

Female Image in Netochka Nezvanova: A Study Based on Feminist Perspective

Ran Mu^{1,a,*}

¹*University of Electronic Science and Technology of China, No.2006, Xiyuan Ave, West Hi-Tech Zone, Chengdu, Sichuan, China*

a. 2021170904014@std.uestc.edu.cn

**corresponding author*

Abstract: This study delves into Fyodor Dostoevsky's unfinished novel, *Netochka Nezvanova* through a feminist lens, exploring the nuanced portrayals of female characters and their significance in the narrative. By examining the interactions, relationships, and development of key female figures such as Netochka, Sophia Alexandrovna, and Alexandra Mikhailovna, the paper highlights how these characters challenge and are limited in the patriarchal structures of 19th-century Russian society. The study argues that Dostoevsky, perhaps unconventionally for his time, presents a complex and empathetic exploration of the female experience, showcasing the struggles and resilience of his female protagonists. Through the character of Netochka, the narrative foregrounds the quest for identity and autonomy amidst societal constraints, emphasizing the importance of education, artistic expression, and female solidarity as means of resistance and self-realization. *Netochka Nezvanova* emerges as a rich text for feminist analysis, offering insights into the complexities of female agency, the critique of gendered societal expectations, and the enduring relevance of Dostoevsky's portrayal of women's pursuit of freedom and dignity.

Keywords: *Netochka Nezvanova*, feminist perspective, gender roles, Dostoevsky, 19th-century Russian literature

1. Introduction

Netochka Nezvanova is an unfinished novel by Fyodor Dostoevsky. The story ends in Netochka's youth time and consists of seven chapters. Dostoevsky began writing *Netochka Nezvanova* in 1846, but stopped working on the novel in 1849 when he was imprisoned for subversion and then imprisoned in Siberia. Dostoevsky personally cherished the novel, and in 1860 added and improved it, keeping the unfinished book in his collection[1]. *Netochka Nezvanova* holds a very special position in all of Dostoevsky's works. The book is the only bildungsroman to feature a female character as the first person narrator. It is Netochka's personal memoir. Dostoevsky rarely uses character names as the title of his novel, especially the name of a female character[2]. For these reasons and others, character analysis can help better understand the author's expression in the text. As the only novel with a female character, the female image in *Netochka Nezvanova* is highly complex and has profound social implications. In the face of family, social and inner pressure, these female characters show a strong sense of self and the spirit of resistance. In the context of a patriarchal society, they bravely challenge traditional gender roles and moral norms in pursuit of individual freedom and happiness.

In addition, the work highlights the mutual assistance and support between women and emphasizes the importance of intimate relationships between women. Moreover, the fate of women in *Netochka Nezvanova* is closely related to the social environment at that time. There are some gender inequalities in the novel, such as gender role consolidation, marriage oppression and other problems, which have a profound impact on the fate of the female characters in the novel, and also restrict the self-identity and happiness of these female characters. Analyzing this work from the perspective of feminism can show the contradiction between sexism and female liberation in 19th century Russia, explore Dostoevsky's concept of individual gender, and call for gender equality and harmony.

2. An Analysis of Netochka's Character

Netochka Nezvanova serves as both the protagonist and the titular character of the literary piece. This article examines the inner and outer realms through Netochka's perspective. Gaining insight into Netochka's personality and depiction will contribute significantly to comprehending the development and evolution of women, as well as Dostoevsky's perception of them. This chapter delves into Netochka's portrayal, starting from her childhood Electra Complex, her time as a highly perceptive child, and her interactions with others.

2.1. Electra Complex

Women's development is closely tied to the family sphere, particularly the intergenerational dynamics between parents, which represent a significant ethical challenge for women. The concept of "home" holds a distinct significance for women, rooted in its origination within Roman patriarchy as a social entity governed by the male head, who held authority over family members and slaves. This historical context influenced the perception of women's roles and femininity, especially within the familial context in 19th century Russia. Physiological, economic, and cultural constraints often confined women to the domestic sphere, leading to the patriarchal delineation of female roles and femininity based on familial functions. In 19th century Russia, every aspect of women's development was intimately linked to the notion of "home."

From the perspective of family field, *Netochka Nezvanova* is analyzed, especially focusing on the absence of male roles and the prevalence of patriarchy. From the perspective of family factors, Netochka's father complex and rejection of her mother can be analyzed, and the reasons for Netochka's complex feelings towards her parents can be explored. In patriarchal societies, family structures are often centered on male authority, with women usually in a subordinate position. This social framework significantly affects family relations and personal emotional development.

Her stepfather holds a unique place in her heart as the family's focal point and the source of emotional sustenance. Netochka regards his fate as extraordinary, describing him as the most peculiar and remarkable individual she knows. His affection and care provide her with a sense of warmth and security. Simultaneously, Netochka harbors a compassionate, maternal love for him, perceiving him as a pitiable and oppressed figure deserving of her utmost support. Consequently, his passing plunges her into profound grief, leaving her feeling bereft of life's most crucial pillar. While deeply attached to her stepfather, she sometimes assumes an assertive role in their relationship, striving to compel his compliance through actions like theft. In stark contrast, Netochka views her mother in a vastly different light, fearing her more than anything else. When she trembled with fear at night, she would hide under the covers all night without waking her mother. She believes her mother to be hypocritical, self-centered, and cold—qualities that clash with her own principles. Netochka perceives her mother as prioritizing material gain and social standing over genuine emotional connections and familial bonds. Her recollections depict her father as innocent and her mother's temperament as unjust. Consequently, she harbors strong aversion and disdain for her mother, even experiencing a sense of

internal anguish and distress regarding her existence. Upon reflecting on this biased judgment of her mother, Netochka arrives at the realization that "perhaps my mother was too harsh on me, and I clung to my father as someone who I thought was suffering with me." The novel portrays the mother as shouldering the family's financial burdens, toiling tirelessly throughout the day, depleting her dowry, and having her treatment funds pilfered, yet ultimately failing to earn respect.

During Netochka's upbringing, the absence of a stable male figure was significant. In a patriarchal framework, the father not only embodies authority but also provides security and identity within the family. The lack of a consistent male role model fuels her longing for paternal love and approval, leading to an idealized view of her stepfather. Patriarchy shapes both the family structure and emotional dynamics, often undervaluing the mother's role and emotional labor. This societal underestimation influences children's perceptions of their mothers. Netochka's aversion to her mother reflects internalized patriarchy, as she unwittingly embraces society's dismissive stance towards women. Mothers endure emotional and physical strain without due recognition or support, creating tension in the mother-daughter relationship. Netochka perceives her mother as constantly fatigued, anxious, or stern, without fully grasping the pressures she faces.

2.2. The Highly Sensitive Child

Netochka, a sensitive and precocious individual, faced early hardships with the loss of her biological father, the death of her hardworking mother, and abandonment by her stepfather. These emotional voids cultivated in her a heightened sensitivity, enabling a profound perception of her surroundings from a young age. However, as she grappled with familial and societal complexities, this sensitivity brought about intense pain and alienation. Dissatisfied with her environment, Netochka began to retreat into a world of her own making, yearning to escape to the imagined sanctuary of the red House. Her acute sensitivity and empathy enhanced her appreciation for music and deepened her literary immersion, ultimately facilitating her self-reinvention in later life.

Netochka's experience can reflect how sensitivities were closely related to women in nineteenth-century Russia and the specific changes in women's growth[3]. Traditional social norms describe sensitivity as a feminine trait, associating women with emotional expression, empathy, and nurturing behavior. This connection is deeply rooted in traditional gender role norms that portray tendentious behaviors and traits for both men and women, often seeing men as rational and powerful and women as more sensitive and vulnerable. And different cultural media such as literature, media and art spread and deepen such stereotypes, which is not only a reflection of social attitudes, but also shaping and perpetuating the connection between sensitivity and women. Because in the traditional context, women's parenting behavior and social division of labor often bring women into close contact with vulnerable groups such as the elderly and children, which will enable women to get more training in empathy. On the other hand, this link may also lead to the marginalization of women at a time when reason is valued, which may limit opportunities for women and exacerbate gender inequality.

2.3. Grow in Interaction with Other Characters

Dostoevsky, known for his polyphonic novels, creates characters as independent entities with unique wills and personalities. Through interaction and dialogue, characters express their viewpoints equally, propelling the narrative forward. The author acts as a facilitator, allowing events to unfold without judgment. This approach enables readers to immerse themselves in characters' lives and comprehend them through their interactions.

In *Netochka Nezvanova*, character dynamics are crucial to plot development and personal growth. Analyzing Netochka's character through a feminist lens involves examining her relationships with characters like Sophia Alexandrovna and Alexandra Mikhailovna. These connections empower

Netochka with strength, resilience, and intellectual curiosity, challenging traditional gender roles effectively.

The relationship between Sophia Alexandrovna and Netochka is nuanced, blending competition with a deep emotional connection. Initially competitive upon Netochka's arrival at the Duke's home, reflecting traditional gender dynamics. They competed for attention within the patriarchal structure, symbolizing societal norms. Over time, their bond evolved into mutual understanding and support, challenging patriarchy. Dostoevsky portrays their bond as transcending rivalry, emphasizing female strength and solidarity against oppression. Sophia guides Netochka with innocence and enthusiasm, shaping her adaptation. Both women defy societal expectations of femininity, contrasting with other characters like Madame Leotard and the old Duchess.

Aleksandra Mikhailovna was Netochka's "mother" as well as her teacher. Their relationship shows the importance of female education and the emotional link between women. Aleksandra Mikhailovna focused on cultivating Netochka's spiritual level and artistic appreciation, encouraging Netochka to read more and learn music. When Netochka arrived in this new home, she was weak and weak, and grew up under the protection of Aleksandra Mikhailovna, with strength, so that she could turn into the person who protected Aleksandra Mikhailovna in the face of the humiliation and oppression of Pyotro Aleksandrovich. Their relationship not only promoted Netochka's intellectual improvement and personal growth, but also reflected a feminist ideal, that is, to get rid of restrictive gender roles, pursue women's independence and creativity, and show women's power. Dostoevsky's portrayal of their relationship actually shows a nuanced exploration of the possibilities women face in supporting and motivating each other in their quest for self-actualization and autonomy.

3. An Analysis of Aleksandra Mikhailovna's Character

In *Netochka Nezvanova*, Aleksandra Mikhailovna plays an important role in portraying the resilience of women in 19th-century Russian society. Her marriage to Pyotr Alexandrovich embodies the oppression of women in traditional marriage, depicting the loss of women's autonomy in marriage and the limits of self-expression. To a certain extent, she is obedient to the traditional patriarchal society, showing a tendency of inferiority and self-injury in marriage, and at the same time, she shows a gentle female power through wisdom and empathy, giving Netochka support and help.

Aleksandra Mikhailovna's marriage to Pyotr Aleksandrovich was oppressive, and she was subject to her husband's controlling and possessive desires, which restricted her freedom and suppressed her individuality. And she herself is also following this social norm to maintain the traditional marriage, she is also the main culprit of sacrificing her own desire, can not pursue the love that she really wants, and the past love as a betrayal to hurt themselves, so in marriage has always had a kind of atonement mentality. Pyotr Alexandrovich was also happy in this way of getting along, supervising and directing Aleksandra Mihalovna's decisions and actions from a superior position.

Aleksandra Mikhailovna felt a strong sense of remorse for her past relationships. One of the important reasons was that Russian society in the 19th century often imposed the burden of marital failure on women, whose behavior would directly affect the stability and reputation of the family. This concept made women prone to guilt and self-sacrifice. This further weakens women's autonomy and strengthens the power structure of patriarchy. The wickedness of Peter Alexandrovich is fully reflected in the face of her, and he will separate the family and the outside of the family into two worlds. When he returned home, he would deliberately turn himself cold, practice his expressions in front of the mirror, and use the mental pressure to alert and control Aleksandra Mihalovna.

The passage suggests that Pyotr Alexandrovich and Alexandra Mihalovna differ greatly in terms of their personal circumstances and opportunities for growth. Pyotr, as a male, is afforded greater freedom and autonomy in his life choices, while Alexandra is confined to the limitations of her role

as a wife and mother within the family circle. This difference in circumstance has significant implications for their personal development and achievements.

Despite these limitations, Alexandra possesses unique talents and abilities, such as her ability to empathize, artistic talent, love of reading, and personal views on various issues. However, due to the restrictive nature of her societal roles and responsibilities, she faces significant challenges in fully realizing her potential. If given more opportunities and resources, both subjective and objective, Alexandra could potentially achieve even greater heights of success. This highlights the importance of creating equal opportunities for both men and women, regardless of gender, in order to maximize individual potential and promote social progress.

In conclusion, *Netochka Nezvanova* shows the societal barriers faced by women in patriarchal societies, which limit their opportunities for personal and professional growth. It also emphasizes the need to create a more equitable society, where individuals can develop and thrive based on their own merit and abilities, rather than being constrained by traditional gender roles and expectations.

4. An Analysis of Sophia Alexandrovna's Character

Sophia has a very different quality from the others, she is a little spoiled, but warm and full of life. Despite their privileged background and early conflicts and misunderstandings with Netochka, they eventually established a deep friendship and gave emotional support to Netochka in times of difficulty. Sophia supported Netochka's artistic ambitions and encouraged her to pursue music, challenging social norms that confined women to their families. And Sophia and Netochka establish a love relationship that subverts gender norms.

From a queer theory perspective, Netochka and Sophia's love transcends binary notions of gender, showcasing diverse relationships beyond traditional categories. There are often binary opposites in the daily discourse system and thinking inertia, such as objective and subjective, strong and weak, rational and emotional, male and female, etc. The cognition of patriarchy often uses such binary opposites, while feminism explores the possibility of the existence of neutral language. When discussing quantitative and qualitative cognitive styles, feminist sociologist Ann Oakley found that they are closely related to gender cognition, in which "quantitative" refers to hard, reliable, rational, objective, and public, echoing masculinity, and "qualitative" refers to soft, unreliable, intuitive, subjective, and private, echoing femininity. This constitutes a dual structure of power hierarchy. Breaking this close bond is dangerous in specific social contexts. Netochka and Sophia's breaking of the traditional gender binary structure and intimate relationship paradigm is a way to explore the possibility of the existence of the middle ground. Dostoevsky boldly challenges people's cognition with an alternative narrative that is fierce in 19th century Russia, and expresses his view of women.

In *Netochka Nezvanova*, Dostoevsky intricately explores sexuality through the complex relationship between Sophia and Netochka. Their emotional bond prompts reflection on love, desire, identity, and societal norms in 19th-century Russia. Sophia's self-discovery unfolds through her affection for Netochka, revealing a nuanced portrayal of their evolving connection. Dostoevsky delicately examines their emotional attachment, sparking introspection on love and fulfillment within societal constraints. The novel challenges traditional views on intimacy and desire, offering insight into the complexity of human sexuality. By subtly portraying Sophia's feelings for Netochka, Dostoevsky prompts readers to reconsider conventional relationships and societal expectations, encouraging contemplation on identity fluidity and diverse expressions of love.

Moreover, the novel's historical and cultural context adds layers of complexity to the examination of sexuality. Set in 19th-century Russia, a period marked by conservative social values and rigid gender roles, the exploration of Sophia's desires becomes even more profound. Dostoevsky's depiction invites readers to consider the impact of societal expectations on individuals' understanding and expression of their own sexuality. Through the lens of Sophia and Netochka's relationship,

Dostoevsky challenges readers to confront their preconceived notions about love and desire. By presenting their bond with subtlety and nuance, he invites readers to navigate the uncharted territory of human emotions, prompting contemplation of the complexities of identity, societal pressures, and the pursuit of authentic connections.

5. Dostoevsky's view of women in *Netochka Nezvanova*

Dostoevsky's views on women were complex, reflecting to some extent the norms and attitudes that prevailed in 19th-century Russia. In Dostoevsky's more works, the image of "Madonna" and the image of "mad woman" with rich connotations are created, and they often coexist with those male images with fierce ideological contradictions and extremely powerful beauty in an agitated and disharmonious struggle between men and women[4]. In the 19th century, with the rapid development of capitalism, the idea of women's liberation had a worldwide impact and had a fierce influence on world literature. Dostoevsky lived in an era of complex and violent ideological conflicts, which also influenced Dostoevsky's own literary creation, especially *Netochka Nezvanova*, the autobiography of a woman's life[5].

Like many of Dostoevsky's early works, the female figures in *Netochka Nezvanova* are in a desperate situation, both economically and spiritually, compared with other men of the same time, and need to be dependent. The right to speak their own fate is deprived by men in a powerful position, and they are more hidden in the dark in their emotions and even marriage. According to Foucault, the production of discourse is controlled, selected, organized and redistributed according to certain procedures. However, under the patriarchal society at that time, the right of production and distribution of discourse belonged to more powerful men, and women who grew up in this social environment would tend to voluntarily give up their right to choose a happy life.

Especially in *Netochka Nezvanova*, the only novel named after a female character, Dostoevsky offers a lens through which to examine the prevalent gender inequality within both familial and societal contexts. Within the narrative, Dostoevsky masterfully portrays the stark realities of gender disparities, emphasizing the struggles faced by women in their roles as wives, mothers, and individuals. Netochka's mother, initially naive and financially secure, undergoes a transformation following her marriage to Yefimov. This union shatters her illusions of a blissful life, burdening her with the responsibility of supporting the family, only to be unjustly blamed. Similarly, Aleksandra Mikhailovna finds herself ensnared within the confines of an oppressive marriage. Overwhelmed by emotional guilt stemming from her infidelity, she becomes a submissive "slave" to Peter Alexandrovich, enduring emotional and psychological abuse. Dostoevsky's meticulous depiction sheds light on the tremendous burden women carry within society, encompassing both the economic hardships they face and the emotional turmoil they endure. Throughout the narrative, Dostoevsky demonstrates a keen awareness of the arduous labor undertaken by women and the immense pressures they bear—both economically and spiritually. His portrayal evokes deep sympathy for women, presenting their struggles with empathy and compassion. However, it is important to note that Dostoevsky does not provide explicit solutions to these societal challenges, showcasing the limitations inherent in his perspective. In examining the gender dynamics within *Netochka Nezvanova*, Dostoevsky confronts the harsh realities of women's lives, shedding light on their suppressed agency and the societal barriers that hinder their pursuit of autonomy and fulfillment. This nuanced exploration offers valuable insights into the complexities of gender inequality, contributing to a deeper understanding of Dostoevsky's portrayal of women and his broader social commentary.

6. Conclusion

This study delves into the representation of women in Dostoevsky's *Netochka Nezvanova* from a feminist perspective. It aims to comprehensively understand the complex portrayal of women in the novel by analyzing the interactions, relationships, and personal growth of the central female characters: Netochka, Sophia, and Aleksandra Mikhailovna. By examining their plight in 19th century Russia and their struggle against societal constraints, the study illuminates the social and cultural obstacles they faced. Dostoevsky vividly depicts their experiences, highlighting the challenges and limitations imposed by prevailing norms. The author also explores the theme of female identity and the pursuit of autonomy within a restrictive social landscape. Approaching the novel from a feminist perspective allows for an exploration of female agency and a critical evaluation of societal expectations placed upon women during this period. By adopting this framework, the research seeks to challenge traditional gender roles and shed light on Dostoevsky's nuanced portrayal of women's longing for freedom and dignity. Ultimately, this endeavor offers valuable insights into Dostoevsky's early views on women and provides a deeper understanding of the novel's themes and messages.

Although *Netochka Nezvanova* was not completed, it occupies an important place in Dostoevsky's oeuvre. It is the only novel to be named after a female character and is recounted from the point of view of the heroine Netochka, showing her interactions with different characters, especially female characters. Analyzing *Netochka Nezvanova* from the perspective of feminism can more carefully reflect the female situation in 19th century Russia and Dostoevsky's feminist view. By understanding the phenomenon and its causes, this article helps to call for gender equality and harmony. In addition, the book was not widely disseminated in the early stage in China. After its republication in September 2023, it quickly reached the hot list of the online Wechat Reading platform. It can be noted that the influence of the book is rapidly increasing, but there are few studies on it.

Subsequent studies will focus on a single systematic feminist theory to carry out a profound analysis of the book *Netochka Nezvanova*, and also focus on the many influential factors in the historical background of 19th century Russia, and grasp the key in the dynamic changes of many influential factors.

References

- [1] Kaderabek, Sarah. *Fyodor Dostoevsky's Netochka Nezvanova*[D]. ProQuest Dissertations and Theses Full-text Search Platform, 1994.
- [2] Cai Yuhua. *Dostoevsky's Female Problem*[D]. Lanzhou University, 2011.
- [3] Young J S. *book-review Heroine Abuse: Dostoevsky's Netochka Nezvanova and the Poetics of Codependency*[J]. *Slavonic East European Review*, 2018, 96(2): 337-340.
- [4] *The Formation of the Image of "Female Double Person" of the Treatise*[D]. Zhang Hailin. East China Normal University, 2017.
- [5] Gaiton T M. *Heroine Abuse: Dostoevsky's Netochka Nezvanova and the Poetics of Codependency*[M]. Northern Illinois University Press; Cornell University Press: 2015-01-01.