

The real story of The Last Station

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Many married women will identify with Helen Mirren's portrayal of Sofya, in a film set during the last months of Leo Tolstoy's life, argues Rosjke Hasseldine

Rosjke Hasseldine, 8 June 2010

Reading the reviews of the movie *The Last Station* confirms my fears – its ages-old story of a wife screaming against invisibility within her patriarchal marriage has been completely ignored. I do wonder how many reviewers even recognise this story.

I don't think they recognise how poignant and, sadly, very relevant this experience still is for women today. They seem to have swallowed whole the long-held patriarchal interpretation that a screaming wife must be histrionic, out-of-control, emotionally unstable or manipulative. An interpretation that completely denies the questions: why is she screaming? What is she actually asking for? What emotional needs are being denied?

The Last Station tells the story of the final months of Leo Tolstoy's life, highlighting his relationship with his wife Sofya (Helen Mirren), and the fight over who has control over the continuation of Tolstoy's ideals, estate and the all important copyright.

But, underneath the arguments between Sofya, Tolstoy and Tolstoy's disciples, is a far more emotional and human story. It is a story that sadly reflects the reality of many wives whose need for recognition, love and nurturing is denied in a way that twists her needs into a sign of her emotional failing, rather than a problem within the marriage and her husband's ability to connect.

Sofya's 'histrionics' as she breaks crockery, throws herself into the lake, and cries and screams, is far more about her need to have her love and dedication to Tolstoy's life and success recognised. You see a glimpse of this story in the scene where she tells Valentin (James McAvoy), that she has spent hours discussing her husband's characters, giving him insight into how they might have realistically behaved and copying out draft after draft of his books. *War and Peace* is not a book I would've liked to have copied out too many times. But seriously, how many wives of male literary giants have had their contributions ignored or denied, as if they didn't exist or matter?

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Sofya's story feels very real to me. Her story is reflected in the modern day anguish that I write about in [The Silent Female Scream](#). How many wives today support their husband's career and creative expressions, without a word of recognition? How many wives are silently or not-so-silently screaming because they feel invisible and need some emotional connection and attention from their husband? Sofya and countless women today are fighting to have the years of sacrifice and caring they have given recognised, and even more potent, they are fighting to feel loved and seen by their husbands.

The Last Station is basically a story of an abusive marriage. It shows how a devoted wife is silenced by a husband who does not recognise her emotional needs and her right to have her life and contribution count. It shows how abusive a patriarchal marriage is for women. How it sentences wives to lives of not-so-quiet desperation as their screams of protests fall on deaf ears.

I know that countless women will identify with Sofya's anguish, even if the reviewers didn't. I have heard her story repeated over and over again in my psychotherapy office and in the Women's Power Circles I facilitate. My hope is that we do not let Sofya's life go unrecognised any longer. Let her through this movie speak to us about how sexist, and therefore abusive it is that a wife is expected to serve without asking anything back for herself, not even love, attention, validation and respect.

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