



## RUSSIAN WOMEN'S PROSE AT THE TURN OF THE 20TH–21ST CENTURIES: MAIN TRENDS, ISSUES, AND POETICS

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**Abstract.** This article examines Russian women's prose at the turn of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries as a dynamic literary field shaped by late-Soviet legacies, post-Soviet social transformation, and the reconfiguration of authorial subjectivity. The study treats "women's prose" not as a narrow thematic label, but as a set of recurrent narrative strategies through which female authors articulate experience, memory, and ethical choice under conditions of cultural instability. The analysis highlights how the period's prose expands the repertoire of the everyday, turning domestic space, family narratives, bodily experience, and routine labor into sites of historical reflection and social diagnosis. Particular attention is paid to the poetics of intimacy and testimony: first-person narration, confessional tonality, fragmentary composition, and the deliberate inclusion of private speech genres that blur the border between fiction, autobiography, and documentary writing. The article argues that women's prose of this era intensifies interest in trauma, vulnerability, and the politics of memory, while simultaneously resisting reductive victim narratives through irony, self-distance, and complex moral optics. The transformation of genre models is traced through the hybridization of short prose, family saga, psychological novel, and essayistic forms, as well as through the rise of urban narratives that register new patterns of mobility, precarity, and consumer culture. The research also considers the changing literary infrastructure of the period, including the diversification of publishing, the emergence of new readership communities, and the impact of prizes and media on canon formation. The article concludes that Russian women's prose at the turn of the centuries constitutes an important laboratory of post-Soviet sensibility, producing distinct aesthetic solutions for representing identity, history, and everyday life in a time of accelerated change.

**Keywords.** Russian women's prose; contemporary Russian literature; post-Soviet transition; gendered authorship; narrative identity; poetics of everyday life; memory studies; trauma narrative; confessional discourse; autofiction; documentary aesthetics; genre hybridity; ethical optics; family narrative; urban prose.



## **РУССКАЯ ЖЕНСКАЯ ПРОЗА РУБЕЖА XX– XXI ВЕКОВ: ОСНОВНЫЕ ТЕНДЕНЦИИ, ПРОБЛЕМАТИКА И ПОЭТИКА**

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### **Introduction**

Russian women's prose at the turn of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries occupies a distinctive position within the broader transformation of Russian literature after the collapse of the Soviet cultural system. The period is marked by the dismantling of ideologically regulated literary institutions, the emergence of a market-oriented publishing sphere, and the diversification of audiences and interpretive communities. In these conditions, prose written by women became especially visible not simply because of demographic growth among authors, but because it offered persuasive narrative instruments for registering social change at the level of lived experience. The category "women's prose" is contested, and the present study treats it as an analytical rather than prescriptive term. It denotes a cluster of texts in which female subjectivity is not incidental but structurally significant: it shapes focalization, value hierarchies, and the representation of everyday practices, the body, family relations, and memory. At the same time, the study avoids reducing women's prose to a single thematic set or to an assumed "female style." Instead, it considers how gendered experience interacts with historical circumstances and literary form to generate a spectrum of poetics.

The turn of the centuries is a particularly productive interval because it intensifies several overlapping processes. First, the post-Soviet transition reconfigures social roles and institutions that previously organized private and public life, including labor, education, medicine, and family policy. Second, collective narratives of the past are destabilized: the Soviet historical storyline loses normative force, while new memory regimes compete in public discourse. Third, the linguistic and affective texture of everyday life changes under the pressure of consumer culture, new media, and expanding mobility. Women's prose engages these processes through narrative modes that privilege the near, the local, and the embodied. Domestic interiors, kitchens, courtyards, communal apartments, maternity wards, and provincial towns become not merely settings but interpretive devices that allow the text to measure the scale of transformation by focusing on routines, gestures, and small social rituals. In this sense, the everyday operates as a key epistemological frame: it is the medium through which history is perceived, questioned, and morally evaluated.



A central feature of the period is the reevaluation of intimacy and testimony. Many texts mobilize first-person narration, confessional tonality, diary-like segments, letters, and oral speech patterns that imitate lived communication. This does not necessarily entail simple autobiographical transparency. Rather, the “I” becomes a constructed position that negotiates between private memory and collective narratives, between vulnerability and self-control, between the desire to speak and the fear of exposure. The hybridization of fiction with documentary and essayistic forms is therefore not only a stylistic choice but also an ethical stance: it reflects the need to speak responsibly about pain, loss, and social injustice while acknowledging the limits of representation. Trauma and memory emerge as dominant concerns, yet the texts frequently resist pathos through irony, pragmatic observation, and the aesthetics of understatement. Such strategies help to avoid turning suffering into a spectacle and instead emphasize moral complexity, ambivalence, and the incomplete nature of healing. From a philological perspective, the importance of Russian women’s prose lies in its role as a laboratory of narrative innovation. The turn-of-the-century prose reworks established genre models, combining psychological realism with postmodern fragmentation, family saga with urban sketch, short story cycles with essayistic reflection. This genre mobility corresponds to the unstable social environment in which identities and life scripts are renegotiated. The heroine is often placed in situations where traditional normative frameworks fail: marriage and motherhood are reimagined, professional self-realization is complicated by precarity, and moral decisions are made in conditions of weakened institutional trust. The prose thus produces new models of subjectivity that are relational rather than heroic, attentive to care and dependency, and sensitive to micro-forms of power operating in everyday interactions. The present research aims to describe the main trends, issues, and poetics of Russian women’s prose at the turn of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries by integrating close reading with contextual analysis. The study focuses on recurring narrative strategies: the poetics of everyday life, the rhetoric of confession and testimony, the representation of memory and trauma, and the hybridization of genres. It also considers how literary infrastructure shapes visibility and reception, including the role of journals, publishing houses, prizes, and media commentary. For philology students and scholars, such an approach is methodologically relevant because it connects textual detail with cultural dynamics, allowing the interpretation of individual works as part of a broader literary process. By clarifying the mechanisms through which women’s prose articulates post-Soviet experience, the study contributes to a more precise understanding of contemporary Russian literature and to a nuanced discussion of gender as a factor of narrative form rather than a simplistic thematic marker.

## Methods

The study employs an integrated philological methodology that combines textual analysis, narratology, and contextual literary history in order to describe Russian women’s prose at the turn of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries as both an эстетико-формальный and sociocultural phenomenon. The research design is qualitative and interpretive, prioritizing close reading and comparative procedures over quantitative frequency counts. At the same time, interpretive claims are disciplined by explicit analytical categories: narrative perspective and focalization, genre and compositional organization, stylistic registers, chronotope, character construction, and the semantic fields of memory, trauma, everyday life, and care. The primary method is close reading focused on the poetics of representation. Texts are examined at the micro-level of narrative technique: the distribution of narrative voices, the balance between eventfulness and reflection, the use of free indirect discourse, dialogue



stylization, and the incorporation of “private” speech genres such as diaries, letters, confessions, domestic conversations, medical notes, or court-like testimonies. Special attention is given to the ways in which the narrator’s authority is constructed or questioned. The analysis distinguishes between autobiographical reference and autofictional strategy, treating the “I” as a textual position that can be stabilized through documentary gestures or destabilized through fragmentation, irony, and self-contradiction. This allows the study to avoid reducing the texts to authorial biography and to foreground the literary mechanisms that produce authenticity effects.

Narratological tools are used to map recurrent models of subjectivity and ethical optics. The research identifies how characters perceive, evaluate, and narrate experience, and how the texts organize empathy, distance, and moral judgment. Focalization analysis clarifies whether events are filtered through a single consciousness, distributed across multiple viewpoints, or mediated by an observing narrator who practices restraint. Particular value is placed on the study of emotional regimes: the rhetoric of shame and silence, the controlled articulation of pain, and the stylistic management of vulnerability. These parameters are examined as formal decisions that shape the reader’s interpretive labor and the text’s ethical stance.

A comparative method supports the identification of major trends. Works are compared across several axes: (1) thematic complexes, such as family history, bodily experience, professional identity, violence and precarity, provincial life and urban mobility; (2) genre frameworks, including the psychological novel, family saga, short prose cycles, documentary prose, and essayistic hybrids; and (3) stylistic solutions, from minimalist everyday realism to intertextual and metafictional modes. Comparison is applied not to homogenize the corpus but to highlight divergence within the field labeled “women’s prose,” demonstrating how similar concerns can be articulated through different aesthetic programs.

Contextual analysis situates textual features within the post-Soviet cultural environment. The study accounts for institutional and discursive factors that influence production and reception: changes in publishing economics, the role of literary journals and prizes, media criticism, and the emergence of new readership communities, including those shaped by digital communication. This layer is used cautiously as an explanatory framework rather than a deterministic cause. The guiding premise is that sociohistorical conditions create pressures and opportunities, while literary form remains a sphere of authorial and genre-based choice.

The research also draws on concepts from memory studies and trauma theory, but they function as heuristic lenses rather than universal templates. Memory is treated as a narrative practice that organizes time, causality, and responsibility, not merely as a psychological content. Trauma is operationalized through textual markers: ruptured chronology, obsessive repetition, ellipsis and silence, heightened sensory detail, and testimonial structures that stage the difficulty of speaking. These markers are examined in relation to counter-strategies such as irony, pragmatic observation, and the aesthetics of understatement, which help the texts avoid melodramatic simplification.

The materials for analysis are selected according to two criteria: representativeness and analytical diversity. The corpus includes prose from the late 1980s through the 2010s that has entered academic and critical discussion and that demonstrates varied genre and stylistic orientations. Within this frame, the study prioritizes texts where female experience is structurally significant for narration and value construction. The analytical procedure proceeds in three steps: first, identifying dominant motifs and narrative situations; second, describing



the formal devices that structure their representation; third, interpreting these devices in relation to post-Soviet cultural dynamics and to the evolving system of contemporary Russian prose.

## Results

The analysis reveals that Russian women's prose at the turn of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries is best described not as a single school but as a constellation of poetics organized around several stable tendencies. These tendencies emerge across different authorial programs and genres and are anchored in recurring narrative strategies that translate post-Soviet experience into literary form. The results are presented as a set of interconnected findings concerning thematic dominants, narrative organization, genre transformation, and ethical-aesthetic effects.

A first major result is the consolidation of the poetics of everyday life as a key mode of historical cognition. The texts repeatedly shift the center of meaning from "large" public events to everyday practices and micro-situations: household labor, caregiving routines, informal economies, bodily maintenance, and small-scale social negotiations. Domestic interiors, kitchens, stairwells, courtyards, clinics, and workplaces function as interpretive chronotopes where social change becomes visible in material details, speech habits, and altered rhythms of time. The everyday is not portrayed as apolitical; rather, it is presented as a zone where post-Soviet transformations are internalized and morally assessed. Through this focus, women's prose develops a form of "low register" social diagnosis that captures precarity, exhaustion, and adaptation without relying on overt ideological commentary.

A second result concerns narrative subjectivity and the prominence of testimonial and confessional modes. Many texts employ first-person narration or close focalization that creates a sense of proximity to lived experience. However, the "confessional" is often constructed through complex mediation: fragments, inserted documents, stylized oral speech, and hybrid forms that combine fiction with diary, letter, or essay. This produces an effect of authenticity while simultaneously foregrounding the instability of memory and the limits of language. The analysis shows that the authority of the narrator is frequently built on ethical restraint rather than rhetorical dominance. Painful material is conveyed through understatement, ellipsis, or controlled detail, creating a poetics of vulnerability that resists sensationalism. As a result, the reader is positioned not as a consumer of exposure but as a co-interpreter responsible for reconstructing meaning from gaps, silences, and partial evidence.

A third result is the heightened role of memory as a structuring principle of plot and composition. Instead of linear event-driven narration, many texts organize time through recollection, return, and retrospective re-evaluation. The family narrative becomes a particularly productive framework: private genealogies, intergenerational conflicts, and stories of parents and grandparents provide a lens for understanding Soviet and post-Soviet discontinuities. Memory operates not only as content but as a narrative technique that rearranges causality, complicates responsibility, and introduces competing versions of the past. The study identifies recurrent compositional patterns such as mosaic structures, episodic cycles, and braided timelines, which mirror the cultural condition of contested memory and the coexistence of incompatible historical narratives.

A fourth result concerns the representation of trauma and the emergence of ethics-centered storytelling. Trauma in these texts is not limited to overt violence; it includes chronic forms of harm: poverty, institutional humiliation, domestic coercion, medical vulnerability, and the erosion of social protections. The analysis shows that trauma is often encoded formally through ruptured chronology, repetition, intrusive sensory detail, and narrative hesitation. Yet the texts



also demonstrate counter-movements that protect subjectivity from reductive victimhood: irony, self-distance, humor, pragmatic observation, and the portrayal of care as a resource of survival. This produces an ethical optics in which agency is distributed, relational, and situational. Characters are frequently shown making imperfect choices under constraint, and the narrative refuses simple moral binaries.

A fifth result is genre hybridity as an organizing feature of the period. The corpus demonstrates persistent blending of the psychological novel with documentary prose, the family saga with urban sketch, and short story cycles with essayistic reflection. Hybridization serves several functions: it allows authors to register the heterogeneity of post-Soviet reality, to combine personal testimony with social commentary, and to negotiate between artistic autonomy and the demand for “truthful” speech. The study finds that short forms and cyclic composition are especially productive, as they can represent discontinuity, episodic survival, and the fragmentary nature of memory. At the same time, longer forms such as family sagas provide a counter-balance, offering a temporal depth that re-links private life with historical duration.

A sixth result relates to language and stylistic registers. Women’s prose of the period frequently integrates colloquial speech, бытовой lexicon, professional jargon (medical, pedagogical, bureaucratic), and media discourse. This stylistic polyphony reflects the diversification of social voices after the collapse of a single authoritative discourse. The mixing of registers can produce irony and critique, but it also functions as a documentary signal that anchors the text in specific social milieus. The analysis shows that stylistic choices are closely tied to the representation of embodiment: bodily states, illness, sexuality, pregnancy, aging, and fatigue appear not as marginal topics but as central semantic nodes that connect private life to institutional power and cultural norms.

Finally, the study observes that the literary field’s new infrastructure influences visibility and canonization. While the texts are aesthetically diverse, their reception is shaped by publishing strategies, the role of prizes, and media-driven discussions that often frame women’s prose through the rhetoric of “personal truth” and “private stories.” The result is a tension between market labels and literary complexity. The analysis indicates that the most significant works resist being reduced to “women’s topics” by producing formally sophisticated narratives where gendered experience becomes a method of seeing and structuring reality rather than a thematic limitation.

## Discussion

The results confirm that Russian women’s prose at the turn of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries should be approached as a heterogeneous literary process in which gendered experience functions primarily as a structuring principle of narration, ethical perspective, and cultural memory rather than as a stable thematic profile. The analytical category “women’s prose” remains useful only when treated as a heuristic that highlights recurrent narrative strategies and positions within the post-Soviet literary field. Once essentialized, the term becomes reductive, masking both aesthetic diversity and the fact that many central features identified in the corpus are not “female” in an exclusive sense but historically conditioned responses to a transformed social world.

One of the most important implications concerns the poetics of everyday life. The shift from grand narratives to micro-level experience is sometimes interpreted as depoliticization or a retreat into the private sphere. The findings suggest a different interpretation: everyday narration becomes a form of political and historical knowledge precisely because the post-Soviet transition reconfigured the conditions under which “private” life is lived. When



institutions weaken or become unreliable, the everyday becomes the primary arena in which people negotiate survival, dignity, and moral orientation. In this sense, domestic space and care labor, so prominent in women's prose, are not merely intimate settings but sites where power relations, economic insecurity, and cultural norms are concretely experienced. The attention to routine and detail therefore performs an epistemic function: it documents social change without adopting the rhetoric of public ideology.

The prominence of testimonial and confessional modes requires careful theoretical framing. In cultural discourse, confessional writing is often treated as transparent self-expression, and women's prose is frequently marketed through the promise of "authenticity." The textual analysis demonstrates that authenticity is not a given but an effect produced by form. Fragmentation, inserted documents, stylized oral speech, and restraint in depicting pain are techniques that construct credibility while simultaneously acknowledging the partiality of memory and the limitations of speech. This observation matters for philological interpretation: it shifts emphasis from biographical reading to the analysis of narrative mechanics. The narrator's "truth" in these texts is less a factual claim than an ethical posture that regulates exposure, preserves dignity, and avoids converting suffering into spectacle.

The centrality of memory and family narrative further complicates simplistic oppositions between private and public history. Family chronologies function as micro-histories that test and sometimes contradict official accounts. By tracking intergenerational transmissions of silence, shame, and unresolved loss, women's prose makes visible the ways historical experience is inherited and reworked in everyday life. The mosaic composition and braided timelines identified in the results can be read as formal equivalents of a cultural condition in which the past is not settled and linear but contested and re-encountered through discontinuous acts of recollection. This supports the broader claim that post-Soviet literature develops new temporal forms to represent a society negotiating multiple, often incompatible, memory regimes.

Trauma-oriented storytelling in the corpus also demands interpretive nuance. The study's operationalization of trauma through formal markers helps avoid overextension of the concept. Many texts depict chronic harm rather than singular catastrophic events, suggesting that trauma in post-Soviet contexts often takes the form of prolonged insecurity, institutional humiliation, and domestic coercion. The identified counter-strategies—irony, understatement, pragmatic observation, and the ethics of care—are not merely stylistic preferences; they constitute modes of resistance to narrative simplification. By refusing melodramatic binaries, the prose preserves moral complexity and insists on agency understood as relational and situational. This is a significant contribution to the poetics of contemporary Russian literature, where ethical attention to ordinary vulnerability becomes an alternative to both heroic paradigms and cynical detachment.

Genre hybridity emerges as a structural response to cultural instability. When social scripts are in flux, stable genre contracts are less persuasive; hybrid forms allow authors to combine the authority of documentary gestures with the interpretive freedom of fiction. Short story cycles and episodic structures, in particular, fit a reality experienced as discontinuous and unpredictable, while family sagas offer compensatory long duration, enabling writers to reconnect personal stories with historical time. From a methodological standpoint, this suggests that genre analysis is not a secondary descriptive layer but a primary tool for understanding how literature models social experience.



The role of language and register mixing invites a discourse-oriented reading. The integration of colloquial speech, bureaucratic idioms, professional jargon, and media clichés indicates that post-Soviet subjectivity is formed at the intersection of competing discourses. Women’s prose often exposes how institutional language can depersonalize experience, especially in medical, legal, and administrative settings, while also showing how everyday speech practices can restore agency and intimacy. The heightened attention to embodiment—illness, pregnancy, aging, fatigue—further reinforces the idea that the body is a key site where social norms and institutional power become tangible. Rather than treating embodiment as “women’s topics,” the analysis supports reading bodily narratives as a means of articulating the politics of vulnerability.

Finally, the findings illuminate the tension between literary complexity and field-level labeling. The market and media often frame women’s prose as personal confession or domestic storytelling, which can limit critical reception and canon formation. Yet the most significant texts exploit the very expectations attached to “private stories” in order to produce sophisticated social diagnosis and formal innovation. For a philological university audience, this tension is pedagogically productive: it encourages students to distinguish between paratextual framing and textual structure, and to evaluate how aesthetic strategies negotiate cultural stereotypes. Overall, the discussion supports the conclusion that Russian women’s prose at the turn of the centuries functions as a crucial site for examining post-Soviet transformations of subjectivity, memory, and ethical narrative form.

## Conclusion

Russian women’s prose at the turn of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries can be understood as a multifaceted literary phenomenon that registers post-Soviet transformation through distinctive narrative optics rather than through a narrow thematic specialization. The study has shown that the most stable tendencies of this prose are expressed in its poetics of everyday life, its intensified work with memory and testimony, and its ethically oriented representation of vulnerability. Instead of positioning history as an external “background,” many texts integrate historical change into the material texture of daily routines, domestic spaces, and institutional interactions, thereby producing a form of social knowledge grounded in lived experience.

The analysis confirms that the category “women’s prose” is analytically productive when it marks recurring strategies of focalization, value construction, and the representation of care, embodiment, and relational agency. At the same time, it becomes reductive when treated as an essential label implying a uniform “female style.” The corpus demonstrates aesthetic heterogeneity: documentary and essayistic gestures coexist with psychological realism, postmodern fragmentation, and genre experimentation. This diversity indicates that gendered experience functions less as a fixed content and more as a method of organizing narration and ethical attention.

A key finding concerns the reconfiguration of narrative authority. Confessional and testimonial modes are central, yet they rarely equate to direct self-disclosure. Instead, authenticity is constructed through formal devices such as fragmentary composition, inserted speech genres, restrained depiction of pain, and carefully managed silence. These techniques position the reader as a responsible interpreter rather than a passive observer, sustaining an ethical contract that protects the dignity of the narrated experience. Memory likewise operates as a compositional principle that disrupts linear plot models and allows the text to stage competing versions of the past, especially within intergenerational and family narratives. In doing so,



women's prose contributes to the broader post-Soviet rethinking of historical time and cultural memory.

The study also demonstrates that trauma in this literary field is frequently represented as chronic and systemic, linked to precarity, institutional instability, and everyday forms of coercion. Formal markers of rupture and repetition coexist with counter-strategies—irony, understatement, pragmatic observation, and the poetics of care—that prevent reductive victim narratives and preserve moral complexity. Genre hybridity emerges as a structural response to cultural instability, enabling writers to balance documentary credibility with fictional interpretation and to model discontinuous experience through episodic and cyclic forms, while longer narratives restore temporal depth and historical duration.

Taken together, these results support the conclusion that Russian women's prose at the turn of the centuries functions as an important laboratory of contemporary Russian literary evolution. It produces refined aesthetic tools for representing identity, memory, and everyday life in a period of accelerated change, and it challenges simplified oppositions between private and public, confession and fiction, vulnerability and agency. For philological university study, this field is methodologically valuable because it encourages multi-level analysis that connects textual form with cultural dynamics and reception frameworks. Further research may refine the typology of narrative strategies within women's prose and extend comparative perspectives to transnational post-socialist literatures, where similar negotiations of memory, embodiment, and ethical narration can be traced in different linguistic and cultural contexts.

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