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## THE RUSSIAN BABUSHKA AS ONE OF THE ARCHETYPES OF RUSSIAN CULTURE

**Abstract:** Due to its significant cultural and social meaning, the word *Babushka* has become one of the most recognizable English words of Russian origin. But what is behind this elderly woman for a Russian? The purpose of this paper is to shed light and understand the phenomenon of the Russian babushka and the importance of her role in Russian culture. The study was not specifically designed to evaluate factors of the reshaping of the babushka's image throughout history. The paper attempts to examine a number of well-known novels and short stories written by prominent Russian authors of various times, both fictional and autobiographical, exploring the image of the Russian babushka. The author argues that the images of grandmothers described in popular literature exert significant influence on the shaping of cultural values and expectations of the Russians. The paper's analyzes results in identifying of the main components of this social and cultural construction which remains consistent in the Russian lingual consciousness regardless recent changes in the system of family values.

**Keywords:** Russian culture; cultural archetype; Russian literature, grandmothers in Russian families.

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## РУССКАЯ БАБУШКА КАК ОДИН ИЗ АРХЕТИПОВ РУССКОЙ КУЛЬТУРЫ

**Аннотация:** Благодаря своему уникальному социокультурному значению, слово «бабушка» стало одним из самых узнаваемых английских слов русского происхождения. Однако что же олицетворяет эта пожилая женщина в сознании русского человека? Целью данной статьи является пролить свет на феномен русской бабушки и понять его особую роль в русской культуре. Автор стремится дать обобщенную характеристику концепта русской бабушки, проанализировав наиболее известные ее образы, описанные в нескольких романах и рассказах российских писателей разных лет. Обосновывается мысль о том, что существующий в популярной российской литературе образ бабушки оказывает значительное влияние

на формирование культурных ценностей и ожиданий русского человека. В ходе исследования автор выделяет основные компоненты данного социокультурного концепта, который до сих пор остается хорошо закрепленным в русском языковом сознании, несмотря на изменения в системе семейных ценностей современного российского общества.

**Ключевые слова:** русская культура, социокультурный концепт, культурный архетип, российская литература, бабушка, бабушки в русских семьях.

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Many Russian children grow up in three-generation families, and depending upon various social and cultural factors, grandmothers play an exceptional role in upbringing of the younger generation and in a sense of belonging existing within a Russian family.

Given the international popularity of the word *Babushka*, as well as its strong association with the peculiarities of Russian culture, the absence of research is particularly striking. This study helps to fill a notable gap in the knowledge of one of the most solid archetypes of Russian culture.

The family roles of modern grandmothers in Russian families, in my opinion, are clearly dependent on the image of the grandmother, which is instilled in the Russian cultural tradition and is one of the most stable stereotypes of a woman from an older generation. The connection between literature and society is a fact that has been widely acknowledged. It is generally accepted that literature reflects society and its cultural norms and values and influences attitudes of people. I shall examine some of the contexts in which the character of *Babushka* occurs in Russian literature, with the goal of understanding what Russians think of when they read this word in their literary texts and what they think about the older women whom the word described. Somewhat more speculatively, I shall also indicate some of the social attitudes and literary experiences that I believe helped to shape this stereotype.

To begin with, let us take a look at the definitions of the word *Babushka* in Russian and English dictionaries.

The Explanatory Dictionary of the Russian Language (S. Ozhegov) defines «*Babushka*» as «the mother of one's father or mother» and «an elderly woman in colloquial speech» [1]. According to the Merriam-Webster dictionary, the word *babushka* refers to an elderly Russian woman and a triangularly folded kerchief for the head, which reflects how deeply the image of a Russian grandmother has established in American and British discourses [2].

The *babushka* doll, commonly referred as *matryoshka* in Russian, a set of wooden dolls of decreasing size placed one inside another, has become one of the most popular souvenirs associated with Russian culture. It also serves another example of worldwide recognition of the *babushka*. «The largest doll, often seen as a grandmother with future generations of dolls tucked inside her, represents family and life as a value in itself, passing through generations of women» [10, p. 2].

The application of the term *babushka* carries various representations in the Russian context. The *babushka* is linked to old age, but is also often associated with positive characteristics. We analyzed the data of the Russian Associative Dictionary [3].

It should be noted that the dictionary reflects the most frequent semantic (paradigmatic) connections of words. It also comprises the most important syntagmatic links and, above all, the «two-word model» (the most familiar to the Russian speaker) which are standard repetitions, clichés, stable combinations of idioms, collocations; and it indicates the most characteristic connections of words, reflecting the peculiarities of Russian culture, not fixed in other dictionaries.

**The word *Babushka* evokes a whole set of commonly shared associations**

Reactions	Frequency
дедушка (grandfather)	74
Старушка (old woman)	43
Моя (my)	39
Старая (old)	39
Добрая (kind)	31
Любимая (beloved)	23
Старенькая (old — diminutive)	19
Родная (dear)	7
Дед (grandfather)	6
Милая (sweet)	6
Дорогая (darling)	5

According to the data obtained in the analysis of the dictionary, the core of the associative field of *Babushka* can be represented by the following reactions: grandfather (74), old woman (43), my (39), old (39), kind (31), beloved (23). As can be seen from these associations for the majority of respondents who participated in the compilation of the dictionary, *the babushka* is associated primarily with the grandfather.

Other nuclear reactions allow us to draw an image of a grandmother, formed in the linguistic consciousness of representatives of Russian culture: my (39) old (39), kind (31), beloved (23) old woman (43).

It is necessary to emphasize that a large number of associations that have a positive emotional connotation, which allows us to identify the main features of the Russian grandmother, such as, above all, kindness and love.

The reaction «old woman» (43), which has the second frequency index, also reflects the respect and love of others in relation to this person through the use of a diminutive suffix -ка.

The percentage of emotionally colored reactions from the total number of associations is about 23%, which is direct proof of the significance and importance of this image in the Russian linguistic consciousness.

As Arvey (2014) argues, *the babushka* is «one highly regarded feminine role in the Russian cultural landscape» [4]. This utterly important figure not only represents love and nurturing, but she is often a significant source of support in bringing up children and maintaining a household.

According to the anthropologist and sociologist Jennifer Utrata (2015), *the babushka* does not simply fulfill a symbolic function, but is also «the backbone of Russian society» [13, p. 41].

As Tatiana Tiaynen (2013) explains, in the Soviet family culture there was often a woman of mature age- a *babushka* who was at the core of the organization and reproduction

of everyday routines: taking care of children, cooking, doing laundry, pickling, cleaning, and being involved in her children's family life [10].

Bezrukova (2000) considers the Russian babushka to be a source of wisdom in a family. In her book «The foundations of spiritual culture», she states that *the babushka*, through her life experience, embodies diligence, kindness, patience, care and forgiveness. She often expresses, as if by accident, such wise thoughts which you will not find in books. The *babushka* strengthens the stability of the family, gives warmth to the relations with the children, without demeaning the role of parents, including her son or daughter. In Russian culture, a grandmother is a very respected person; caring for children is her holy responsibility, she is responsible for the house and peace in it. Children love grandmothers, they get attached to them, feeling their love for themselves, they affectionately call them «granny», «baboosya». Grandmothers are also looking for their grandchildren's love [6, pp. 16–17].

The well-known saint in the Russian Orthodox Church Theophan the Recluse (Theophan Zatvornik) who possessed a rare degree of a thorough understanding of the soul of his homeland and of contemporary people in general, wrote beautiful words about the babushka in the compilation of his letters «*The Spiritual Life and How to Be Attuned To It*»: «There is no warmer place for a granddaughter than at their grandmother's; and for a grandmother there is no one more precious than her beloved granddaughter. So we should thank God for it. And you should comfort your babushka and listen to what she says more attentively. Old women have wisdom that they got from their experiences and life hardships. And they often express even by accident, in their simple phrases such wise lessons which you will not find in books» [14, p. 34].

One of the most prominent Russian linguists of our time, Svetlana Ter-Minasova (2000) discussed the phenomenon of the Russian babushka in one of her works: «The Russian word babushka and the English grandmother are kinship terms denoting the mother of the parents. However, what does the Russian grandmother have in common with the English grandmother? They are completely different characters, they look different, dress differently, they have completely different functions in the family, different behavior, different ways of life. <...> Russian grandmother, as a rule, is in her new status even busier than before: she grows grandchildren, leads the household, gives parents the opportunity to work, to earn money. The English-speaking grandmother goes on a “well-deserved rest”: travels, dresses brightly, tries to catch up in entertainment, a pleasant pastime». The emotional spectrum of the бабушка image is much wider than the emotional spectrum of grandmother, which indicates the importance of this image in the Russian family institute. Grandmother in Russia is a beloved, dear, kind old woman, unlike the English elderly, friendly respectable grandmother-lady [11, p. 54].

At this stage of our exploration into the phenomenon of the “Russian babushka”, let us delve into the famous examples of grandmothers in Russian literature. To be eligible for this study, the literary works had to meet two criteria: having been written in different periods of Russian history and having depicted grandmothers with different social and cultural backgrounds.

Maxim Gorky, a Russian novelist, playwright and essayist, developed one of the most memorable images of *babushka* in Russian literature. In the first volume of his autobiographical trilogy *My childhood* (1913), he described his early years as a curious and frightened boy who was taken to live with his grandparents after his parents died. While Maxim's grandfather was a wicked tyrant who would beat him until he was in a state of unconsciousness, his grandmother became his closest friend. «<...> my friend for life, the being nearest my heart, the dearest and best known of all» [9].

In a simple but powerful language, Gorky depicted a powerful portrait of his babushka, a simple woman but the only saving grace in his life. «When she smiled the pupils of her dark, luscious eyes dilated and beamed with an inexpressible charm and her strong white teeth gleamed cheerfully. Apart from her multitudinous wrinkles and her swarthy complexion, she had a youthful and brilliant appearance» [9].

Through violence, poverty and degradation around his grandmother was a stabilizing force in Gorky's life. «Everything about her was dark, but within she was luminous with an inextinguishable, joyful and ardent flame, which revealed itself in her eyes» [9]. She became a guardian angel for this poor boy, protecting him from evil people and life hardships. She presents the genuine beauty of unselfishness and human dignity and resilient spirit of optimism.

She was not able to have a peeve on anyone or bear a grudge for a long time. Those around her took advantage of her kindness but she never complained. Living with his babushka, Alyosha would listen to her stories every evening. «The longer she spoke, or rather sang, the more melodiously flowed her words. It was inexpressibly pleasant to listen to her». A wonderful storyteller «So she always talked, using such peculiarly harmonious words that they took root in my memory like fragrant, bright, everlasting flowers» [9]. She told him endless tales about angels, goblins and witches, developing and boosting his imagination.

Materialistic values were never important to this woman. «I had grown to be a part of her, as it were, and at this period of my life I do not remember anything so distinctly as that energetic old woman, who was never weary of doing good». Compassion and sympathy towards people characterize her personality.

All the difficulties and problems this wise woman considered as trials sent by God. She would kneel beside her bed (with Gorky inside it pretending to be asleep) and give God her views on the day's happenings, down to the last interesting details. «The longer prayers were generally the conclusion of a day of trouble, or a day of quarreling and fighting». «Grandmother gave to God a circumstantial account of all that had happened in the house» [9].

Thanks to Akulina Ivanovna, Alyosha grew up into a kind, supporting person. She taught him to see only the best in people.

Viktor Astafyev, one of the most prominent writers of the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, created one of the most memorable images of the Russian babushka in literature. A native Siberian, he described his childhood in the village of Ovsyanka on the bank of the Yenisei River where he was born in many of his works. When he was a small boy, he became an orphan and began to live with his grandmother. The image of Astafyev's grandmother Ekaterina Petrovna is the most charming, most significant and captivating character that goes through such stories as *The Last Tribute*, *Grandma's Holiday*, *The photo I am not in which*, *The Horse with the Pink Mane*. In each of these stories she is a strong and powerful woman, but at the same time, most of her warmth, kindness and love is hidden under her external sternness. Ekaterina Petrovna, as her grandson once discovered, «a very respectable person in the village» [5, p. 21]. She is strict and tough, when necessary, severe and resolute, but invariably full of kindness and inexhaustible optimism.

In the story *The Horse with the Pink Mane* having disgraced his grandmother, Vitka is waiting for a fair punishment. Indeed, Ekaterina Petrovna, justifying the nickname «General», desperately curses Vitka. The shamed and offended grandson feels remorse. But what a marvelous fairy-tale picture that struck him unexpectedly: «A white horse with a pink mane was riding on the kitchen table, as if over a huge land, with plowed fields, meadows, and



roads, on pink hoofs» [5, p. 22]. It was the promised gingerbread — a dream, to which Vitka for good reason has already said goodbye. His grandmother's behavior (she still gives him the gingerbread) may be interpreted as some unofficial but effective pedagogical tool: she punishes her grandson with kindness. Indeed, Vitya was taught a lesson of «high ethics». It is not solely to make him understand that it is bad to betray family, but to raise the awareness of the need to forgive. His grandmother forgives Vitka because of her natural kindness and the feeling of pity for the orphan's child's soul. That's why the author notes: «How many years have passed! How many events have passed. There is no grandfather alive, no grandmother, and my life is slipping towards the sunset, and I still cannot forget the grandmother's gingerbread — that wonderful horse with a pink mane» [5, p. 26].

Ekaterina Petrovna is the guardian of folk wisdom for Astafyev. In her speech, the author included a huge number of dialectal and colloquial words and expressions. She scolds the boy for his cold legs, grumbles a little, but then he will be nursed all night, rubbed, wrapped and left until the morning near the bed of her beloved grandson.

*The Precipice* (1869) (Russian: Обрыв, translit. *Obryv*) is a novel by Ivan Goncharov and is regarded as one of the Russian literature's classics. The author considered it to be his most definitive work.

Goncharov puts an old woman, Tatiana Markovna Berezhkova, in the center of the conflict between the old truths of the patriarchal society and the new truths of the socialist revolutionary movement. He considered Berezhkova (after Raisky) the most important link in the plot. Her image embodies the conservative ideas, stability and decency that are common for the people of her generation. Tatiana Markovna Berezhkova expresses the «old truth». «The Old Truth» is the embodiment of everlasting foundations, norms of behavior and traditions. The supporters of the «new lies» (Volkhov) strongly opposed it.

The zeal of Tatyana Markovna Berezhkova extends to all the inhabitants of the estate and thereby acquires a truly universal scope: it was necessary for her to feed not only the household but also her numerous servants, and the economic calculations were so big that it was impossible to keep them in their heads, therefore, «Grandmother had an income-expenditure notebook»; And not one or two keys from the storerooms and barns hung on her belt, but a whole bunch, «so that grandmother, like a rattlesnake, could be heard from afar». At the same time, Tatyana Markovna managed to rule her estate as «a small kingdom, wisely, economically, painstakingly, despotically and feudally» and «loved to say that nothing will remain without her» [8].

Grandmother Tatiana Markovna «reigns» in her ancestral estate, she is a landowner, a pillar noblewoman and «remembers herself» every minute of her existence. According to her sincere assumption, nothing could ever destroy the differences between «peasants» and «nobility». Therefore, she «never demanded anything from her servants, but as if she advised to do this or that; She could not ask her subordinates: it was not in her feudal nature».

Tatyana Markovna's haughtiness and gentility are expressed in everything: in dealing with servants, in the manner of communicating with neighbors and society, in her appearance. However, Tatyana Markovna was not a cruel ruler, lady of the manor, but a «mother-mistress» for all her people, taking care of their «table»: «They were fed nourishingly <...>», and about health: «If anyone fell sick — Tatiana Markovna got up even at night, sent him alcohol, ointments» [8].

Irrational, emotional human behavior is at the center of *The Precipice*, but Grandmother keeps under control everything that happens in the house, in her «kingdom» each thing is assigned to its place, in her patriarchal world there is no fuss.

Despite her strictness, indulgence and severity, it is the Grandmother who becomes the symbol of the immutable and eternal happiness. And this world will accept and save everyone from any misfortunes and give them family. It is no accident that Grandmother has a «speaking» last name: Tatiana Markovna Berezhkova, like a wise and kind mother-guardian, will save all the inhabitants of the «happy orphanage» «счастливого приюта».

The vision of the Russian grandmother in contemporary Russian literature is noteworthy in that writers continue to address the phenomenon of the babushka in their works.

The winning novel of the Russian Booker *The Time of Women* by Elena Chizhova (2009) bears the dedication «To my grandmothers» [7, p. 3]. The writer depicts the atmosphere of a communal apartment of the early 1960s addressing historical, social, and religious questions.

The novel features a variety of characters representing the disintegration of Soviet society. The center of the story is not a regular family. Three elderly women, Yevdokia, Glykeria and Ariadna, are raising a mute 7-year-old girl, Suzanna, the illegitimate daughter of a factory worker Antonina, who was allocated a room in their communal flat. In fact they become the girl's surrogate babushkas.

Each of these three women lost their families and homes in the World War II and survived the siege of Leningrad keeping memories of starvation and death and living with the scars, both physical and psychological.

While Antonina is to work, sometimes accepting double shifts, to make ends meet, the babushkas share their stories and recollections with the girl, filling her head with images from their tragic past during their confidential conversations at home. After numerous tragedies and sufferings in their lives, the grandmothers find the purpose of their lives in the little girl and pour all the love they have into her. Instead of sending her to nursery, they spend their time reading to her (in Russian and French), teach her about their Christian faith and talk about their own unhappy lives under the Soviet regime.

Despite their everyday drudgery, such as the endless struggle to get basic supplies and the constant cooking of potatoes and bland food, their courage and dignity can be seen in their gestures and in the lines on their faces.

When Antonina becomes ill with cancer, the three grandmothers are desperate to protect Suzanna and are doing their best to keep Sofia out of the orphanage.

Yevdokia, Glikeria, and Ariadna are religious and secretly practice Orthodox Christianity, which is prohibited by the atheist Soviet regime. They baptized Suzanna in secret and she received the name Sofia.

The babushkas' continual reading of fairy tales to Sofia as a child forms her viewing the world as a mixture of reality and fantasy and presumably contributes to her future career as a successful painter.

With the help of these three grandmothers, it is shown how it is possible to resist oppression in any form and at the same time retain one's humanity. They are the embodiment of the remarkable ability of Russian women to resist all kinds of brutality and cruelty in the world.

The author suggests that elderly women are the ones who transmit historical memory and play a key role in child-raising in Russia.

One of 21st-century Russia's most prominent writers, Liudmila Ulitskaya frequently depicts babushkas in her books. The novel «*The Big Green Tent*» (2011) covers the Soviet dissident movement telling a story of three boyhood friends from a very different social background, whose lives are all constrained by the Soviet state and whose fates reflect the history of their country.

The protagonist Sanya Steklov lives with his mother and grandmother Anna Alexandrovna, a mentor not only for her beloved grandson but for his two closest friends, Mikha and Ilya. «Mikha was captivated by Anna Alexandrovna. He was not the only one to fall under her spell» [12, p. 14].

They all were treated as outcasts in school due to their incapacity to bullying and violence. Handsome, cultured, musically gifted Sanya was the target of his classmates' aggression. He provokes their hatred being different from the majority: he goes to a musical school, he is always well-dressed and sandwiches that he brings to school are «covered with a clean napkin» [12, p. 11].

Although his friend, an orphan, Mikha Melamid belongs to the same social class as his classmates, he has all the reasons to be hated by his classmates as well. He is Jewish; he wears glasses; his hair is red and his face is covered with freckles. Ilya Bryansky, a poor boy with a single mother, never participates in school fights lacking any level of aggression.

Despite all the differences of their personalities and a different fate, the boys became friends for all their lives. The inclination to culture and knowledge unites them. Sanya's grandmother Anna Alexandrovna played a very significant role in their forming years. «Sanya, the proud owner of this remarkable grandmother, sauntered casually from room to room, occasionally sharing his thoughts — not with his friends, but with his grandmother» [12, p. 17].

She is an intelligent, well-educated woman who demonstrates an extraordinary sense of dignity in the clash with caddish and impoverished Soviet way of life. She never discusses politics and the state system with the boys; instead, she educates them by the style of her household, conversations about music and literature, visits to the museums and conservatoires. All this speaks better than any open critic of the Soviet system. She gave Mikha to read the Gospels and introduced him to Orthodox Christianity. She organized home Christmas celebrations which became so memorable for the boys. All this serves as their protest to the Soviet system.

Anna Alexandrovna (or Nyuta, as her grandson calls her) — represents the custodian of the family memory and that past era which neither Ilya not Mikha knows about. People who appear to be around Anna Alexandrovna unknowingly want to match her, to deserve her respect.

Ulitskaya's novel *Sincerely yours, Shurik* (2003) is completely dedicated to the theme of love in human relations. Ulitskaya creates a character of the eternally womanizing modern male who by his own indecision finally ruins his life. Women tend to mistake his gentleness for insipidity and lack of character.

Ulitskaya portrays a smart and strong-willed grandmother Elizaveta Ivanovna. Her daughter and she raise their boy Shurik in the atmosphere of idyllic family love. Under the guidance of his grandmother Shurik turns into a well-educated and attractive young man, who displays all the qualities to become a nice, trustworthy person. He is very kind, helpful and responsive to people in need.

Vera, a former actress who then a secretary and an accountant, spent all her life under a protective bell-glass that her smart, energetic mother constructed. Shurik's babushka replaces the absent father in his upbringing. She wanted to shield her beloved grandson from the bitterness of being a fatherless child and all miseries of the world. To bring up a real man as her late husband was a responsible, self-confident, strong-willed person who can make decisions independently.



Babushka taught him French and German at home. Every year she organized home Christmas performances. Her heart could not bear Shurik's failure in the exam. One of their favorite evening pastimes was reading. Shurik was feeling cosy near his Babushka reading loud the best of Russian and foreign classics.

If Shurik and his mother could cause mixed feelings among the readers, Elizaveta Ivanovna always deserves respect.

Regardless his numerous love affairs, he was not a Don Juan, but a useful man, a man without his own will, a man who was always eager to fulfill the desires of others and could never say «No».

Literature is the mirror of society, it establishes attitudes and values in society. It can be argued that the image of the grandmother in the Russian literary tradition is the embodiment of sacrificial femininity and selfless (ideal-motherly) love. Each of these texts represents a certain archetype, the main features of which are not difficult to determine: the image of a grandmother who tastily fed and created a feeling of coziness and security — a more caring «nanny» than a teacher. The Grandmother contributes to the preservation of a grandchild's sense of security and autonomy. Their relationship is much more intimate and frank than with the parents, since grandmothers rarely punish them, but they are soft to them and forgive any misbehavior. The Babushka plays a unique role as a protective mechanism against the harsh influence of the external environment.

Within family, the babushka might be a key person in maintaining family history and traditions, as well as in transmitting cultural heritage between generations. She is often called *babushka* not only by her grandchildren but also by other family members.

It is due to babushkas that the Orthodox tradition survived during the years of oppression. Women from the countryside were more likely to practice faith in the Soviet period, though secretly. They maintained the «emotional protection» of grandchildren from the outside hostile social interaction, «softened» the harsh realities of life. Educated babushkas could be seen as significant channels of pre-revolutionary culture in the conditions of Soviet dominant discourse.

Russian grandmothers not only spend much of their free time with their grandchildren, but also talk a lot with them. The latter circumstance has a significant educational impact on children. She is a never-fading source of everyday-life wisdom. Almost all grandmothers convey a responsible attitude towards work and education. There may be a connection between the presence of grandmother and the cultural level of grandchildren (early acquaintance with literacy and literature, extracurricular activities, grandchildren getting higher education), arose for the primary hypothesis about the cultural influence of grandmothers on the upbringing of grandchildren in Russian families. They nurture growth and development of their grandchildren's personalities.

For many women, grandmothering is only one, and not a decisive, part of their lives and identities. However, traditional babushkas, even today, tend to build their lives around the families of their adult children, putting a lot of effort and emotions into child care, leaving aside her professional career and friendship contacts.

Despite the fact that in today's era of globalization and world integration, significant changes are taking place in the system of family values and the concepts of Russian culture are gradually assimilating with the Western, losing their national peculiar features and unique identity, the phenomenon the Russian grandmother remains fixed in the Russian language consciousness and still prevails. Becoming a grandmother continues to be a turning point in most women's lives and for the time being this archetype is still solid in the Russian context.

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