesthetics. The concept of a 'diaspora' originally refers to an ancient Greek word meaning 'to scatter about'; it stands for *dissemination* or the *lack at the centre*. The diaspora of a particular national or ethnic group consists of those who have been scattered worldwide from their original homeland. Unfortunately, there are several examples of a globally-scattered people who have often had to leave their homeland due to terror, trauma or state-sponsored violence.<sup>11</sup> Among any diaspora there is often a sense of desire to be reunited with other members of the national, ethnic, linguistic or cultural group. In Gorbanevskaya's case, her involvement with the periodical publication 'Russian Thought' in Paris can be seen as a longing to stay connected with the Russian diaspora in France and, by extension, the Russian people as a greater whole. Gorbanevskaya refers to specific elements of Russianness, as discussed above, and also references specific places in Russia. From the *Three Notebooks of Poems*, Gorbanevskaya connects Russian place names: 'My Moscow, a waxen board, / poems walk on the first snow, / my *ennui*, which I cannot hide, / but do not press to my pale brow' (Gorbanevskaya 22). Later in the same poem, the poet refers to 'prison-trains [leaving] / the Kazan Station for the East' (Gorbanevskaya 22), and 'the Neva and Onega run deep between their banks' (Gorbanevskaya 22). By referring specifically to these emblematic cities and rivers of Russia, Gorbanevskaya connects herself to the rest of the Russian diaspora, and – by extension – to Russia itself. In psychological terms, mentioning these common geographical locations that are known to and experienced by other members of the diaspora goes some way to alleviating the sense of isolation that she clearly feels as a result of her displacement from home and from nation.

Gorbanevskaya's poetry echoes the meaning of her life as part of the diaspora. Accordingly, in the sequence *Poems of the Last Century*, Gorbanevskaya sets the scene in France and then refers to Moscow in the poem's last two lines:

On the long, long rue Vaugirard  
 nothing of interest,  
 aside from its length,  
 but the gracious city  
 tosses on either side,  
 in the heat-haze  
 of the brick-flow.

You gave up for lost  
 your long, long, life,  
 but once in the long street,  
 outside your home,  
 you revive – not out of dogma,  
 but because you remember childhood places,  
 the short Neglinka,  
 the endless ring-road (Gorbanevskaya 47).

In terms of imagery and setting, here Gorbanevskaya repeats and highlights the 'long, long' French street and the person's 'long, long' life – which is starkly contrasted with the short Neglinka street in the centre of Moscow. The contrast of long and short can be taken with multiple meanings – it

<sup>11</sup> Jenny Edkins *Trauma and the Memory of Politics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003) 15.

refers to distance, obviously. However, the ‘long, long’ life refers to the passing of time and of memory. The short Moscow street has an immediacy in this context, as a childhood memory that is an instant rather than a long narrative. There is also the implication of diasporic longing for a lost location, one far away in space and in memory, and connection to Russia and its people. Gorbanevskaya’s sense of displacement that imbues the tone, voice and imagery of her poems has to do with time and landscape intertwined – landscape can stand as an emblem of time, and of time passed since the poet’s displacement. Conversely, she often references the passage of time through landscape, through Russia as a place and as a myth or ideology, and through the city of Moscow as it is known by locals. As Gorbanevskaya writes in ‘How Few Pinball Machines Now in Paris’, ‘Landscape, landscape – in truth, a landscape, / the more appealing, the more wretched, / rainy, like a birch tree on the edge of a grave’ (Gorbanevskaya 97). Here it can be seen how landscape and time are connected in Gorbanevskaya’s poetic world, and how both relate to displacement. The poetic quest is one for the truth to be revealed, despite displacement or exile or state oppression and silencing of those on the margins. The contrast of ‘the more appealing’ with ‘the more wretched’ holds in it the possibility that the more wretched could itself also be the more appealing to some. There is an honesty in the wretchedness of the landscape, and the image of a tree adjacent to grave points to the fact that some forms of life continue even after an individual person has passed away. The death of the individual human does not equate to the death of the broader landscape, which continues growing with plant and other life. Gorbanevskaya closes the poem with the question, ‘What would you give for it?’ (Gorbanevskaya 97), implying that human sacrifice is to some degree necessary in order to maintain, own or even remember a particular living landscape.

In solidarity, Gorbanevskaya finds the possibility of resistance and freedom: “‘Let’s fly, friend!’” comes the whisper. / Can you!’ (Gorbanevskaya 101). The poet uses poetic forms, voice and words to assert and re-shape her reality, and in this way, her version of events will shape the memory of others through being preserved in her writing. Poetry is therefore a means of individual freedom in constrained situations, and the displacement that is caused by Gorbanevskaya’s confinement and unjust treatment serves as a nexus of power in her poetic voice and imagination. In her writing, Gorbanevskaya frees herself from confinement and isolation, her words and her imagination enabling her to fly outside prison ‘slamming the door behind, / mounting the clouds’ (Gorbanevskaya 102).

However, it is also important to consider that Gorbanevskaya’s imprisonment can be understood as a way in which she is displaced and isolated not only from human society and human connection, but also from her own self and her own truth. Technically, Gorbanevskaya was being ‘treated’ for schizophrenia, but this was a politically-motivated diagnosis that French doctors later disproved. As Kolla has noted, the psychiatrist Malcolm Lader contends: ‘I could not have made this diagnosis but would have regarded Miss Gorbanevskaya as having repeated depressive episodes’.<sup>12</sup> Her poetry encapsulates the dichotomy of being told that her psychological and personal truth is a lie, and for being incarcerated on false pretenses as a result of seeking to speak and preserve the truth at the Prague Spring protest:

This truth is a lie ...  
 This truth, I insist on,  
 don’t, don’t believe it,  
 do not test it, with a knife pinning  
 the tender throat to the wall (Gorbanevskaya 28).

<sup>12</sup> Malcolm Lader, *Psychiatry on Trial* (Bungay: The Chaucer Press, 1977). Quoted by Koller 257.

Here, the false truth that ‘is a lie’ is presented as a matter of extreme urgency, one that portends violence with the image of the knife to the throat. ‘[T]he naked truth, / or deliberate lie’ are similarly confusing and are ‘to be read as quickly as possible, / or you’ll not make it out’ (Gorbanevskaya 95). Finding herself in a world of chaos, in which reality and personal agency have been displaced and corrupted, and in which falsehoods and truth are exchanged, Gorbanevskaya retrospectively uses her poetic voice to correct the memory of the experiences she lived through, and to preserve her truth for the future.

Ambiguity of identity is also evoked through Gorbanevskaya’s experiences in the mental health system. The ambiguity of the division between mentally ‘normal’ or healthy, and disordered, is one which poets and artists of various backgrounds often consider in a context of tension, lived experience and psychological displacement. Gorbanevskaya’s incarceration and treatment by the patriarchal system on a falsified diagnosis of ‘schizophrenia’ was certainly politically motivated, and there is no doubt that this trauma led her to question her own sanity or reality at times. In this ambiguity and ambivalence regarding her own experience and reality, the language, imagery and voice of her poetry reflect her psychological displacement. Additionally, Gorbanevskaya can be seen to essentially dissociate from herself, her body and her psyche at times as a means of surviving trauma and abuse. Gorbanevskaya appears fatalistic and dissociated from herself in the poem: ‘Don’t destroy me, Lord, / losing me in a game of change, / sending me out to roam the world, / believing in nothing’. (Gorbanevskaya 9). The poet writes of ‘the unknown shadow land’ (Gorbanevskaya 69) and the ambiguities and conflicts present in her own memories: ‘What can I not forget, / subsiding, like a prisoner, in a corner? / I cannot remember but wouldn’t lie to myself, / threading this needle ... These wounds, sores – where from? / Not to remember, not to forget either. / You lie in the bed you made, but the bed’s / no place to grieve or love in’ (Gorbanevskaya 68). In these phrases, it can be seen that Gorbanevskaya considers the acts of remembering or forgetting to be ambiguous yet potentially oppositional activities. ‘Sanity’ likely depends on an ability to accurately remember occurrences, but due to trauma, she cannot trust her own experience.

The melancholy or depression referenced can be detected in her poetic voice, which as previously mentioned is often grief-stricken or pervasively sad in its perspective. A possible description of an episode of melancholy or depression is to be found, for example, in the poem:

My dear, what’s happening,  
when the hour doesn’t arrive,  
when the hand sticks, unable to move,  
and time twitching in the same place,  
is unable to rise  
one millimetre ... Like a windless sail,  
I faint in your palms,  
invisible, undreamed, distant  
in the complete revolution of a clock’s hands  
from me, as once upon a time, as *then* (Gorbanevskaya 27).

The image of a stuck clock and the hand unable to move a millimetre is potent in depicting the immobilizing effects of serious depression, and the feeling that one is unable to move. This can be interpreted as further evidence of the sense of displacement in Gorbanevskaya’s work, as she is displaced emotionally as well as geographically and culturally. The phrase ‘my dear, what’s happening’ also projects a sense of dissociation either towards or as a patient. Again,

Gorbanevskaya's tone and approach is one of some fatalism, as if she has no agency or control over her melancholic body and self. Further evidence of such melancholic dissociation can be found in the 1994-6 collection *Nabor* [*Type-setting*] in which one poem reads:

My head's badly arranged,  
birthing not thoughts, just words,  
not self-generated –  
that's about it!

The seed, dropped into flesh,  
to ripen in its own good time,  
bursts from the temporal,  
generating bones.

Unmilled flour  
coagulating into a martyr,  
mouthing, with a butted tongue,  
extracted, as by an empty ladle (Gorbanevskaya 39).

The image of birthing words rather than thoughts indicates displacement and, potentially, dissociation in Gorbanevskaya's writing technique. The imagery in the third stanza is dark and melancholic, with images such as the empty ladle and the possibility of a martyr's tongue having been extracted lend themselves to an interpretation of isolation and potentially torturous oppression. The association of trauma and its effects through the melancholic imagery suggest the effects of displacement.

Gorbanevskaya develops a resilient poetic voice in style and tone as a means of resistance, despite her experiences of depression and melancholy, her multiple displacements from Russia, and her isolation as a member of the Russian diaspora. For example, as an activist and a dissident, Gorbanevskaya's poetic voice is often relatively discursive, contrary or even hectoring towards the Soviet state, towards an individual or towards the world. Even when discussing music in poetry, her voice is argumentative at times. In 'Concerto for Orchestra', written in 1962 before Gorbanevskaya's imprisonment and exile, she argues with the composer Bela Bartok regarding his composition 'Concerto for Orchestra'. Gorbanevskaya writes: 'Bartok, listen to what you've written! / Like beating a rusty frying-pan: rat-tat-tat, / like mountains mounting mountains, / rivers circling themselves... it's always the same: noise, / racket, not the real thing' (Gorbanevskaya 4). Although at the time of writing this poem Gorbanevskaya was not in exile and was not part of the diaspora, she was already developing in certain ways a poetic voice and tone redolent of displacement.

Furthermore, by taking an argumentative, discursive stance, Gorbanevskaya not only continues her dissident, protesting work in the poetic form, but she also counters prevailing patriarchal views regarding women stating strong opinions in a direct fashion. Her strong and direct poetic voice can be seen as an element of activism and also an element of feminism, in which she will not have her opinions silenced by patriarchal society. Gorbanevskaya lampoons patriarchal expectations in a later poem, 'The Female Sympathiser is Certainly Convivial', in which the poetic narrator refers to a female character in infantilising ways that are based on her physical appearance rather than her mind, words or ideas. By drawing attention to the fact that patriarchal society judges women on how they look rather than what they say – women being often viewed as decorative,

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rather than worthy of an audience – Gorbanevskaya’s poetic voice allows her to critique the current situation for women in the world: ‘The female sympathiser is certainly convivial, / a sweetie-pie, a pipelet, a receptacle of the spirit, / acceptably brittle, / like the first sleet underfoot / that year, when autumn lingered, / not a year passed, / but clouds were waking rustling, / and my soul scurrying over the snow’ (Gorbanevskaya 66). By portraying the female character as weak and brittle, comparing her to sleet versus the narrator’s emblem of snow, she underlines how women are seen as weak and inconsequential by comparison to men in a patriarchal system. In Gorbanevskaya’s poetic voice, even in translation to English, sarcasm and irony are important elements and ways through which she expresses her opinions and hopes for a better future.

## Discussion and Conclusions

Gorbanevskaya’s poetic voice and imagery recalls a pre-Soviet Russia as a way of negotiating her displacement from her homeland. Imagery of snow can be seen as one way in which Russia is represented in her poems as lost and temporally displaced in relation to the author. Imagery of snow, in addition to representing old Russia, can be seen as a thematic concern with impermanence and transience, which links to Gorbanevskaya’s identity as a stateless exile and also as a displaced person.

Gorbanevskaya’s displacement places her within the Russian diaspora as it relates to poetry, literature and broader artistic culture and aesthetics. She stayed connected with Russians outside Russia by involvement in the periodical publication ‘Russian Thought’ in Paris, and also by addressing Russian themes, politics and the abuses of the Soviet state in her work. Gorbanevskaya connects geography with her own personal memories, and memories of the Russian diaspora more generally. She references specific streets, cities, rivers and place names that will spark recognition in other Russian or Muscovite – or Russian diaspora – readers. Her use of setting, of geographical markers and of temporal elements in her poetry reflects her status as a displaced person, and as a female voice oppressed under a patriarchal system.

As an activist and a dissident, Gorbanevskaya’s poetic voice is often relatively discursive, contrary or even hectoring. She holds strong opinions and at times in her poetry these are stated very directly. This can be seen as a form of feminist activism against the norm that women should be seen and not heard in patriarchal society, and also as a way through which she asserts her displaced voice as oppositional. Gorbanevskaya’s poetic voice, imagery, persona and work demonstrate her ambiguous, ambivalent and hybridized identity and experience which is shaped at least in part by her status as a displaced person. Yet, Gorbanevskaya will not have her opinions silenced by patriarchal society. Gorbanevskaya’s poetic voice allows her to critique political and cultural norms using sarcasm, argument and imagery that undermines oppressive situations and status quos: in Gorbanevskaya’s poetic voice, even in translation to English, sarcasm and irony are important elements and ways through which she expresses her opinions and hopes for a better future. At all times, her quest through the poetic form is for the personal and political truth – as an individual woman, as a displaced person, as a member of the diaspora and as a Russian. By telling her story through poetry, Gorbanevskaya can retrospectively un-silence herself, to let her words and thoughts be free and find connection with her readers in the Russian diaspora and further afield. Her poetic voice, formed in the context of her displacement, is truthful, fearless and profoundly powerful. She is able to negotiate her own ambiguous identity as a Russian living outside Russia for thirty years, and as a woman oppressed – but not crushed – by patriarchy.

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