

Postcolonial Identities in Russophone Women's Writing from
the Caucasus and Central Asia

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NOTE ON CONVENTIONS

I have followed the British Standard (BS 2979:1958) transliteration conventions, with one exception: ‘ë’ is rendered throughout as ‘yo’ (not ‘ë’). Furthermore, the endings of proper names in ‘ий’ are transcribed throughout as ‘y’, not ‘ii’ (Georgy, Strugatsky, etc). Exceptions to this rule are only made in the case of a few widely accepted transcriptions, e.g. Yevgeny Zamyatin (not Evgeni Zamyatin), Nikita Khrushchev (not Nikita Khrushchyov’).

Soft signs are not retained in the main text in widely recognised names such as Olga.

For references, I have been guided by the handbook of the Modern Humanities Research Association (2013), with one exception – in subsequent references to books/chapters/articles, I cite not only the author’s surname and page number, but also a short version of the work’s title.

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I dedicate this work to my parents, Professor Koba Koplatadze and Nino Gogvadze.

SHORT ABSTRACT

This thesis examines how Russophone women writers from the Caucasus and Central Asia come to terms with the post-Soviet transition and negotiate their post-Soviet, postcolonial identities in their fiction. Employing the theoretical tools of postcolonial theory, my enquiry covers four core topics: post-Soviet trauma, immigration, NGOs and utopias. Yet, all of these themes are interlinked through the authors' shared social perspectives (ludic auto-stereotyping, mischief, mock-foolery), as well as representational strategies (evocations of unusual, uncanny, or even inhuman, senses of self).

After establishing the methodological and historical frameworks of this project in the Introduction and Chapter One, I begin the literary analysis by focusing on the psychological dimension of the post-Soviet transition. Chapter Two thus examines how women writers come to terms with the specifically post-Soviet uncanny trauma and alienation, what I define as the post-Soviet 'unhomely' (Bhabha).

The study then moves to the cultural side of the post-Soviet transition. Chapter Three charts the career trajectories of two émigré authors in Moscow against the background of cultural and social 'Othering'. Building on postcolonial 'trickster discourse' (Vizenor), I examine how these authors adopt seemingly foolish and naïf personae in their autobiographical fiction to subvert the Orientalist tropes surrounding them.

Russophone authors' ironic tactics are also examined in Chapter Four which explores the politico-economic side of the post-Soviet decolonisation. I examine how, in their NGO

narratives, women authors mock the self-Orientalist and neo-colonial dynamics of the aid sector ‘from within’ (Mbembe).

In the final chapter, I focus on the pan-Asian creative collective’s utopian narratives. Building on posthuman and postcolonial theories (Haraway, Derrida), I examine how these authors radically revise Soviet sci-fi literature and create fictional utopias populated by cyborgs and other non-human beings that challenge nationalistic and conservative conceptions of post-Soviet identity.

The conclusion recapitulates my findings on how Russophone literature reveals the influences of (neo)colonialism on post-Soviet identity formations and suggests the specificity of the post-Soviet postcolonial condition.

LONG ABSTRACT

In this thesis, I examine how Russophone women writers from the Caucasus and Central Asia respond to the post-Soviet transition and define their post-Soviet identities. The starting position of my analysis is that the current developments in the post-Soviet region cannot be understood without reference to postcolonial theory and that, to a large extent, post-Soviet identity is a post-colonial identity. Using theoretical tools of postcolonial studies (Bhabha, Vizenor, Tlostanova, Mbembe, Haraway), my enquiry spans a wide array of topics which most distinguish Russophone women's prose: post-Soviet 'unhomely' trauma, immigration, NGOs and utopias. Yet, all of these themes are interlinked because the social perspectives and representational strategies are shared. Victimisation is eschewed in terms of ludic auto-stereotyping, mischief, and various kinds of strategically significant folly or outsider commentary, and authors push boundaries in order to creatively engage with otherness, evoking different kinds of unusual, uncanny, or even inhuman, senses of self.

The Introduction establishes the conceptual and methodological framework of this project. I begin by commenting on the centrality of gender in Soviet and post-Soviet state projects. The analysis then focuses on Russia's persisting's cultural and political hegemony over the Caucasus and Central Asia and considers how it affects the linguistic and cultural allegiances of the writers from the two regions. Women's writing from the Caucasus and Central Asia is then situated within broader post-Soviet and world literature, highlighting the former's specific thematic preoccupations. In this section, I also examine the barriers that women authors from the two regions have faced in terms of increased cultural isolation and informal censorship, as well as shrinking readerships since the fall of the Soviet Union. While

drawing from post-colonial theory, this thesis also seeks to propose its reassessment and reconceptualization by introducing a post-socialist perspective within its hermeneutics. Thus, the rest of the introduction anticipates this study's core literary analysis which reveals how Russophone authors evoke various facets of the post-Soviet postcolonial condition, as well as its specificities in regard to the customary Western colonial models.

Chapter One further examines the context, background and theories underpinning this study and assesses the role and validity of postcolonial theory for researching Russophone literature. It includes three main sections which proceed in a rough chronological sequence from Russian imperialism to the Soviet period, to the post-Soviet era. First, I provide the literature review of critical works in Russian postcolonial studies which I build around the following argument: the tendency in literary and cultural criticism to ignore literary texts produced by non-Russian authors from the former Russo-Soviet Empire is rooted in the theoretical discourse on Russia's subaltern and internally colonised identity vis-à-vis the West. The second section assesses the colonial aspects of the Soviet Empire and traces the development of Russophone writing within this context. In the final part of the chapter, I examine post-Soviet national building, mythmaking, and censorship to consider the pressures they generate for Russophone writers, especially women authors.

Chapter Two, which opens the literary analysis of this thesis, focuses on the psychological aspects of the post-Soviet transition. It builds on Homi Bhabha's concept of the 'unhomely' which provides a useful theoretical framework for responding to the experience of alienation and displacement that marks modern existence in general, but especially the post-colonial, and, I shall suggest, post-Soviet existence more specifically. The resonance of the 'unhomely' can be heard in Armenian writer Mariam Petrosyan's novel *Дом, в котором* (2009), Georgian writer and filmmaker Nana Ekvimishvili's *The Pear Field* (2015), Georgian author Teona Dolenjashvili's *Memphis* (2008) and Kazakh/Russian/German writer Olga Breininger's *B*

Советском союзе не было адрэрола (2018). I argue that post-Soviet literary evocations of alienation represent a specific model within wider postcolonial narratives of the ‘unhomely’ due to such traumatic factors as the rapidity of the Soviet Union’s cultural collapse, the national humiliation with which it was associated, the ambivalence towards its results, the repression of the collective trauma suffered under the Soviet regime, and the radical shift from a communitarian to an individualistic consciousness. In the works analysed, this specificity manifests itself through three key motifs of home, abandoned children, and corrupted natural world, and it is through such interlinked metaphors that a broader discourse of the traumatic search for a psychospiritual homeland and post-Soviet subjectivity is generated.

The study then moves to the cultural side of the problematic disengagement from the Soviet past. Chapter Three thus charts the career trajectories of two non-Russian Russophone women authors, Uzbek author Bibish and Armenian author Narine Abgaryan, who achieved success in the Russian metropolis but had to deal with persisting Orientalist myths on backwards nations, primordial ethnicity and the superiority of Russian language and culture. I propose the concept of a Russophone trickster to suggest that the authors ironically subvert these tropes in their autobiographical writings, Bibish’s *Танцовщица из Хивы, или история простодушной* (2004) and Abgaryan’s *Понаехавшая* (2011). Building on the concept of ‘trickster discourse’ (as developed by Gerald Vizenor and others), I argue that these authors adopt a literary persona of a comic fool to subtly ironise the values surrounding them through their seeming replication. While the authors’ ‘subaltern’ status hinders them from speaking without collusion with dominant discourses, their trickster strategies grant them a degree of leeway in appropriating and consequently deconstructing them.

Russophone authors’ tactics of mockery and tricksterism are also explored in Chapter Four which focuses on the political dimension of the post-Soviet decolonisation. It examines fictional narratives by Russophone women that represent humanitarian aid and its impact on

‘developing’ societies, focusing on Kazakhstani author Lilya Kalas’s *Фонд последней надежды: (Пост)колониальный роман* (2013), Azeri author Rena Yuzbashi’s *From Воробышек with love* (2007) and Tajik author Eleonora Kasymova’s *Таджик* (2007). These works suggest that rather than taking a side within the post-Soviet power struggles, women writers build on their personal insights into the workings of NGOs in order to expose the neo-colonial tendencies in the agendas of each political player involved, thus problematising the stereotypical critiques of NGOs in their countries. Echoing Achille Mbembe’s notion of mockery from within, the authors satirise how NGOs’ dependency on the West and their inability to divorce themselves from Russo-Soviet influences lead to the self-Orientalising, contradictory and inefficient practices. They reveal the complicity between foreign neo-colonial forces on the one hand, and local corrupt élites and their subjects on the other. In addition, the authors explore how NGOs remain similarly trapped in the confusing and Orientalising politico-cultural whirlpool of Russo-Soviet and Western dictates on gender. They suggest that the multiplicity of influences on the region exacerbates the divide within women’s communities and limits the positive impact of gender activism. More broadly, the writing on NGOs points to the specificities of the Soviet colonial project and how its legacies are played out in the post-Soviet context.

In the final, fifth chapter, I examine by far the boldest methods of questioning post-Soviet selfhoods by the pan-Asian collective of writers and activists, SHTAB. While critiquing the Soviet past, the authors draw positive energy from its utopian potential. They consciously engage with Western theory at the intersection of posthumanist and postcolonial studies, most notably the works of Donna Haraway, to create fictional utopias populated by cyborgs that altogether call into question the concept of national identity and often reject it in favour of post-Soviet posthumanism. The main focus of my analysis is SHTAB’s *Совсем Другие* (2018), a collection of feminist and queer sci-fi stories. I approach the collection through critical

methodology at the intersection of posthumanist and postcolonial theory, especially through Donna Haraway's concepts of cyborg identities and companion species, as well as Jacques Derrida's essays on postmodern subjectivity. The utopias in the stories are populated by humans, cyborgs and non-human beings that often coexist harmoniously in a technological world that is free from colonial impulses, holds a high respect for the environment, does not seek to establish a hegemony of humans over animals, and rejects the hierarchies of race, gender and class. I read the collection as the authors' attempt to critically examine the Soviet colonial project and the post-Soviet realities in Central Asia, including the often-neglected ecological and LGBTQ+ issues, and argue that their utopias serve as platforms for imagining alternative post-Soviet post-human identities which challenge what they perceive as racist, nationalistic and patriarchal conceptions of current post-Soviet selfhood.

The Conclusion recapitulates my findings on how Russophone literature reveals the influences of (neo)colonialism on post-Soviet identity formations and suggests the specificity of the post-Soviet postcolonial condition.

Introduction

Since the dissolution of the Soviet Union, societies in former Soviet republics have been negotiating their post-Soviet identities at the intersection of national, Russian and Western political dynamics. Reflection on the Soviet experience has been a key part of this process. Post-Soviet literature has become one of the liveliest platforms for coming to terms with ambivalent attitudes towards the Soviet past, critiquing colonial aspects of Soviet rule and dealing with nostalgia for the Communist order. My project examines how post-Soviet women writers outside of Russia, namely those in the Caucasus and Central Asia, respond to the post-Soviet transition and define their post-Soviet identities. It considers Russian studies as an expanding, trans-geographical field, while also enriching postcolonial studies by expanding its Eurocentric hermeneutics to include territories that are at most debatably ‘European’. The starting position of my thesis is that the current developments in the post-Soviet region cannot be understood without reference to postcolonial theory and that, to a large extent, post-Soviet identity is a postcolonial identity.

Among important constituents of the Russo-Soviet imperial project were the insistence on Russian exceptionalism, but also an abiding sense of inferiority relative to the West.¹ The paradoxical result was what the pioneering scholar of decoloniality and gender studies, Madina Tlostanova, has termed ‘secondary Orientalism’.² Russian Orientalism mimicked western

¹ Especially since Russification took hold in the late nineteenth century, as will be discussed in Chapter One.

² Tlostanova’s key works include *Gender Epistemologies and Eurasian Borderlands* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010); *Postcolonialism and Postsocialism in Fiction and Art. Resistance and Re-existence* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017) and *What Does it Mean to be Post-Soviet? Decolonial Art From the Ruins of the Soviet Empire* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2018).

Orientalism, partly compensating for Russia's sense of inferiority vis-à-vis the West, with a slight deviation and often unconscious feeling that Russia itself was a form of a mystic Orient for the Occident.³ Of all the nations and ethnicities incorporated into the Russo-Soviet empire from outside of Russia, those in Central Asia and the Caucasus were some of the most common targets of secondary Orientalism.⁴ At the same time, Russia maintained, as it still does, that it was not an 'empire' of the ordinary kind, not the least due to the apparent threat from advanced Western imperial powers.⁵ These inherent contradictions of Russian Orientalism continue to complicate the interactions between Russia and its 'ex-colonies' and play an important role as the latter define what it means to be 'post-Soviet'. Post-Soviet Russophone authors from the two regions actively comment on these dynamics in their fiction, laying bare an urgent need to consider the post-Soviet experience from the perspective of the Soviet Union's Orientalised 'Others'.

A number of seminal studies have examined how, as part of the process of constructing Russia's imperial identity, canonical Russian writers Orientalised these nations in their fiction.⁶ Yet the current application of postcolonial theory in Russian Studies is generally limited to the analysis of Russian, rather than the broader Russophone literature, especially from the Caucasus and Central Asia.⁷ As Harsha Ram remarks, often, when 'we look to the East, we

³ Madina Tlostanova, 'The Janus-Faced Empire Distorting Orientalist Discourses: Gender, Race and Religion in the Russian/(Post) Soviet Constructions of the "Orient"', *Worlds and Knowledges Otherwise*, 2.2 (2008), 1-11 (p. 1).

⁴ These nations are most distinct from the Slavs in terms of their religion, culture, and skin-colour. While Georgia and Armenia are predominantly Orthodox Christian countries and their nations are predominantly white-skinned, Russo-Soviet colonial discourse nonetheless denoted their inhabitants as 'blacker' than the nations in the Baltics, Belarus, or Ukraine.

⁵ See for instance Viatcheslav Mozorov's argument that post-Soviet Russia justifies its imperialistic tendencies by promoting its identity as a supposedly 'subaltern' empire. Viatcheslav Morozov, *Russia's Postcolonial Identity: A Subaltern Empire in a Eurocentric World* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014), *passim*.

⁶ Susan Layton, *Russian Literature and Empire: Conquest of the Caucasus from Pushkin to Tolstoy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994); Ewa Thompson, *Imperial Knowledge: Russian Literature and Colonialism* (Westport: Greenwood Press, 2000); Harsha Ram, *The Imperial Sublime: A Russian Poetics of Empire* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2003).

⁷ Besides works on Russian Orientalism, the most comprehensive study on Russian literature that employs postcolonial theory is *Postcolonial Slavic Literatures After Communism*, ed. by Klavdia Smola

remain content with Russian representations of it'.⁸

The time has come to ask not whether postcolonial theory is applicable to the Russian colonial case – I shall argue that in most significant aspects it definitely is – but rather what is to be gained from drawing from postcolonial theory when approaching post-Soviet culture. The only way to settle both questions is to put postcolonial theory into practice since, after all, most of the founding and seminal texts of postcolonial theory are rooted in critical readings of literary texts. We could debate post-Soviet postcolonialism endlessly but fail to form a more accurate picture of the developments in the post-Soviet region by overlooking the non-Russian literary and intellectual traditions of the former Soviet Union, especially from the critically neglected regions of the Caucasus and Central Asia. Similarly, in order to accurately understand the nature of Russo-Soviet colonialism, it is crucial to transcend the theoretical discourse of Russia as a victimised internal colony and to pay attention to the perspective of the societies in the southern sphere of the ex-Soviet bloc.⁹ Therefore, we need to look at the ways Russia's "others" talk back, define themselves, and draw on globally circulating discourses and local histories to react to, resist, and define the terms of their engagement in this new context'.¹⁰ Without considering these voices, we will be turning in circles, trapped in the paradigm of 'Russia's eternally anxious opening to the West'¹¹, never able to reach any conclusions while a precise and sophisticated grasp of discourses and practices passes us by.

Employing the theoretical tools of postcolonial studies (Bhabha, Spivak, Haraway, Tlostanova, Mbembe, Vizenor), my thesis examines how authors in the so-called periphery of

and Dirk Uffelmann (Bern: Peter Lang, 2018). The volume mostly focuses on Russian, Ukrainian and Polish literature.

⁸ Harsha Ram in Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, Nancy Condee, Harsha Ram, and Vitaly Chernetsky 'Are we Postcolonial? Post-soviet space', *PMLA*, 3.121 (2006), 828-836 (p. 832).

⁹ I critique the notion of 'internal colonisation' in the next chapter.

¹⁰ Jill Owczarzak, 'Introduction: Postcolonial Studies and Postsocialism in Eastern Europe', *Focaal*, 53 (2009), 3-19 (p. 12).

¹¹ Harsha Ram in Spivak et al., 'Are We', p. 832.

the former empire ‘write back’.¹² The central issue in my discussion is these authors’ self-identity, a topic that is especially timely to consider in view of the radical changes following the break-up of the Soviet Union. As Anthony Giddens has argued, since self-identity is reflexive, ‘the narrative of self-identity has to be shaped, altered, and reflexively sustained in relation to rapidly changing circumstances of social life, on a local and global scale’.¹³ In particular, I examine how women writers employ literature as a platform for negotiating the changing national and gender identities associated with their countries’ post-Soviet transition. Close textual readings are complemented with insights gained from interviews with artists, activists, writers and filmmakers interviewed during fieldworks in the Caucasus and Central Asia.

My enquiry spans a wide array of topics which most distinguish Russophone women’s prose, including post-Soviet ‘unhomely’ trauma, immigration, NGOs and utopias. Yet, all of these themes are interlinked because the social perspectives and representational strategies are shared. Victimisation is eschewed in terms of ludic auto-stereotyping, mischief, and various kinds of strategically significant folly or outsider commentary, and authors push boundaries in order to creatively engage with otherness, evoking different kinds of unusual, uncanny, or even inhuman, senses of self.

Although my focus is on women writers, whenever possible, their works are placed in a dialogue with those by male authors.¹⁴ Singling out women authors admittedly carries the risk of essentialising them, but remains necessary for bringing into relief some of their specific preoccupations with the question of identity, a theme that demands in-depth analysis within an

¹² Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths, and Helen Tiffin, *The Empire Writes Back: Theory and Practice in Post-colonial Literatures* (London and New York: Routledge, 1989)

¹³ Anthony Giddens, *Modernity and Self-Identity: Self and Society in the Late Modern Age* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1991), p. 215.

¹⁴ Sometimes, the comparison is not viable. For instance, unlike women authors who have personal experiences of working in the female-dominated aid sector, male writers have not produced NGO narratives.

already broad thematic and geographical scope of my thesis. Feminist postcolonial scholars argue that colonialism operated very differently for women and for men. They emphasise that women's 'double colonization' – resulting from their subjection both to general discrimination as colonial subjects and specific discrimination as women – needs to be taken into account in any analysis of colonial oppression.¹⁵ For if 'in the context of colonial production, the subaltern has no history and cannot speak, the subaltern as female is even more deeply in shadow'.¹⁶

The position and status of women were central in the ideological and economic goals of the Soviet colonial project. The Soviet Union undoubtedly propagated gender equality, especially in the first decade of its existence.¹⁷ Yet women were particularly subject to exploitation because of their disproportionate presence in marginal and precarious forms of employment such as cotton-picking.¹⁸ And even women from the social elite had to bear the 'double burden' of home-making and child-rearing alongside work.¹⁹ In the Caucasus and

¹⁵ Gayatri Spivak, 'Can the Subaltern Speak?', in *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture* ed. by Carl Nelson and Lawrence Grossberg (Champaign: Illinois, University of Illinois Press: 1988), pp. 271-313; Spivak, 'Three Women's Texts and a Critique of Imperialism', *Critical Inquiry*, 18.4 (1985), 756-769; Chandra Talpade Mohanty, 'Under Western Eyes: Feminist Scholarship and Colonial Discourses', *Boundary*, 2.12-13(1984), 333-358; Sara Suleri, 'Woman Skin Deep: Feminism and the Postcolonial Condition', *Critical Inquiry*, 18.4(1992), 756-769.

¹⁶ Spivak, 'Can the Subaltern Speak?', p. 28.

¹⁷ Women were granted legal rights and protections (including marital, labour, abortion), and accessed work and education. For women's role in the Soviet Union see, among others, *Women in the Stalin Era*, ed. by Melanie Ilic (Basingstoke, UK: Palgrave Macmillan, 2001); *Gender, State and Society in Soviet and Post-Soviet Russia* ed. by Sarah Ashwin (London: Routledge, 2000).

¹⁸ In Chapter Three, I pay attention to how Uzbek author Bibish critiques Uzbek women's experiences in Soviet cotton farms.

¹⁹ One of the first Soviet feminist films, Georgian director Lana Gogoberidze's *Some Interviews on Personal Matters* (1978), closely explores this issue. The protagonist Sofiko, a successful journalist and mother of two, seemingly epitomises the ideal of a Soviet superwoman who takes pride in working and running a household. However, through interviewing other Soviet women about their lives, hopes and dreams, Sofiko realises that her own happiness is mired by suffocating familial duties. On the double burden see, among others, Hilary Pilkington, 'Behind the Mask of Soviet Unity: Realities of Women's Lives', *Superwomen and the Double Burden: Women's Experience of Change in Central and Eastern Europe and the Former Soviet Union* ed. by Chris Corrin (London: Scarlet Press, 1992), pp. 180-235; Penny Morvant, 'Bearing the Double Burden in Russia', *Transition*, 1.16 (1995), 4-9; Alternatively, Sarah Ashwin considers that 'the Soviet ideal of the woman who successfully combined home and work was not an alien imposition, but something to which many women aspired'. See Sarah Ashwin, "'A Woman is Everything": The Reproduction of Soviet Ideals of Womanhood in Post-Communist Russia', in *Work, Employment and Transition: Restructuring Livelihoods in Post-Communism*, ed. by Al Rainnie, Adrian Smith and Adam Swain (London: Routledge, 2002), pp. 117-133; See also Sarah

Central Asia, Soviet gender policies often mimicked the ‘civilising missions’ of western colonial empires which were justified by constructing the colonized nations, especially their gender orders, as backward and uncivilised. Madina Tlostanova has even argued that Soviet ideology’s distorted racial mechanisms and colonial nature became ‘particularly obvious in the gendered forms of orientaling’.²⁰ Contradicting the proclaimed project of creating a racially, ethnically, culturally, or religiously unmarked Soviet woman, women in the Caucasus and Central Asia were seen as Russia’s exotic and Oriental Others in need of liberation and civilisation.²¹ Focusing on women’s centrality in colonial nation-building in Central Asia, Douglas Northrop has similarly argued that by the mid-1920s, the Soviets ‘deemed the Uzbek nation in its current state to be by definition incapable of modernity or civilization, a judgement that led directly to the decision in 1927 to transform Uzbek society forcibly through its women’.²² Scholars including Northrop and Marianne Kamp contend that the ensuing *hujum* – the Soviet campaign to liberate and unveil Central Asian Muslim women – resulted in a deep trauma and a crucial battle over identity in Soviet Central Asia.²³

Ashwin, ‘Russia’s Saviours? Women Workers in Transition from Communism’, in *Global Humanisation: Studies in the Manufacture of Labour*, ed. by Michael Neary (London and New York: Mansell, 1999), pp. 97-126.

²⁰ Tlostanova, ‘The Janus-Faced’, p. 7.

²¹ *Ibid.*, p. 7.

²² Douglas Northrop, *Veiled Empire: Gender and Power in Stalinist Central Asia* (Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press, 2003), p. 34.

²³ Northrop, *Veiled Empire*; Marianne Kamp, *The New Woman in Uzbekistan: Islam, Modernity, and Unveiling under Communism* (Seattle, WA: University of Washington Press, 2006); Douglas Northrop, *Veiled Empire: Gender and Power in Stalinist Central Asia* (Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press, 2003); See also Adrienne Edgar, ‘Bolshevism, Patriarchy, and the Nation: the Soviet “Emancipation” of Muslim Women in Pan- Islamic Perspective’, *Slavic Review*, 65.2 (2006), 252-272; Adeeb Khalid, ‘A Secular Islam: Nation, State, and Religion in Uzbekistan’, *International Journal of Middle East Studies*, 4.35 (2003), 573-598. Khalid re-evaluates the Soviet state-enforced initiatives such as *hujum*, suggesting that while in recent scholarship in Russian they have been considered as an exercise in European colonialism, a far more apt comparison would be with the Kemalist remaking of Anatolia that was roughly contemporary with events in Central Asia (p. 576). He argues that ‘[t]he Bolshevik vision was more universalist, and it was much more ruthlessly executed, but its implementation was the act of a state bent on reshaping the behavior and norms of its citizens, rather than a colonial state acting on native subjects’ (p. 577).

Women's identity continues to be one of the most central, complex and contested issues in post-Soviet politics and nation-building in Central Asia and the Caucasus, arguably even more so than in other postcolonial countries. If the ex-colonies of the West have to decolonise themselves mainly from Eurocentric racist epistemologies, women in the Caucasus and Central Asia face a double burden due to their subjection to multiple modernizing and colonizing agents.²⁴ Due to 'secondary Orientalism', gender, and indeed wider identity discourses in peripheral Eurasia often remain 'in the grip of progressivism and developmentalism' relative to both Russia and the West.²⁵

Post-Soviet identity politics and women's writing have been the subject of several important studies. By and large, however, discussion has addressed the political and social side of the so-called 'transition', and the question of women's identities has been examined mainly in relation to Russian and Eastern European cultures.²⁶ Literature from the Caucasus and Central Asia remains unexplored, even though many countries in the region, especially Kazakhstan and Georgia, are witnessing an unprecedented creative output by women that has extended not just to types of output where they were prominent before 1991, such as poetry, but also prose fiction, screenwriting and plays, categories that have traditionally been in the

²⁴ Madina Tlostanova, *Gender Epistemologies and Eurasian Borderlands* (New York: Springer, 2010), p. 200.

²⁵ Madina Tlostanova, 'Postcolonial Post-Soviet Trajectories and Intersectional Coalitions', *Baltic Worlds*, 1-2(2015), 38-43 (p. 42).

²⁶ Helena Goscilo, *Lives in Transit: Contemporary Russian Women's Writing* (New York: Ardis Publishers, 2013); *New Women's Writing in Russia, Central and Eastern Europe*, ed. by Rosalind Marsh (Cambridge: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2012); Laura Adams, *The Spectacular State: Culture and National Identity in Uzbekistan* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2010); *Soviet and Post-Soviet Identities*, ed. by Mark Bassin and Catriona Kelly (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012); *Post-Soviet Women: From the Baltic to Central Asia*, ed. by Mary Buckley (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997); *Post-Soviet Women Encountering Transition: Nation Building, Economic Survival, and Civic Activism*, ed. by Kathleen Kuehnast and Carol Nechemias (Washington: Woodrow Wilson Center Press, 2004).

domain of male writers. The phenomenon applies to other creative forms also: more than half of the films shown at two recent Georgian film festivals in the UK were directed by women.²⁷

The writers whom I discuss include Eleonora Kasymova (b.1951), Bibish (b.1965), Lilya Kalas (b.1969), Mariam Petrosyan (b.1969), Narine Abgaryan (b.1971), Rena Yuzbashi (b.1976), Teona Dolenjashvili (b.1977), Nana Ekvimishvili (b.1978) Zhanar Sekerbaeva (b.1982), Syinat Sultanalieva (b.1984) and Olga Breininger (b.1987).²⁸ All of these authors were born in the Soviet Union and grew up within a political system which they saw disintegrate and disappear. Their works reflect a conflict of identity born out of an encounter of different cultures and literary traditions, an encounter which is moreover subject to the particular stresses resulting from colonialism, its legacies, and the traumatic processes of the post-Soviet transition.

Russophone women authors from the Caucasus and Central Asia, largely the most prominent of whom are listed above, became visible in the post-Soviet publishing market only from the 2000s.²⁹ Yet, even within the relatively brief period of less than two decades in which these authors' works have been published, shared generational perspectives and a particular chronology of experience emerge. Early fiction tends to be retrospective and focuses on digesting the traumas of the Soviet past. Pessimistic in tone, the prose in this category is dominated by uncanny and unhomey conceptions of identity and conveys predominantly critical, though at times nostalgic visions of the Soviet past.³⁰ The most recent works by the

²⁷ Regent Street Cinema, London, Georgian film festival 2018; Tyneside Cinema, Newcastle Georgian film festival in collaboration with Durham University, 'Screening the Nation: Georgia, 1918-2018', 2018. See also Cathe Clarke, 'Putting Cannes to Shame: the Female-led Georgian Film Festival', *The Guardian*, 3 May 2018 <<https://www.theguardian.com/lifeandstyle/2018/may/03/putting-cannes-to-shame-the-female-led-georgian-film-festival>> [accessed 2 September 2019].

²⁸ One exception is the visual artist Hagra (1992) whose graphic short story I analyse in the final chapter.
²⁹ None of the works analysed in this thesis were written in the 1990s; indeed, to my knowledge, there were no significant literary publications by women in this period. This can in large part be attributed to the tumultuous post-independence period characterised by civil unrest, food shortages, wars, and increased crime in the region.

³⁰ Authors in this category include Petrosyan, Ekvimishvili, Dolenjasvhili and Breininger, on whom I focus in Chapter Two.

young generation of authors are increasingly cosmopolitan in their outlook. They engage with Western postcolonial thought and attempt to move beyond the Soviet experience through imagining cyborg and other non-human selfhoods.³¹ Somewhere in-between these two general trends we find writers who are most bound by the ideological legacies of the Soviet era and neo-colonialism, and whose works are very much rooted in the post-Soviet present. One group here are diaspora writers who have to navigate their cultural allegiances and resist being construed as exotic Oriental women as they make their literary careers in Moscow.³² The second group are women writers who reflect on their experiences of working in the aid sector while navigating the ambiguous local/Russian/Western political allegiances of their organisations.³³ In order to work around ideological pressures and censorship, or critique neo-colonialism, these writers adopt trickster personae as well as humorous, ironic and satirical modes of writing.³⁴ Writers in this category most explicitly reveal the persistence of ‘secondary Orientalism’ and the resulting self-Orientalising tendencies that characterise post-Soviet societies in the region.

The writers whom I focus on come from an enormous territory across which many languages are spoken, Turkic, Finno-Ugric, Kartvelian, and East Asian, as well as the Indo-European tongues usually associated with ‘the West’. Due to my own academic background as a Slavist, though, I shall be concentrating on writing in Russian. This corpus of material is of significant interest because Russia remains incomparably the most important regional power and the richest country in the entire area, and writers using Russian are most visible in terms of metropolitan culture. I opt for the term ‘Russophone’, which suggests the separateness of Russophone literature from Russian literature (even as the former often continues to develop

³¹ These include works by Sekerbaeva, Sultanalieva and other writers and activists of the pan-Asian collective SHTAB, on whom I focus in the last chapter.

³² Works by Abgaryan and Bibish, analysed in Chapter Three, belong to this group.

³³ These include Kalas, Kasymova and Yuzbashi, on whom I focus in Chapter Four.

³⁴ The issue of censorship and social pressures is explored in the next chapter.

in dialogue with the metropolis and its culture), rather than the label ‘non-Russian Russian literature’ which has traditionally denoted a very specific type of writing from the Brezhnev era³⁵ and moreover evokes the idea of the ‘Russian World’ (Русский Мир).³⁶ It should be noted that some scholars have expressed concerns that paying attention to writing in the colonial language risks overshadowing fiction in ‘native’ languages, and perpetuating power asymmetries between the metropole, with its ‘high-status’ writing, and the ‘periphery’, with its ‘derivative’, ‘low-status’ writing.³⁷ However, as one of the first scholars of Russophone literature Naomi Caffee aptly observes, Russophonia exists regardless of our scholarly attention to it, and ‘studying the ongoing effects of Russification, instead of ignoring its existence (which happens from a policy perspective in many former Soviet republics) helps to draw attention to

³⁵ The term originated in the Soviet Union during the Brezhnev era and gained currency as a marketing term for certain publications of the Michigan-based Ardis press, one of the most important organs of Russian *tamizdat* in the 1970s and 80s. Ardis’s key contributions include the publication of Russian and English translations of classics by such writers as Osip Mandelstam and Marina Tsvetaeva. The term in question came into academic use in the West in late 1980s to commonly denote authors publishing under the favourable policies of the Brezhnev era including Kyrgyz writer Chingiz Aitmatov and the Abkhazian novelist Fazil Iskander. Ardis Records, Michigan University Special Collections, Information Page, <<https://quod.lib.umich.edu/s/scllead/umich-scl-ardis?view=text>> [accessed 20 May 2019]; Naomi Caffee, ‘Russophonia: Towards a Transnational Conception of Russian-Language Literature’ (unpublished doctoral thesis, UCLA, 2013), p. 16.

³⁶ The direct link between transnational language ties and Russia’s national interests encapsulated by the concept of the ‘Russian World’ was first made by Russian President Vladimir Putin’s then wife Lyudmila Putina, who, at a conference devoted to ‘The Russian Language on the Boundary of Millenia’ (October 2000) remarked that ‘the confirmation of the borders of the Russian world is also the assertion and strengthening of Russia’s national interests. The Russian language unifies the people of the Russian world [...]. The borders of the Russian world extend along the borders of Russian-language usage’. A year later, in October 2001, Vladimir Putin sent members of the Russian Language Council to meet with members of the French International Organisation of Francophonie to discuss the group’s experience and ways in which it might be adopted to promote ‘Russophonia’. However, that year, when Putin addressed the Congress of Compatriots (Kongres Sootechestvennikov), he opted for the term the ‘Russian world’ to declare that ‘the concept of the “Russian world” has for time immemorial extended far beyond the geographical borders of Russian and even far beyond the border of the Russian ethnos’. See Michael S. Gorham, ‘Taking the Offensive: Language Culture and Policy under Putin’ in *After Newspeak: Language Culture and Politics in Russia from Gorbachev to Putin* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 2014), pp. 131-165 (p. 157).

³⁷ See for example Patrick Corcoran’s remark in regards to the study of Francophone identities: ‘In blunt terms, being able to state that one is “French” is to claim a particular identity whereas the fact of being “francophone” merely indicates a relationship to an “identity” that belongs to someone else or, at best, to locate oneself in terms of a culture that is not one’s own. [...] Inevitably this is a context of incompleteness, marked by difference, an inescapable sense of lower status and ultimately, possibly, exclusion rather than inclusion’. Patrick Corcoran, *The Cambridge Introduction to Francophone Literature* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), p. 10.

the continuing inequalities that originate from the Russian imperial project, and the way they are reflected in culture'.³⁸ Surely, such an inquiry would only fuel scholarly interest in comparative perspectives drawn from the writings in other literary languages of Eurasia.

One exception in my field of study is literature in Georgian. Georgian writers mainly target domestic and European markets and never write in Russian. One explanation for this phenomenon might be the local cultural elites' historically Europe-orientated outlook, a stance only fuelled by the country's independence.³⁹ As Paul Manning has argued, 'while Georgians have long seen their modern predicament in terms of their ambiguous location within an Orientalist imaginative geography, few members of the intelligentsia have ever seriously proposed any answer to that question ["Europe or Asia?"] other than "Europe"'.⁴⁰ I decided it was important to include Georgian writers in the current study to determine how language politics affects Georgian women writers' stance within the debates on the Soviet project's colonial nature, and to provide a counter-example where political and social issues are shared across the language divide. As such, Georgian literature also performs the function of a 'control' group in the analysis of underlying similarities between Russophone and 'native language' fictions from the two regions.

³⁸ Caffee, 'Russophonia', pp. 50-51. Caffee's seminal thesis (now forthcoming as a monograph) provides an excellent overview of the development of Russophone writing from the Russian late imperial period to the present day, although mainly in relation to male authors from Central Asia and the Caucasus.

³⁹ Georgia has established particularly close cultural connections with Germany where it was chosen as the guest of honour of the prestigious 2018 Frankfurt Book Fair.

⁴⁰ Paul Manning, *Strangers in a Strange Land: Occidental Publics and Orientalist Geographies in Nineteenth-Century Georgian Imaginaries* (Brighton, MA: Academic Studies Press, 2012), p. 10. The pertinence of Manning's suggestions relative to the Georgian intelligentsia's ardent, if not somewhat insecure Europeanism is evident in the following statement by German-based Georgian woman writer Nino Kharatishvili at the 2018 Frankfurt Book Fair: 'Georgian authors, filmmakers and musicians have managed to bring Georgia back onto the European cultural map and to draw attention to it. The Guest of Honour appearance is the biggest proof of this. It is all the more important to use this opportunity properly – to be open and honest and to hide nothing – to tell all the ambivalent, fragile stories that bring us closer to the European audience. Because connections are seldom sought in straightforwardness and perfection, but rather in human ambivalence, which of course every political, social and historical narrative contains'. <<https://www.buchmesse.de/en/press/press-releases/2018-03-15-georgia-celebrates-opening-of-its-2018-literature>> [accessed 30 March 2018].

Just as the changes to political, economic, social and cultural structures that colonialism imposes in the colonies are not uniform, so the degree to which the colonies adopt new colonial structures and retain their traditional ones are not homogeneous.⁴¹ Generally, most postcolonial states are left with hybrid structures that reject, revise and retain the ideologies of the colonial state.⁴² Postcolonial theory seeks to understand these postcolonial situations and analyse the strategies by which colonised societies have engaged imperial discourse.⁴³ The term postcolonial rarely signifies a definite break with colonialism, rather, it suggests that when ex-colonial countries gained national sovereignty or independence, they moved from colonial to apparently autonomous, postcolonial status, which often represented only an initial, relatively minor shift from direct to indirect rule, and a transition towards a position not so much of independence, as in-dependence.⁴⁴ Postcolonial theory recognises, therefore, that the former colonies' dependency on international organisations and on former colonial powers persists in the form of neo-colonialism.⁴⁵

While decolonisation in the post-Soviet space has been multiform and complex, as my thesis aims to highlight, women's writing from the Caucasus and Central Asia unvaryingly reveals that there exists a continuation of colonial dynamics between Russia and the two regions, albeit through new politico-economic and socio-cultural relationships. The authors evoke various facets of the post-Soviet postcolonial condition, as well as its specificities in regard to the customary Western colonial models.

⁴¹ Bart Moore-Gilbert, *Postcolonial Theory: Contexts, Practices, Politics* (New York: Verso, 1997), p. 203.

⁴² Robert Young, *Postcolonialism: An Historical Introduction* (UK: Blackwell Publishers, 2001), p. 57.

⁴³ Bill Ashcroft, *Post-Colonial Transformation* (London: Routledge, 2001), p. 7.

⁴⁴ Robert Young, *Postcolonialism: A Very Short Introduction* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2003), p. 3.

⁴⁵ Young, *Postcolonialism*, p. 45; Kwame Nkrumah, 'Neo-Colonialism, the Last Stage of Imperialism' (1965) <<https://www.marxists.org/subject/africa/nkrumah/neo-colonialism/introduction.htm>> [accessed 5 September 2017].

The immediate question that arises on the extent of (post)colonial cultural hegemony relates to the very existence of Russophone writing itself. The earliest Russophone writings in the Caucasus and Central Asia date back to the expansion of the Russian Empire into the two regions. Notable writers of this period, such as Azeri author Mirza Fatali Akhundov (1812-1878) and Kazakh philosopher-bard Abai Kunanbaev (1845-1904), hybridised traditional and newly transplanted cultural elements in their works. While advocating Russian language learning and closer allegiance with the Russian Empire, these writers took inspiration from the Western discourse to which they were exposed through Russian colonisation to pave the way for the emergence of a narrative on the nation.⁴⁶ In the Soviet period, Russophone writers became increasingly visible in line with the Soviet policy *druzhba narodov* [‘Friendship of the Peoples’].⁴⁷ Non-Russian writers such as Kyrgyz author Chingiz Aitmatov were even granted preferential treatment to non-Russian writers, allowing for comparative leeway in political and stylistic iconoclasm and moderate dissent within the predominantly ideologically collusive literary mode of the period.⁴⁸

The complicated legacy of the Soviet past has fostered a high degree of ambivalence among observers in the Soviet Union’s former ‘periphery’. One key factor has been the high degree of Russification of local elites, particularly in Central Asia, where the Russian language, more than twenty-five years after the Soviet Union’s collapse, is still widely used in metropolises such as Almaty, Astana, and Bishkek, and where everyday life had also been thoroughly Sovietized by the early 1960s. In addition, post-Soviet cultural market politics are characterised by a typically postcolonial dynamic whereby post-Soviet Russophone writers acclaimed by Moscow generally find greatest market success. These authors’ careers are still

⁴⁶ Caffee, ‘Russophonia’, p. 48.

⁴⁷ The formation of non-Russian Russophone elites in the Soviet period is dealt with at length in Chapter One.

⁴⁸ Anthony Olcott, ‘Introduction: Non-Russian Soviet Writers Today’, *Soviet Studies in Literature*, 25.2 (1989), 5-16.

largely determined by the Russian metropolis, and many Russophone authors have won various Russian literary prizes.⁴⁹ Some of them have settled in Moscow as a result.⁵⁰ Due to this mixed picture, contemporary post-Soviet women writers who write in Russian and target the metropolis often find themselves at cultural and political crossroads. Echoing the ‘independence’ of their nations as they go through the ambiguous post-Soviet transition, they inhabit in postcolonial cultures’ ‘in-between-ness’.⁵¹

Not only do these authors write in Russian, but they engage with Russian literature, folklore, and cinema, pointing to Russia’s persisting cultural influence in the region. Some of them even hold degrees in Russian literature and culture.⁵² Kazakh author Lilya Kalaus’s favourite Russian authors include Victor Pelevin, Boris Akunin and Sergei Dovlatov.⁵³ Although, Kalaus belongs to those authors for whom Russian represents a linguistically ‘neutral territory’ since both of her parents, exiles in Kazakhstan from Estonia and Crimea, spoke different languages from each other, did not know Kazakh, and had to settle for communicating in Russian. Armenian author Mariam Petrosyan declares her admiration of the Strugatsky brothers.⁵⁴ Narine Abgaryan, another Armenian author, recalls her thrill at acquiring books by Russian women writers as soon as she arrived in Russia: ‘Я купила

⁴⁹ Individual prizes won by these authors are noted in relevant chapters. Alongside ‘Большая Книга’ and ‘Книга Года’, these include ‘Русская Премия’. Awarded annually to Russophone [русскоязычные] writers based outside of Russia, ‘Русская Премия’ aims to ‘preserve’ and ‘develop’ the traditions of Russian culture and Russian language as ‘a unique phenomenon of world culture’. It is funded by the Eurasian Research Institute, a Russian NGO dedicated to maintaining ‘cultural, humanitarian, and educational connections between Russia and the former USSR’. See ‘Институт евразийских исследований, ‘О фонде’, <<http://www.ea-studies.ru/o-fonde.html>>; Русская премия, ‘О премии’ <<http://www.russpremia.ru/>> [Both accessed 7 June 2017].

⁵⁰ Rena Yuzbashi explains that she lives in Moscow because the city offers better opportunities for her literary career. Rena Yuzbashi, interview, ‘Five o'clock с Азером Гарибом’, 26 April 2015, 29:46-29:50 <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=t2qRLJTrH4w>> [accessed 2 August 2019]. Armenian author Narine Abgaryan has also remained in Russia after emigration.

⁵¹ Homi K. Bhabha, *The Location of Culture* (London/New York: Routledge, [1994] 2004), p. 2.

⁵² These include Abgaryan, Kalaus and Tajik author Eleonora Kasymova.

⁵³ From my interview with Kalaus, 6 June 2017, Almaty, Kazakhstan.

⁵⁴ Mariam Petrosyan interviewed on Radio Van, March 7, 2016, <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dJkhXr2qCU0&t=5896s>> [accessed 28 August 2019]

Толстую, Петрушевскую и Токареву, вот это были три первые книжки, которые я купила в Москве, и они у меня до сих пор лежат, это было такое счастье'.⁵⁵ Azeri author Rena Yuzbashi gives her preference to Lyudmila Ulitskaya and Polina Dashkova.⁵⁶ She holds Russian literature in such high esteem, that she does not even consider herself worthy of the title 'писатель', opting instead for 'автор'.⁵⁷ In fact, although unambiguously proclaiming her national identity as 'Azeri', Yuzbashi considers that as a Russophone author, she is making a contribution to Russian literature.⁵⁸ Abgaryan's personal page similarly describes her as 'российская писательница'.⁵⁹ These authors' stance raises a question over the appeal of the language of the former ruler beyond pragmatic considerations such as the commercial value of Russophone literature in the publishing market.

On the other hand, the cultures of the two regions have also opened up to the outside world in a similar way to Russia, the Baltic states, Belarus and Ukraine – indeed arguably more so, in some respects – with striking resemblances to postcolonial cultures in other former colonies, suggesting the importance of paying attention to the place of Russophone post-Soviet cultures in the wider postcolonial world.⁶⁰ Many of the authors whose works I examine in this

⁵⁵ Narine Abgaryan, interview, Читай-город, 14 January 2017, 29:02-29:40 <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=so1V66fFV-4>> [accessed 11 April 2018].

⁵⁶ Yuzbashi, interview, 'Five o'clock, 29:46-29:50.

⁵⁷ 'Я пишу на русском, а русская литература установила такую планку для слова писатель, что мне до нее расти, но я очень надеюсь, что я до нее дорасту' – Yuzbashi declares. Yuzbashi, interview, 'Five o'clock', 2:26 -2:36.

⁵⁸ Ibid., 26:28-26:51.

⁵⁹ Narine Abgaryan's Wikipedia page. <https://ru.wikipedia.org/wiki/Абгарян,_Наринэ_Юрьевна> [accessed 20 August 2019]

⁶⁰ For instance, Belarussian author Svetlana Alexievich, winner of the 2015 Nobel Prize in literature, has been called 'the first major postcolonial author of post-Communism'. Serguei Oushakine, 'Neighbours in Memory: a book review of Svetlana Alexievich's "Second-Hand Time" (trans. by Bela Shayevich) and "Chernobyl Prayer: A Chronicle of the Future" (trans. by Anna Gunin and Arch Tait)', *The Times Literary Supplement*, 2016, pp. 10-12. Ukrainian author Svetlana Zabuzhko's works, most notably *Fieldwork in Ukrainian Sex* (1996), strongly echo postcolonial women's writings, in particular in their examinations of the trauma of linguistic colonisation, and the double oppression of women in colonial times. For a comparative analysis of Zabuzhko's and Francophone women writers' works see Oksana Lutsyshyna, 'Postcolonial Herstory: The Novels of Assia Djebar (Algeria) and Oksana Zabuzhko (Ukraine): A Comparative Analysis' (unpublished master's thesis, University of South Florida, 2006.

thesis explicitly situate their work in a postcolonial tradition. Thus, prominent Kazakhstani author Lilya Kalaus subtitles one of her novels as ‘postcolonial’.⁶¹ Similarly, the writers and activists of the pan-Asian cultural collective SHTAB engage with works of Western postcolonial, feminist and posthumanist theorists, among them Donna Haraway, to radically re-imagine Soviet sci-fi literature, especially the worlds of the Strugatskys, and theorise bold utopian conceptions of post-Soviet/colonial identity. These patterns are not limited to literature, as evidenced by a recent exhibition in Bishkek, Kyrgyzstan which sought to examine the legacies of Central Asia’s colonial past.⁶²

Nonetheless, Russian language remains the main literary medium for reaching wider readership for writers in Central Asia and the Caucasus whose works are not widely exposed to critical interest beyond the post-Soviet sphere. In addition, most writers report unfavourable conditions of publishing industries and declining readership in their countries as two major obstacles in the dissemination of their works.⁶³ In this context, women writers face an additional hurdle due to the low status of women’s writing and societal constraints placed on women.⁶⁴ As Rosalind Marsh has argued, in Russia, Central and Eastern Europe, ‘the literary

⁶¹ Lilya Kalaus, *Фонд последней надежды: (Пост)колониальный роман* [The Fund of Last Hope: A Post-Colonial Novel] (Almaty: Litres, 2013) <<https://www.litres.ru/lilya-kalaus/fond-posledney-nadezhdy/>> [accessed 7 July 2019].

⁶² Exhibition ‘Red Pill’ organised by the artistic organisation Laboratoria Ci, Kyrgyz National Museum of Fine Arts named after Gapar Aitiev, Bishkek, 9 June - 30 June 2018.

⁶³ Kazakh author Lilya Kalaus who has extensive experience as an editor has told me that roughly a quarter of the publishing in her country is devoted to educational material, dictionaries and children’s literature. Women do win prizes but find it extremely difficult to get published, especially if they do not write in Russian. My interview with Kalaus, 6 June 2017, Almaty, Kazakhstan. Moreover, despite the increased variety of ‘serious’ literature since the collapse, reading habits in the former Soviet region have been seriously affected by newfound easy access to forms of popular entertainment that had earlier enjoyed only very limited circulation or had not existed at all, including detective fiction, glossy fashion magazines, Hollywood-style action films, and certain kinds of popular music. Emily D. Johnson, ‘Twenty Years after the Collapse of the Soviet Union: Russian and East European Literature Today’, *World Literature Today*, 2011, <<https://www.worldliteraturetoday.org/2011/november/twenty-years-after-collapse-soviet-union-russian-and-east-european-literature-today>> [accessed 7 August 2018].

⁶⁴ Among other Central Asian authors discussing this situation, Topchugul Shaidullaeva, a Kyrgyz woman writer, points out that a creative woman in her country not only lacks the financial means to self-publish, but has always been known as the wife or daughter of somebody and that any praise for a wife by the outside world is seen by her husband as a personal insult. Sarah Lawson, ‘Report on the 2007 Women Writers’ Conference in Helsinki, Finland’, <<https://www.englishpen.org/press/sarah->

canon is still frequently measured by the standards of a male-dominated establishment, and the value of contemporary women's writing or a special critical approach to it have by no means been established'.⁶⁵ The same is true for most countries in the two regions of this study, especially Central Asia.⁶⁶ The works of these women writers thus represent a minority voice in an already 'marginal' literature.⁶⁷

One of the key concerns of Russophone women writers has been to come to terms in their fiction with the traumas of the colonial past haunting them in the post-independence period. In this regard, the thematic evolution of post-Soviet Russophone women's writing echoes, to some extent, the trends in women's writing of the nineties in Russia and other ex-Soviet republics. Works in both categories tend to depict post-Soviet society and women's lives in particular in pessimistic, haunting, and dark, echoing the wider gloomy tones of late Soviet and early post-Soviet literature.

As literary scholar Sergei Romashko has pointed out, Soviet life was steeped in lies, meaning that after the break-up of the Soviet Union, people were unable to digest the past as they could not tell what was real and false in their experiences. 'In fact we are all on the verge of madness, because the break-up went straight through us, our lives, and our memory', Romashko remarks.⁶⁸ Literature in the wake of *perestroika* and *glasnost* dealt precisely with this 'paradox and gap between the official and unofficial', sought to deal with the 'real'

lawson-reports-on-the-2007-women-writers-conference-in-helsinki-finland/> [accessed 4 November 2017].

⁶⁵ Rosalind Marsh, 'Women, Literature and Gender in Contemporary Russia, Central and Eastern Europe' in *New Women's Writing in Russia, Central and Eastern Europe* (Cambridge: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2012), p. 4.

⁶⁶ The only anthology of Central Asian women's writing that has been translated into English was deliberately titled *Соловей в клетке* to suggest women writers' challenges in making their voices heard. *Nightingale in Cage. The Anthology of Central Asian Women Writers*, ed. by Lilya Kalas (Almaty: Iskander, 2008), p. 4.

⁶⁷ However, this is less true of Georgian women authors whose works have been translated into several European languages and have been visible on international platforms such as the Frankfurt book fair.

⁶⁸ Sergei Romashko, 'О Нине Садуре и ее книге', in Nina Sadur, *Сад* (Vologda: Poligrafist, 1997), quoted in Marja Rytönen, 'Memorable Fiction: Evoking Emotions and Family Bonds in Post-Soviet Russian Women's Writing', *Argument*, 2.1 (2012) 59-74 (p. 59).

experiences of people behind the official Soviet culture's falsified representations of a happy Soviet society, and, in the postmodernist turn of 'alternative' prose, questioned the very possibility of representing the 'real'.⁶⁹

Post-Soviet Russian women's writing from the nineties continued to engage with the themes of trauma and memory. Works by Lyudmila Petrushevskaya, Lyudmila Ulitskaya, Elena Chizhova and others reassess the Soviet past, unravel untold stories of the victims of the Soviet regime, convey the hidden secrets of every Soviet life and give voice to the often silent resistance of women towards repressive ideologies.⁷⁰ Similarly, one important way in which Ukrainian post-Soviet women writers such as Maria Matios, Oksana Zabuzhko and Yevhenia Kononenko have been able to gain recognition and even acceptance into the literary canon is by turning to 'national' themes, such as the traumatic Soviet past which they have examined from the perspective of a female subject.⁷¹

And yet, while sharing the pessimistic tone of the early post-Soviet (and indeed early postcolonial) fictional narratives,⁷² non-Russian Russophone women's writing is rarely set in Soviet/colonial times. Rather, the protagonists in these works are haunted by eerie memories of the past in their present. This difference suggests an importance of examining the specific treatment of colonial trauma in non-Russian cultures in relation to both Russian and other postcolonial cultures.

Scholars have recently recognised 'an urgent need to decolonize trauma studies by recognizing the globalized contexts of traumatic events, the specific forms traumatic suffering

⁶⁹ Marja Rytönen, 'Memorable Fiction: Evoking Emotions and Family Bonds in Post-Soviet Russian Women's Writing', *Argument*, 2.1 (2012) 59-74 (p. 59).

⁷⁰ One might mention here Lyudmila Petrushevskaya's *Время ночь* (1991), Lyudmila Ulitskaya's *Медя и ее дети* (1996) and Elena Chizhova's *Время женщин* (2009). Rytönen, 'Memorable', p. 59.

⁷¹ Oleksandra Ihor Shchur, 'Post-Soviet Women Writers and The National Imaginary, 1989-2009' (unpublished doctoral thesis, University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, 2013).

⁷² See for instance Adebayo Williams, 'Literature in The Time of Tyranny: African Writers and The Crisis of Governance', *Third World Quarterly*, 17.2 (1996), 349-366, especially p. 354.

takes, and the myriad ways in which it is represented in literary works'.⁷³ Works in comparative literature have significantly redressed the marginalization of non-Western and minority traumas. They have contributed to our understanding of 'the specific social and historical contexts in which trauma narratives are produced and received', as well as the 'diverse strategies of representation and resistance that these contexts invite or necessitate'.⁷⁴ Similar contributions are crucial in Slavic studies. There exist important works that provide frameworks for examining how trauma is dealt with in post-Soviet Russian culture.⁷⁵ However, a conceptual model for a cross-cultural analysis of trauma in the post-Soviet sphere is yet to be developed.

As Alexander Etkind, Svetlana Boym and several other scholars have observed, after the collapse of the Soviet Union, the atrocities of the Soviet past have not been properly examined and memorialised.⁷⁶ Etkind has proposed that 'haunted by the unburied past, post-Soviet culture has produced perverse memorial practices' – 'in a land where millions remain unburied, the dead return as the undead. They do so in novels, films, and other forms of culture which reflect, shape, and possess people's memory'.⁷⁷

Russophone women's writing is similarly steeped in uncanny moments whereby characters are haunted by the past, and yet these moments are not merely eerie, but also 'unhomely', a term coined by Homi Bhabha. In unhomely moments, collective trauma of one's

⁷³ *Decolonizing Trauma Studies: Trauma and Postcolonialism*, ed. by Sonya Andermahr (Basel, Switzerland: MDPI, 2016), p. 2. See also Stef Craps, *Postcolonial Witnessing: Trauma Out of Bounds* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012); Jill Bennett and Rosanne Kennedy, *World Memory: Personal Trajectories in Global Time* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003); *The Future of Trauma Theory: Contemporary Literature and Cultural Criticism*, ed. by Gert Beulens, Samuel Durrant and Robert Eaglestone (London: Routledge, 2013).

⁷⁴ Andermahr, *Decolonizing Trauma Studies*, p. 2.

⁷⁵ See for instance Alexander Etkind, *Warped Mourning: Stories of the Undead in the Land of the Unburied* (Redwood City, CA: Stanford University Press, 2011)

⁷⁶ Etkind, *Warped Mourning*; Svetlana Boym, *The Future of Nostalgia* (New York: Basic Books, 2001), eBook, p. 125;

⁷⁷ Alexander Etkind, 'Post-Soviet Hauntology: Cultural Memory of the Soviet Terror', *Constellations*, 16 (2009), 182-200 (p.182).

nation suddenly invades one's private sphere in the form of eerie visions. 'The border between home and world becomes confused; and, uncannily, the private the public become part of each other.'⁷⁸ As a result, one becomes unable to dissociate one's 'home' from its political and cultural context, or one's individual identity from one's collective identity, highlighting how, in the postcolonial context, national history is inextricably linked with one's search for identity. As I shall discuss in Chapter Two, fictional characters in Russophone women's unhomey narratives do not merely encounter ghosts, rather, their private spheres are invaded by the memories, whether imaginary or real, of traumatic colonial events. For these protagonists, uncanny moments are not merely born out of a confrontation with the 'unburied past', but also their malaise of defining a post-Soviet identity in view of the rapidity of the Soviet Union's cultural collapse, the national humiliation with which it was associated, the ambivalence towards its results, and the radical shift from a communitarian to an individualistic consciousness. Their fiction thus points to a more multi-layered and complex model of the post-Soviet uncanny than current theories would suggest.

Indeed, even within the broader postcolonial evocations of alienation, one can speak of a specifically post-Soviet 'unhomey' determined by the peculiarities of Soviet colonialism, especially the Soviet State's special interest in enforcing the merging of one's individual and private self with a cultural collective. Thus, dissociating one's private self from the collective becomes especially tricky in the post-Soviet reality. In this context, women writers' unhomey visions, which often occur precisely in private spaces, are charged with added political significance due to women's symbolic association with domestic settings. Re-imagining 'homes' against colonial and nationalist conceptions of these spaces can in part be read as political acts on the part of women writers.

⁷⁸ Bhabha, 'The World,' p. 141.

A very different set of themes preoccupies diaspora writers who have to make their literary careers in Moscow against Orientalist ‘Othering’, stereotyping and racism directed at migrants from the Caucasus and Central Asia.⁷⁹ Hostility towards members of this group has been especially noticeable since the late Soviet economic migration when economic stagnation (*zastoi*) deepened, and the resources were concentrated towards the centre. The collapse of the Union with the accompanying economic shocks has only sustained this phenomenon. As Jeff Sahadeo points out,

Even as social and economic supports in the Caucasus and Central Asia, part of a unitary Soviet state structure, eased the economic shocks experienced in postcolonial Latin America, Africa and Asia, peoples on all these global peripheries recognized growing imbalances that constrained their, and their children’s, hopes for a sustainable future.⁸⁰

Indeed, Sergei Abashin considers current migration patterns from Central Asia to Russia and the Russian attitudes towards migrants as typically postcolonial.⁸¹ Meredith Roman has made a similar claim by arguing that postcolonial racism in Russia can be explained by the fact ‘the Soviet Union’s ostensibly non-racist ideology actually contained the seeds of racism within it’.⁸² While not institutionalised racism of the apartheid kind, such discrimination has still been

⁷⁹ Post-Soviet writing reveals that these people are still often denoted in Russia by such colloquial derogatory terms as *negry* or *chernomazyi*. For instance, in Bibish’s autobiography *Танцовщица из Хивы*, the protagonist and her sons are physically bullied and called *черномазый*, *черножопый*, *‘черная овечка*’, *‘бомж*’, *‘нищий*’ and *‘негр*’ (p. 249, p. 247, p. 183). See also Azerbaijani author Rena Yuzbashi’s novel *Скинхед [Skinhead]* (Moscow: Eksmo, 2010) which discusses racism towards Caucasians in Russia. See also Jeff Sahadeo, ‘Soviet “Blacks” and Place Making in Leningrad and Moscow’, *Slavic Review*, 71.2 (2012), 331-358; Jeff Sahadeo, ‘Black Snouts Go Home! Migration and Race in Late Soviet Leningrad and Moscow’, *The Journal of Modern History*, 88.4 (2016), 797-826.

⁸⁰ Jeff Sahadeo, ‘The Accidental Traders: Marginalization and Opportunity from The Southern Republics to Late Soviet Moscow’, *Central Asian Survey*, 30.3-4 (2011), 521-540, p. 524.

⁸¹ Sergei Abashin, ‘Советское = колониальное? За и против’, in *Понятия о Советском в Центральной Азии*, ed. by Georgy Mamedov and Oksana Shatalova (Bishkek: Shtab-Press, 2016), pp. 28-50, pp. 47-48.

⁸² Roman suggests that in the post-Soviet period Moscow readily portrays its former little brothers from the Caucasus and Central Asia as ungrateful criminals and parasites because, according to the logic of the official Soviet script, their foolish secession from the system in which they were the chief beneficiaries simply meant their degeneration to their uncivilized pre-Soviet, criminal if not barbarian and ‘dark’ existence. Meredith Roman, ‘Making Caucasians Black: Moscow Since the Fall of

inhibitory and distressing to those who have experienced it.⁸³

Responding to the need of re-evaluating relations with the migrant ‘Others’ of the former Soviet ‘East’ in the postcolonial context, and in large part due to the Russian state’s encouragement to promote works focusing on inter-ethnic encounters, migrants have become increasingly visible in post-Soviet culture, as I shall argue in Chapter Three. Like other ex-colonial metropolises that retain an economic upper hand on their ex-colonial territories and provide wide support to migrant literature in the form of advances, publicity, and prizes,⁸⁴ Moscow’s cultural market is very favourable to the theme of migration. In fact, Birgit Beumers even points to Russian culture’s willingness to regard migrants from Central Asia and the Caucasus, particularly *gastarbeiters*, as new Russian heroes.⁸⁵ This environment provides ample opportunities for diaspora writers from Central Asia and the Caucasus to enter the Russian publishing market, albeit at the risk of being Orientalised and of exoticising themselves.

One of the key concerns of postcolonial theory has been to establish how the continued power asymmetries and cultural patronage determines the positions of postcolonial writers in the countries that used to be colonies. Postcolonial writers who originate from the ‘periphery’ and who gain success in the metropolises are often criticised for representing or becoming part of the privileged elite whose work ‘willy-nilly remains collusive’ neo-colonial ideologies.⁸⁶ Women writers, especially Muslim, often face a double pressure of collusion with dominant ideologies since Western readers in the ex-colonial empires are inclined to read their arrival in

Communism and the Racialization of Non-Russians’, *Journal of Communist Studies and Transition Politics*, 18 (2002), 1-27, p. 8; p. 1.

⁸³ Jeff Sahadeo, ‘The Accidental Traders’, p. 521.

⁸⁴ Elleke Boehmer, *Colonial and Postcolonial Literature: Migrant Metaphors*, 2nd ed (Oxford: New York: Oxford University Press, 2005), p. 232.

⁸⁵ Birgit Beumers, ‘A “Hero of Our Time”: The Gastarbeiter in Recent Russian Cinema’, *Zeitschrift Für Slavische Philologie*, 70 (2014), 161-78.

⁸⁶ Boehmer, *Colonial*, p. 232.

the ex-imperial centre as a narrative of progress from oppression to freedom.⁸⁷ Compounding this is the challenge of eschewing cultural representations of migrants as victims, also dominant in Russian culture, for instance in Sergey Dvortsevov's recent film *Айка* (2018).⁸⁸ Russophone migrant writers from the Caucasus and Central Asia thus run the risk of offering up sentimental narratives and fictionalising their host countries into an alter ego against which Russianness is measured and unconditionally valorised. I am concerned with establishing how, in the context of the persistently Orientalist Russian literary market, these authors establish their literary careers and determine their politico-cultural allegiances, and to what extent they manage to make their 'subaltern' voices heard.

In the context of postcolonial literature, native American writer and theorist Gerald Vizenor developed a notion of 'trickster discourse', a means of cultural survival through the interpretation of, and resistant response to, stereotypical representations, often through humorous appropriation of them.⁸⁹ Tricksterism is also a useful theoretical concept when approaching migrant narratives by Russophone creative artists who resist losing their integrity by joining the establishment, as I shall show in Chapter Three. I focus on two women authors who have used the Russian government's sponsorship of new, positive Russian heroes from the migrant community to their own advantage. Through adopting the mask of a fool, their literary personae perform this role through seemingly overidentifying with the stereotypes of naïve and uncouth Oriental immigrants and simultaneously suggesting a common cultural code with Russian culture and its heroes. And yet, in moments when their masks slip and the ironic nature of their performances is revealed, these authors are able to deconstruct from within the very stereotypes which they seemingly support, exposing their fabricated nature.

⁸⁷ Carine M. Mardorossian, 'From Literature of Exile to Migrant Literature', *Modern Language Studies*, 32.2 (2002), 15-33, p. 22.

⁸⁸ Such migrant tropes in Russian culture are discussed in detail in Chapter Three.

⁸⁹ Gerald Vizenor, 'Trickster Discourse', *American Indian Quarterly*, 14.3 (1990), 277-287.

The tone of irony is more explicit in NGO narratives by women authors who have built on their experiences of working in the aid sector to critique their societies' subjection to neo-colonialism. While the dissolution of the Soviet Union promised the revival of indigenous epistemologies, alternative models of being and different gender discourses in post-Soviet Central Asia and Caucasus, 'secondary Eurocentrism' inherited from Soviet Orientalism prevailed. Among others, Madina Tlostanova suggests that 'the ethnic elites of the newly independent states continued the economic, social and cultural discrimination of their own people, hiding behind the neo-liberal or ethnic-nationalist values and continuing to practice self-deprecating intellectual dependency on Western modernity'.⁹⁰ As will be discussed in Chapter Four, this dependency, with its 'specific self-Orientalising inferiority complex'⁹¹ is particularly well demonstrated by women's satirical accounts of foreign-funded post-Soviet NGOs.

While NGOs and neo-colonialism are among the key concerns of postcolonial theorists, 'no critic has yet thoroughly addressed the existence of a narrative genre produced by and organized around the activities of NGOs', 'nor has there been any sustained attention to the participation in or appropriation of such a genre by postcolonial writers'.⁹² Unsurprisingly, the same applies to post-Soviet fictional narratives on NGOs. My study aims to fill this void by focusing on narratives whose ideological irreverence is striking not only within Russophone, but also wider postcolonial literature which has been witnessing 'an increasing 'NGO-ization'.⁹³

⁹⁰ Tlostanova, 'The Janus-Faced', p. 8.

⁹¹ Tlostanova, *Gender*, p. 140.

⁹² Liam O'Loughlin, 'Negotiating Solidarity: Indra Sinha's *Animal's People* and the "NGO-ization" of Postcolonial Narrative', *Comparative American Studies An International Journal*, 12.1-2 (2014), 101-113, p. 102. To my knowledge, O'Loughlin's is the only study that closely examines a fictional NGO narrative. The set of question that guides his analysis are very different from my own, as I explore in Chapter Four.

⁹³ According to Liam O'Loughlin, 'as an increasingly pervasive genre of 'writing the disaster', the NGO narrative traffics in the spectacle of suffering (with varying degrees of self-awareness) and draws

When approaching Russophone NGO narratives, Achille Mbembe's concept of 'mockery within' proves particularly useful. While recognising the ongoing effects of colonialism, Mbembe highlights the importance of refocusing analytical attention on the daily rituals by which the postcolonial people negotiate these effects in their everyday lives. Blurring the oppressor/oppressed binaries, Mbembe focuses on the potential complicity between the neo-colonial forces, the corrupt élites and their subjects. He adds that considering this interdependence, the main, if not only, means of resistance to the forces of oppressive power is to expose them from within through laughter and mockery, even while ironically embracing them.⁹⁴ Echoing Mbembe's notion of mockery from within, Russophone women authors satirise NGOs' neo-colonial dependency on, and complicity with Russia and the West, and the ensuing self-orientalising effects on post-Soviet identity constructions.

While Russophone women writers' anti-bureaucratic/colonial narratives daringly challenge the status-quo through mockery, they do not suggest possibilities of transcending it. The same cannot be said of Russophone sci-fi narratives which have been gaining currency among the new generation of Central Asian writers, as evidenced by pan-Asian writers' short story collection *Совсем Другие* (2018) which I analyse in Chapter Five. The key issue at stake for these authors is challenging the post-independence rise in nationalism and the accompanying hegemonic identity politics in the region.⁹⁵ By building on some of the key notions in posthumanism, including cyborg identities, cybernetic embodiment and companion species (Donna Haraway), they create utopian and dystopian worlds (often Soviet-inspired ones) to radically re-imagine post-Soviet Central Asian identities as polyvocal and respectful of the region's diverse cultural heritage, politics, gender composition and ecology.

notions of transnational responsibility and implication from that spectacle'. O'Loughlin, 'Negotiating Solidarity', p. 102.

⁹⁴ Mbembe, *On the Postcolony*, p. 108.

⁹⁵ These processes are analysed in the next chapter.

Benedict Anderson famously observes that nations are imagined constructs. Anderson highlights that nations ‘depend for their existence on an apparatus of critical fictions in which imaginary literature plays a decisive role’.⁹⁶ And yet, literatures do not simply perpetuate national myths to which Anderson suggests they are subordinated, they can also subvert them. This is precisely what SHTAB’s Russophone writers are seeking to achieve – they employ literature to challenge the very notion of a stable national identity. In this context, their favouring of posthuman utopias is not surprising. As Bill Ashcroft highlights, ‘postcolonial writing is suffused with future thinking, with a utopian hope for the future, a belief [...] in the possibility of justice and equality, in the transformative power of writing [...]’.⁹⁷ Feminist cyborg writing holds similar transformative potential, namely in its ability ‘to imbue problems of identity and subjectivity with gender/racial consciousness’.⁹⁸ As Donna Haraway points out, ‘the cyborgs populating feminist science fiction make very problematic the statuses of man or woman, human, artefact, member of a race, individual entity, or body’.⁹⁹

Here, Russophone literature once again diverges from post-Soviet Russian and Eastern European fiction, as I shall discuss in Chapter Five. While authors in Central Asia and the Caucasus are concerned with challenging postcolonial nationalisms and the legacies of Soviet colonialism, Russian writers are preoccupied with commentary on Russia’s anxieties over its perpetual Others – the West and Russia’s ‘Eastern’ neighbours’. Consequently, rather than experimenting with cyborgs and other non-human beings, they evoke more conservative transhuman figures, especially vampires – the archetypal ‘Others’ of world literature. As for Eastern European utopian projects, they lack the firmly pronounced postcolonial dimension of Central Asian fictions.

⁹⁶ Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities* (London: Verso, 1983), p. 15.

⁹⁷ Bill Ashcroft, ‘Introduction: Spaces of Utopia’, *Spaces of Utopia* 2.1 (2012), 1-17 (p. 2).

⁹⁸ Hui-Chuan Chang, ‘Feminist Cyborg Writing and the Imagining of Asia’ in *Spaces of Utopia*, 2.2 (2012), 45-60 (p. 45).

⁹⁹ Haraway, ‘A Cyborg’, p. 178.

The transnational approach adopted in the analysis of the chapters produces new perspectives on Russia's imperial and postcolonial engagements, as well as on the predominantly Eurocentric concepts of Empire and Colonialism. Post-colonial theory cannot be globally applicable until it is more comprehensive in its outlook. As David Chioni Moore cautions, 'to privilege the Anglo-Franco cases as the colonizing standard and to call the Russo-Soviet experiences deviations, is wrongly to perpetuate the already superannuated centrality of the Western or Anglo-Franco world'.¹⁰⁰ The thesis also extends the cultural map of Russia to the understudied post-Soviet South and connects the fields of Russian and Postcolonial Studies. While the concept of 'the Russian world' has been heavily politicised (particularly since 2014) and has become part of the Russian government's push to recapture Great Power status,¹⁰¹ the fact is that Russian remains the second language for many inhabitants of the Caucasus and Central Asia, and Moscow still to a significant extent has the status of metropolis. It is both the scholarly and literary recognition and the denial of this (and many positions in between) that I propose to examine in the discussion that follows.

¹⁰⁰ David Chioni Moore, 'Is the Post- in Postcolonial the Post- in Post-Soviet? Toward a Global Postcolonial Critique', *PMLA*, 116.1 (2001), 111-128 (p. 123).

¹⁰¹ Igor Zevelev, 'The Russian World in Moscow's Strategy', CSIS (Centre for Strategic and International Studies), 22 August 2016, <<https://www.csis.org/analysis/russian-world-moscows-strategy>> [accessed 20 September 2019]

Chapter One

The Historical and Theoretical Background of Russophone Literature

Introduction

This chapter further examines the context, background and theories underpinning this study. It includes three main sections which proceed in a rough chronological sequence from Russian imperialism to the Soviet period, to the post-Soviet era. First, I provide the literature review of critical works in Russian postcolonial studies which I build around the following argument: the tendency in literary and cultural criticism to ignore literary texts produced by non-Russian authors from the former Russo-Soviet Empire is rooted in the theoretical discourse on Russia's subaltern and internally colonised identity vis-à-vis the West. The second section assesses the colonial aspects of the Soviet Empire and traces the development of Russophone writing within this context. In the final part of the chapter, I examine post-Soviet national building, mythmaking, and censorship to consider the pressures they generate for Russophone writers, especially women authors.

In an article discussing the applicability of post-colonial theory to the post-Soviet sphere, Gayatri Spivak points to the potential scope for the development of the existing critical debates around postcolonial theory, suggesting that they can be enriched through a consideration of alternative perspectives on its main concepts:

When an alien nation-state establishes itself as ruler, impressing its own laws and systems of education and rearranging the mode of production for its own economic benefit, ‘colonizer’ and ‘colonized’ can be used. The consequences of applying them to a wide array of political and geographic entities would be dire if colonialism had only one model. On the other hand, if we notice how different kinds of adventures and projects turn into something that fits the bare-bones description given above, we will have a powerful analysis of the politics of progressivism, of one sort or another.¹

While we can fruitfully examine how the Russo-Soviet imperial projects fit ‘the bare-bones description’ of colonialism evoked by Spivak, and the diversity that her description suggests, Russian studies departments display a remarkable lack of enthusiasm for postcolonial theory and Russophone literature from the former Soviet republics, especially from the Caucasus and Central Asia.² Yet, the potential points of divergence of the Russian colonial model from other standard colonial models would only undermine the legitimacy of Russian postcolonial studies if we were to fixate on the centrality of these Western models, and not if, on the other hand, we were to question the very usefulness of the persistently influential tripartite (first, second and third worlds) and Eurocentric modernizing and developmentalist models of thought.³

The development of Russian postcolonial studies would enrich postcolonial theory by introducing a post-socialist perspective within its hermeneutics. As Adeeb Khalid points out, the Soviet experience can ‘inject new caveats and perhaps a new scepticism toward generalizations built on the basis of the experience of mainly bourgeois, western European overseas empires’.⁴ The study of post-Soviet cultures within the postcolonial framework would equally address what Ewa Thompson identifies as a persisting problem of the current

¹ Gayatri Spivak in Gayatri Spivak, Nancy Condee, Harsha Ram and Vitaly Chernetsky, ‘Are We Postcolonial? Post-Soviet Space’, *PMLA*, 3.121 (2006), 828-836 (p. 828).

² As I will demonstrate later in the chapter.

³ Robert Marsh has argued that ‘modernization theory is far from dead’ and has in fact been revived in some part ‘due to sociology of knowledge factors, such as the collapse of Soviet communism’. Robert Marsh, ‘Modernization Theory, Then and Now’, *Comparative Sociology*, 13 (2014), 261-283. See also Robert Moran, ‘A Three Worlds Theory for the 21st Century’, *Huffpost*, 12 May 2016, <https://www.huffpost.com/entry/a-three-worlds-theory-for_b_13441454> [accessed 4 July 2018].

⁴ Adeeb Khalid, ‘Introduction: Locating the (post-)colonial in Soviet history’, *Central Asian Survey*, 26.4 (2007), 465-473 (p. 471).

knowledge production – the seemingly neat East/West division which is unsettled by the Russian model of history:

The perception of postcolonialist commentators that history is ‘the discourse through which the West has asserted its hegemony over the rest of the world’ is incorrect. The world has never been divided into two neat compartments, West and non-West. The bilateral vision disregards the fact that Russia engaged in a massive effort to manufacture a history, one that stands in partial opposition to the history created by the West.⁵

As for Russian studies, subsuming the study of post-Soviet cultures under the broader category of postcolonial studies would ensure a more sophisticated understanding of the Soviet experience and the current politico-economic, social and cultural developments in the post-Soviet region. As noted by Radim Hladík, such a critical turn would also ‘entail greater subtlety in the study of post-socialism beyond simple periodization and lead to the exploration of the other ramifications of the prefix “post”’.⁶ By extension, one can also interrogate the very concepts of Soviet communism and socialism. In addition, Russian postcolonial studies would turn a much-needed spotlight on the post-Soviet countries which still remain in a relative post-War isolation, especially in the southern sphere of the post-Soviet region, by integrating their voices into the global dialogue. As Thompson points out,

Unlike Western colonies, which have increasingly talked back to their former masters, Russia's colonies have by and large remained mute . . . They continue to be perceived within the paradigms relevant to Russia, the objects of Russian perception rather than subjects responding to their own histories, perceptions, and interests.⁷

We have to distinguish, however, between the issue of the lack of ‘talking back’ from the post-Soviet world, and the lack of listening ears. The claim that these countries have been ‘mute’ is exaggerated and highlights that very little attention is being paid to a rich source

⁵ Ewa Thompson, *Imperial Knowledge: Russian Literature and Colonialism* (Westport: Greenwood Press, 2000), pp. 23-24.

⁶ Radim Hladík, ‘A Theory’s Travelogue: Post-Colonial Theory in Post-Socialist Space’, *Teorie vědy*, 33.4 (2011), pp. 561-590 (p. 571).

⁷ Thompson, *Imperial*, p. 23.

where colonial and postcolonial identities are negotiated – literature. Hladík is right to point out that ‘as more and more time passes since the collapse of state socialism, literature manifests not less, but more interest in the importance that the state-socialist past and durable cultural and knowledge formations hold for the post-socialist present’.⁸ In addition, some Russophone writers explicitly situate their works within wider postcolonial literature, prompting Russian studies to engage with postcolonial theory.⁹

The possibility that post-colonial theory in its current form does not apply perfectly to the Russian Empire should be regarded as a source of critical excitement rather than an incentive for shying away from the subject. As Spivak highlights, theory need not be employed as fixed and consequently rigid academic tool:

I don't think one chooses a theoretical model and then applies it to primary material. I think the production of theory is itself a practice and the matter studied participates in this . . . it is invariably what escapes the reading that generates interest for more robust users of ‘theory’.¹⁰

Spivak’s arguments echo Edward Said’s concept of ‘Travelling Theory’ which examines what happens with theory when it is transposed to and adopted by new contexts. Said argues that theory is essentially and especially flexible in the context of literary studies. ‘Fields like literature or the history of ideas have no intrinsically enclosing limits, and [...] no one methodology is imposable upon what is essentially heterogeneous and open activity – the writing and interpretation of texts.’¹¹ Said’s idea leads me to examine the often peculiar ways in which postcolonial theory has been remoulded in Russian studies.

⁸ Hladík, ‘A Theory’, p. 565.

⁹ See, for instance Kazakh author Lilja Kalaus’s novel *Фонд последней надежды: (Пост)колониальный роман* [The Fund of Last Hope: A Post-Colonial Novel] (Almaty: Litres, 2013) <<https://www.litres.ru/lilya-kalaus/fond-posledney-nadezhdy/>> [accessed 7 February 2019]

¹⁰ Gayatri Spivak in Stephen Collier, Alex Cooley, Bruce Grant, Harriet Murav, Marc Nichanian, Gayatri Spivak and Alexander Etkind, ‘Empire, Union, Center, Satellite: The Place of Post-Colonial Theory in Slavic/Central and Eastern European/(Post-)Soviet Studies: A Questionnaire’, *Urbans Review*, 7(2003), 5-25 (p. 17).

¹¹ Edward Said, ‘Traveling Theory’ in Edward Said, *The World, the Text, and the Critic* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1983), pp. 226-247 (p. 230).

Russian Postcolonial Theory: Empire, Orientalism, and Self-Colonisation

To this day, the application of postcolonial theory in Russian and Slavonic literary studies has been largely limited to the study of nineteenth-century Russian canonical literature, particularly in relation to Russian Orientalism in the Caucasus. Studies in this category often draw from Edward Said's *Orientalism* (1978) to highlight that the variegated, though often negative and marginalising representations of the Russian Empire's non-Russian colonial subjects, its 'Orient', played a crucial role in Russia's own identity formation.¹² Among these, Susan Layton's and David Schimmelpenninck van der Oye's studies point out that Said's theory of Western Orientalism cannot be directly applied to Russian Orientalism since Russia's historically ambivalent self-perception as neither East nor West has in turn generated its ambivalent approach to the 'Orient'.¹³ According to Layton, Russia's hybrid, semi-Asian identity found expression in the romanticizing of the North Caucasus peoples by such canonical nineteenth-century Russian writers as Alexander Pushkin, Alexander Bestuzhev-Marlinsky, and Mikhail Lermontov. 'Russia's cultural heterogeneity', Layton argues, 'predisposed romantics to enhancing Asia some way or another, instead of identifying exclusively and consistently with the Western civilization to which, they knew, their country did not wholly belong'.¹⁴ Kalpana Sahni nicely summarises the singularity of Russian Orientalism:

¹² See Susan Layton, *Russian Literature and Empire: Conquest of the Caucasus from Pushkin to Tolstoy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994); Kalpana Sahni, *Crucifying the Orient: Russian Orientalism and the Colonization of Caucasus and Central Asia* (Bangkok: Orchid Press, 1997); Ewa Thompson, *Imperial Knowledge: Russian Literature and Colonialism* (Westport: Greenwood Press, 2000); Harsha Ram, *The Imperial Sublime: A Russian Poetics of Empire* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2003); David Schimmelpenninck van der Oye, *Russian Orientalism: Asia in the Russian Mind from Peter the Great to the Emigration* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2010).

¹³ Layton, *Russian Literature*; Schimmelpenninck van der Oye, *Russian Orientalism*.

¹⁴ Salome Asatiani, 'Literature and Empire: Scholar Susan Layton Discusses Russia's "Literary Caucasus"', RadioFreeEurope/RadioLiberty, 13 November 2011

<http://www.rferl.org/a/literature_empire_scholar_susan_layton_discusses_russia_literary_caucasus/24389678.html> [accessed 20 November 2016].

The Russian elite became mentally colonized without having ever been a colonial subject. This was the uniqueness of Russian history and created the inherent contradictions of Russian Orientalism, whereby the Oriental attitude directed at them was accepted by the Russians and subsequently employed to downgrade the conquered people.¹⁵

Studies into Russian Orientalism serve as an invaluable base for the evolution of Russian postcolonial studies. Inevitably, they tell us more about the imperial gaze and perspective than the ‘subaltern’ voices of the colonised nations. Thus, it is vital for scholars in Russian studies to also consider the Russian colonial context from the viewpoint of the ‘periphery’ of the empire. When pointing out the neglect of the non-Russian literary and intellectual traditions of the former Soviet Union, Harsha Ram argues that ‘we remain trapped in the Petrine paradigm of Russia’s eternally anxious opening to the West; where we look to the East, we remain content with Russian representations of it’.¹⁶ Ram’s forthcoming monograph on the Russian-Georgian cultural encounter in the imperial and early Soviet eras makes a crucial step in redressing this epistemological imbalance. So does Rebecca Gould’s 2016 study comparing Georgian, Chechen, and Daghestani depictions of anticolonial insurgency in the Russian Empire.¹⁷ Moreover, in view of major developments in postcolonial theory since Said’s seminal study, we need to extend methodological approaches beyond the engagement with the founding texts of postcolonial theory.¹⁸

¹⁵ Sahni, *Crucifying*, p. 15.

¹⁶ Harsha Ram in Spivak et al., ‘Are We’, p. 832.

¹⁷ Harsha Ram, *The Scale of Culture. City, Nation, Empire and the Russian-Georgian Encounter* (forthcoming). Ram has also written several articles on this subject; Rebecca Gould, *Writers and Rebels: The Literature of Insurgency in the Caucasus* (New Haven, Connecticut: Yale University Press, 2016). See also *Россия - Грузия после империи: сборник статей*, ed. by Mir’ya Lekke and Elena Chkhaidze (Moscow: Новое литературное обозрение, 2018)

¹⁸ In this regard, see the following pioneering works: Madina Tlostanova, *Postcolonialism and Postsocialism in Fiction and Art: Resistance and Re-existence* (Cham, Switzerland: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017); Naomi Caffee, ‘Russophonia: Towards a Transnational Conception of Russian-Language Literature’ (unpublished doctoral thesis, UCLA 2013); Dmitriy Mel’nikov, ‘Toward Russophone Super-Literature: Making Subjectivities, Spaces and Temporalities in Post-Soviet Kazakhstani Russophone Writing’ (unpublished doctoral thesis, Nazarbayev University, 2017); Olga Breininger, ‘Literature as Performative Warfare: Violence, Space, and Religion in the North Caucasus’ (unpublished doctoral thesis, Harvard University, 2019).

The lack of critical attention to texts produced by non-Russian authors who inhabit the territories that once formed part of the Soviet Union (and before that, the Russian Empire) can be partly explained by the theoretical discourse on Russia's subaltern and internally colonised identity vis-à-vis the West, a notion which has somewhat monopolised the application of postcolonial theory in Slavic studies. Paradoxically, while few scholars employ the term 'postcolonial' in relation to the Caucasus and Central Asia, numerous influential works consider Russian identity as 'postcolonial', 'internally colonised' and 'subaltern'. On the one hand, these studies illuminate the ambiguities of Russian imperialism, fill important research gaps, including in respect of the Russian conquest of Siberia, and help to demystify Russia's foreign policies.¹⁹ Their commendable endeavour of incorporating Russian imperial experience into postcolonial studies is jeopardised, however, by what Madina Tlostanova identifies as the general lack of critical preoccupation with racial politics in the Russo-Soviet empires.²⁰ Yet, one of the most important exceptions here is Marina Mogilner's *Homo Imperii: A History of Physical Anthropology in Russia* (2013) on racial science in pre-revolutionary Russia and the early Soviet Union. Mogilner revises the widely assumed view that the supposedly 'nonclassical' nature of the Russian empire and its equally 'nonclassical' modernity made Russian intellectuals immune to the racial obsessions of Western Europe and the United States.²¹

An important question thus inevitably arises on whether Russia can in fact be considered as postcolonial state. Dragan Kujundzic considers Russian identity as 'postcolonial' based on a 'self-colonial impulse in Russian history', most notably epitomized by Peter the Great's

¹⁹ See Alexander Etkind, *Internal Colonization. Russia's Imperial Experience* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2011).

²⁰ Madina Tlostanova, 'Internal Colonisation. Russia's Imperial Experience by Alexander Etkind (review)', *Postcolonial Europe*, 10 May, 2014 <[http://www.postcolonial-europe.eu/reviews/166-book-review-internal-colonization-russias-imperial-experience->](http://www.postcolonial-europe.eu/reviews/166-book-review-internal-colonization-russias-imperial-experience-) [accessed 9 July 2019]

²¹ Marina Mogilner, *Homo Imperii: A History of Physical Anthropology in Russia* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2013)

reforms and the ensuing ‘psychological destruction of Russian people’.²² Alexander Etkind, who also considers Russia an internal colony, argues that ‘in Russia, the typical colonial endeavours were directed not overseas but rather at the people in the homeland’ and that ‘to put it in postcolonial terms, the *narod* was the subaltern’.²³ According to Etkind, the Russian peasantry was discursively shaped into the ‘Other’ and made distinct through markers of alterity, such as a full beard, religious confession, or ascription of estate. The Russian elite orientalistised the *narod* [the Russian nation] by developing historiographies, running field studies, and writing novels about it:

In a characteristically colonial way, agronomists ascribed to peasants such qualities as illiteracy, irrationality, benightedness, deafness, obscurity, inertia, absence of civil consciousness, etc. Kotsonis is right to compare his research of the Russian countryside with the “Subaltern Studies” of the Indian society under British rule.²⁴

The Russian elites and the Russian *narod*, however, were both Russian, in other words both the ‘coloniser’ and the ‘colonised’ were of the same ethnicity, culture and language, and the oppression of the peasants could only stretch up to the limit beyond which the common cultural base of these two classes would become obvious. On the other hand, as Mykoła Riabczuk points out, in countries such as Belarus and Ukraine, ‘colonial relations were ethnicized; local language and culture became a stigma, a sign of backwardness, “blackness”, and inferiority vis-a-vis the superior Russophones who represented both wealth and power’.²⁵ Indeed, people from colonised majority groups often russified their surnames, while members of the peasantry adopted surnames based on the traditional patronymic which were not

²² Dragan Kujundzic, “‘After’: Russian Post-Colonial Identity”, *MLN*, 115.5 (2000), 892-908, p. 897; p. 984.

²³ Alexander Etkind in Collier et al., ‘Empire’, p. 23; p. 20.

²⁴ Etkind, ‘Empire’, p. 24.

²⁵ Mykoła Riabczuk, ‘Colonialism in Another Way. On the Applicability of Postcolonial Methodology for the Study of Postcommunist Europe’, *Porownania*, 13 (2013), 47-59 (p. 57).

morphologically distinct.²⁶ Alexander Morrison likewise doubts that ‘the relationship between Russian administrators and Muslim subjects in Central Asia, [can] really be equated to the extension of the state’s control over ethnic Russians in the empire’s heartland, or the relationship between Russia’s elites and its peasantry’.²⁷

Furthermore, one could argue that conflictual attitudes towards the peasantry have prevailed in other imperial or non-imperial countries in different historical periods, in which case the boundary between ‘internal colonisation’ and simple oppression and class conflict becomes fuzzy. In fact, Andreas Schönle, Andrei Zorin and Alexei Evstratov altogether problematise the equation of Russia’s self-Europeanisation with the oppression of the Russian people. They suggest, for instance, that if the ultimate goals of Meiji restoration and Kemalist revolution – two other major Europeanisation projects – were to mobilize a broader stratum of society through the elites, in Petrine and post-Petrine Russia, by contrast, ‘the state considered the top-down Europeanization of a narrow upper class as more effective, and often safer, than fundamental social and political transformation’.²⁸

It also seems extreme to declare that Russia’s typical colonial endeavours were directed inside rather than outside. First of all, there were also parts of the Western empires where marginalised groups were granted certain advantages, for instance, women in New Zealand

²⁶ Oleksandr Taranenکو, ‘Ukrainian and Russian in Contact: Attraction and Estrangement’, *International Journal of the Sociology of Language*, 183.1 (2007), 119-140, especially p. 125. On how the Armenian bourgeoisie Russified their surnames see Ronald Grigor Suny, *Looking Toward Ararat: Armenia in Modern History* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1993), p. 23.

Russification of surnames persisted in the Soviet period, leading official calls and measures by post-Soviet states, in Azerbaijan and Tajikistan for instance, to de-Russify surnames with Russian endings and forbid future russification. ‘Dushanbe Bans Use of Russified Surnames for Ethnic Tajik Children’, RFE/RL, 29 April 2016, <<https://www.rferl.org/a/tajikistan-russified-surnames-banned/27706350.html>>; ‘Azerbaijan Planning To De-Russify Family Names’, RFE/RL, 7 February 2010 <https://www.rferl.org/a/Azerbaijan_Planning_To_DeRussify_Famil_Names/1951314.html>; ‘Azerbaijan “may ban Russian names”, *BBC*, 5 March 2013 <<https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-europe-21658746>> [all accessed 5 August 2019].

²⁷ Alexander Morrison, ‘*Internal Colonization. Russia’s Imperial Experience* by Alexander Etkind (review)’, *Ab Imperio* 3(2013), 445-457 (p. 446).

²⁸ *The Europeanized Elite in Russia, 1762–1825*, ed. by Andreas Schönle, Andrei Zorin and Alexei Evstratov (DeKalb: Northern Illinois University Press, 2016), p. 3.

were given suffrage earlier than in the British metropolis.²⁹ Moreover, not only does such argumentation overlook the colonial subject status of the nations in the Russian Empire and the Soviet Union, but it also risks promoting the image of Russia as a benign coloniser, harsh on itself but benevolent towards, and even beneficial for, its external colonies.

Indeed, when asked about the place of post-colonial theory in Slavic/Central and Eastern European/(post-)soviet studies, Etkind overlooks all violent aspects of Russian colonialism and instead focuses on the apparent privileges of Russia's external imperial subjects, arguing that 'the heartland regions of the country were exploited more than the peripheral regions'.³⁰ In the same vein, Geoffrey Hosking argues that Russia's state-building obstructed its nation-building and that 'the effort required to mobilize revenues and raise armies for the needs of the empire entailed the subjection of virtually the whole population, but especially the Russians'.³¹ A similar argument is put forward by Russian commentators who argue that the Soviet system made limited inroads into the societies under its control. A.V. Malashenko goes as far as to argue that the cultural loss has been far greater for the Russians than, say, Central Asians, since Russian Orthodoxy 'was essentially destroyed in the years of Communist rule while Islam was able to preserve its influence at all levels of society'.³² Thus the 'psychological destruction of Russian people', as undeniable as it is, is made to appear as infinitely more deserving of the term 'colonial' than the equally undeniable, though mysteriously overlooked hardships of the 'colonised' in the Caucasus and Central Asia.

²⁹ *Women's Suffrage in the British Empire: Citizenship, Nation and Race*, ed. by Ian Christopher Fletcher, Laura E. Nym Mayhall and Philippa Levine (London: Routledge, 2000)

³⁰ Alexander Etkind in Collier et al., 'Empire', p. 21.

³¹ Geoffrey Hosking, *Russia: Empire, People and Empire, 1552 – 1917* (Harvard: Harvard University Press 1997), p. xxiv.

³² A. V. Malashenko, 'Islam Versus Communism: The Experience of Coexistence', in *Russia's Muslim Frontiers*, ed. by D. Eickelman (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1993), pp. 63-78 (p. 63). For the critique of this work see Deniz Kandiyoti, 'Post-Colonialism Compared: Potentials and Limitations in the Middle East and Central Asia', *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 34.2 (2002), 279-297 (p. 289).

Such flattening of differences between the experiences of Russians and the populations subjected by Russia is problematic for numerous reasons. Certainly, one cannot deny that the Russian Empire and the Soviet Union were often as fatal for Russians as for non-Russians. In addition, pointing out the subtleties of Russia's ambiguous nature as a coloniser, and indeed a nation, can be intellectually enriching and useful, for instance when studying post-Soviet Russian literature.³³ Furthermore, colonisation myths, such as Russia's ceaseless benevolence towards and support for the non-Russian peoples of the mountains and steppes, play an important role in the constitution of Russian identity; they are widely believed even by specialists.³⁴ However, such an enquiry into Russia's postcoloniality should not be undertaken at the expense of Russia's colonial subjects who are discursively pitted against the Russians in a contest of victimhood. Focusing on Etkind's project, Harsha Ram highlights the risks of such an undertaking in perpetuating the imperialist discourse:

Even the conquest of the Caucasus was 'not quite colonial' for Etkind . . . In effect, Etkind perpetuates aspects of Russian colonialist ideology, providing evidence of how far Russian culture still is from 'find[ing] a positive, enlightened solution' to the enduring legacy of colonization . . .³⁵

A further example of the way in which Etkind's approach perpetuates Orientalist and colonial discourse in the course of its attempted critique crops up in Etkind's review of two important studies on Russian Orientalism, Susan Layton's *Russian Literature and Empire* (1994) and Harsha Ram's *The Imperial Sublime* (2003). Here Etkind writes: '[w]hile Layton looked at the world through the emancipatory optic of postcolonialist and feminist movements, Ram manifests a different kind of sensibility, one which is alert to *the scale and beauty of the*

³³ As evidenced by *Postcolonial Slavic Literatures After Communism*, ed. by Klavdia Smola and Dirk Uffelmann (Bern: Peter Lang, 2018).

³⁴ See two very contrasting reviews of Willard Sunderland's *Taming the Wild Field: Colonization and Empire on the Russian Steppe* (Ithaca, NY; London: Cornell University Press, 2004) by Igor Grachev and Pavel Rykin Morrison, and Alexander Morrison. 'The Russian Empire and the Steppe. An Exchange of Views', *Forum for Anthropology and Culture*, 4 (2007), 395-415.

³⁵ Harsha Ram in Spivak et al., 'Are We Post-Colonial', p. 835.

victorious power'.³⁶ More light is shed on the peculiar concept of the beauty of the Russian empire in the next paragraph:

A late development among great European empires, *the Russian Empire survived and outdid most of them*, after its collapse having been *transfigured into its new Soviet reincarnation*. [...] the empire quickly absorbed the lands at its center and on its periphery. In the heartlands as well as in the newly annexed territories, *the imperial order replaced barbarity and wilderness*. Orthodox and non-Orthodox Russians, Catholics, Protestants, Jews, Muslims, and 'heathens' who inhabited the annexed lands were to various extents subjected to Russian statehood. [...] *Larger than the Soviet Union and much larger than the current Russian Federation, the empire of the tsars stretched from Poland and Finland to Alaska and Manchuria*.³⁷

The imperial project's longevity, geographical size, speedy conquests and apparently civilising effects on the 'barbarity and wilderness' of its annexed territories are evoked in a suspiciously laudatory manner which barely registers a critical note. One can only imagine the nations on the receiving end of Russian imperialism replying that beauty lies in the eye of the beholder.

Similar epistemic concerns can be raised in relation to the terminology employed in Viatcheslav Morozov's study *Russia's Postcolonial Identity: A Subaltern Empire in a Eurocentric World* (2014). Morozov views Russia as a subaltern empire that colonised itself 'on behalf of the global capitalist core while itself being integrated into European international society'.³⁸ Employing Homi Bhabha's concept of mimicry, Morozov points out Russia's ambivalent relationship with its 'Master' – the West which it simultaneously resents and seeks to emulate. While Morozov astutely deconstructs Russia's foreign policy and the country's inferiority complexes in relation to Western capitalist empires, applying the Master/Slave paradigm to the relationship between the West and Russia stretches the concept's analytical bite to the extreme. If the West indirectly colonised Russia, then we might ask – who colonised the Soviet republics? One would have to say that, by extension, they were also colonised by

³⁶ Alexander Etkind, 'Orientalism Reversed: Russian Literature in the Times of Empires', *Modern Intellectual History*, 3.4 (2007), 617-628 (p. 617) (emphasis added).

³⁷ Etkind, 'Orientalism', p. 617 (emphasis added).

³⁸ Viatcheslav Morozov, *Russia's Postcolonial Identity: A Subaltern Empire in a Eurocentric World*, (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014), p. 32.

the West, in which case the accountability for colonial oppression would shift away from Russia. In fact, as Morozov himself aptly remarks, ‘the anti-colonial suspicions about the tendency to downplay the oppressive effects of internal colonisation is to some extent justified: it does indeed ‘exoticise’ Russian colonialism, which might to some extent shield it from other criticism targeted against other empires’.³⁹

Placing Russia in a subaltern position without paying attention to the country’s racial politics and exoticising the ‘unique act of self-colonization of the Russian people’⁴⁰ shifts the focus away from the ex-Soviet republics, the voices of whose peoples are unheard or slow in emerging, and erases, rather than critically or strategically blurs, the distinctions between master/slave and coloniser/colonised. The work on the postcoloniality of these regions is still so underdeveloped that it seems premature to rush into asserting such radical claims on Russia’s subalternity without first ascertaining what subalternity even entails in the post-Soviet world more broadly. Furthermore, arguing for Russia’s subaltern nature in this context surely reinforces Russia’s own discourse on its victim and subaltern status in world politics, as well as its historical position as an object of colonisation by foreign powers?⁴¹

³⁹ Morozov, p. 36.

⁴⁰ Boris Groys, ‘Имена города’ in *Утопия и обмен* (Moscow: Znak, 1993), pp. 357 -365, p. 358.

⁴¹ When explaining the dominance of this self-subalternising rhetoric in Russia, James Wertsch argues that one important narrative schema by which Russia has shaped its collective memory is ‘the expulsion of foreign enemies’— based on foreign invasions including ‘even the reign of communism in the twentieth century’. Wertsch picks out the main elements of this narrative template: 1. Russia is peaceful and not interfering with others; 2. Russia is viciously and wantonly attacked without provocation ; 3. Russia almost loses everything in total defeat as the enemy attempts to destroy it as a civilization; 4. Through heroism and exceptionalism, and against all odds, Russia triumphs and succeeds in expelling the foreign enemy. James Wertsch, ‘National Narratives and the Conservative Nature of Collective Memory’, *Neohelicon*, 34.2 (2007), 23-33 (p. 30).

The Soviet Union: A Colonial Empire?

Unlike the rich critical tradition examining Russian Orientalist literature, the study of postcolonial literatures and cultures of the former Soviet republics remains a rare phenomenon, and one mainly limited to the northern sphere of the former Soviet Union.⁴² In his seminal essay comparing the Soviet and colonial ‘Post-s’, David Chioni Moore remarks ‘how extraordinarily postcolonial the societies of the former Soviet regions are’ and ‘how extraordinarily little attention is paid to this fact, at least in these terms’.⁴³ Indeed, one could even talk about a positive desire not to pay attention: many scholars have objected to extending postcolonial terminology to the former Soviet Union for its alleged limited value. Stephen Velychenko, for instance, claims not to understand why postcolonialism, ‘only a technique of literary criticism’, ‘should be concerned with politics and economics nor why anyone outside the field of literature should be troubled by its dubious methods and preconceptions’.⁴⁴

Moore considers Russia’s supposedly ambiguous identity between East and West (the idea perpetuated by the above-mentioned works by Etkind and Morozov), as one of the two most popular objections to post-Soviet postcolonialism, and dismisses it as an ‘odd, unprovable idea’.⁴⁵ He counters the second objection which stems from the fact that Russia’s colonies were adjacent to, rather than separated by water from the colonial centre, as in the British and French cases, by pointing out that ‘when one considers the easy Marseille-Algiers sail or the generally

⁴² See in particular Smola and Uffelmann, eds, *Postcolonial Slavic Literatures*; Violeta Kelertas, *Baltic Postcolonialism* (Amsterdam and New York: Rodopi, 2006); *Ukraine in the 1990s*, ed. by Marko Pavlyshyn and J.M.E. Clarke (Melbourne: Monash University, 1992); *From Sovietology to Postcoloniality: Poland and Ukraine from a Postcolonial Perspective*, ed. by Janusz Korek (Huddinge: Södertörns högskola, 2007); Claire Cavanagh, ‘Postcolonial Poland’, *Common Knowledge*, 10.1 (2004), 82-92; *Postcolonial Approaches to Eastern European Cinema: Portraying Neighbours On-Screen*, ed. by Ewa Mazierska, Lars Kristensen and Eva Näripea (London: I.B. Tauris, 2014).

⁴³ David Chioni Moore, ‘Is the Post- in Postcolonial the Post- in Post-Soviet? Toward a Global Postcolonial Critique’, *PMLA*, 116.1 (2001), 111-128 (p. 114).

⁴⁴ Stephen Velychenko, ‘Post-Colonialism and Ukrainian History’, *Ab Imperio*, 3.1 (2004), 391-404 (p. 396).

⁴⁵ Moore, ‘Is the Post’, p. 119.

pleasant London-Cairo voyage, one is puzzled that the infinitely rougher path from Moscow to Tashkent [...] is granted an “adjacence”⁴⁶ Alexander Morrison is similarly critical of ‘the land/sea’ distinction.⁴⁷ It is indeed puzzling that so much weight should be given to the ‘geographical contiguity’ between Russia and its neighbours in determining USSR’s postcoloniality since the territorial proximity between Russia and its geopolitically important neighbours is in fact likely to constantly tempt Russia in its colonial ambitions to culturally, politically or militarily annex its nearby ‘buffer-zones’ separating it from the West.⁴⁸

Harsha Ram suggests that the underrepresentation of non-Russian Soviet ethnicities in Western universities, and their regional isolation from global intellectual debates may be a more significant factor in the underdevelopment of Eurasian postcolonial studies than the purely methodological question of postcolonialism’s applicability to the post-Soviet region.⁴⁹ Moore, for his part, attributes the lack of dialogue between postcolonial critics and the post-Soviet world to the former’s Marxist sympathies, as well as to their historical indebtedness to the three-worlds theory.⁵⁰ Sharad Chari and Katherine Verdery similarly argue that one of the reasons why socialist and colonial empires have been considered largely separate from each other has been the partitioning of the world through the Cold War division of intellectual labour whereby the First World was studied chiefly by mainstream economics and sociology, the Second World chiefly by political science, and the Third World chiefly by anthropology and

⁴⁶ Ibid., p. 119.

⁴⁷ Morrison highlights that ‘[i]n the Indian case, once the Suez Canal was opened in 1869, journey times from Southampton to Bombay were less than half those of Moscow to Tashkent, let alone Irkutsk or Vladivostok’. Alexander Morrison, ‘What is “Colonisation”? An Alternative View of *Taming the Wild Field*’, *Forum for Anthropology and Culture*, 4 (2008), 402-415, p. 414.

⁴⁸ One could make an argument about the colonial nature of Russia’s military interventions in Ukraine and Georgia, and the ongoing ‘creeping occupation’ in the latter. For example, according to Viatcheslav Morozov, ‘[e]ven though the 2008 war with Georgia cannot be exclusively blamed on Russia’s imperialism, it definitely strengthened imperialist attitudes’, Morozov, *Russia’s Postcolonial*, p.110

⁴⁹ Harsha Ram in Spivak et al., ‘Are We’, p. 832.

⁵⁰ Moore, ‘Is the Post’, p. 117.

development studies.⁵¹ In addition, as Nancy Condee highlights, Russia remains a challenge to scholars of both the First and Third Worlds as they inextricably associate modernity with capitalism, the nation-state, and liberal democracy.⁵² Naturally then, Russia differs to them in its markers of modernity due to ‘the relative impoverishment of its center in contrast to its Western borders; its constructions of ethnicity, nationality, and race; its state-driven, highly centralized structure; and [...] the relative weakness of its own national formations’.⁵³

There are several issues with both the clear-cut distinctions involved in the Three Worlds theory evoked by Chari and Verdery and the rigid understanding of modernity alluded to by Condee. First of all, after 1989 many Soviet countries became, like postcolonial ones, synonymous with underdevelopment.⁵⁴ In addition, if we define modernity ‘as the emergence of nation-states, the establishment of parliamentary democracy, and the spread of industrial capitalism in Western Europe’ then certainly ‘none of these aspects of modern political and economic systems pertained in the Imperial Russian and Soviet cases’.⁵⁵ However, as Hrach Bayadyan points out

if we are guided by such definitions which ear-mark a number of characteristic aspects of transformation, namely industrialization, urbanization, secularization, universal literacy, etc. we will see that many aspects of modernization were fully incorporated into the objectives of Soviet power. In the meantime, Soviet society was characterized by aspects of the Enlightenment such as the belief in progress, the faith in reason and science.⁵⁶

⁵¹ Sharad Chari and Katherine Verdery, ‘Thinking Between the Posts: Postcolonialism, Postsocialism, and Ethnography After the Cold War’, *Comparative Studies in Society and History*, 51.1 (2008), 6-34, p. 18.

⁵² Nancy Condee in Spivak et al., ‘Are We’, p. 831.

⁵³ Condee, ‘Are We’, p. 831.

⁵⁴ Chari and Verdery, ‘Thinking’, p. 19.

⁵⁵ David Lloyd Hoffmann, ‘European Modernity and Soviet Socialism’, in *Russian Modernity: Politics, Knowledge, Practice* ed. by David Hoffmann and Ianni Kotsonis (Houndmills: Macmillan Press, 2000), pp. 245-260, p. 246.

⁵⁶ Hrach Bayadyan, ‘Soviet Armenian Identity and Cultural Representation’, <http://acsl.am/wp-content/uploads/2008/11/guidelines_Soviet%20Armenian%20Identity%20and%20Cultural%20Representation.pdf> [accessed 3 May 2017], p. 201.

Therefore, Soviet modernity, while undoubtedly ambiguous – after all, the early Soviet discourse privileged a new collective Soviet identity over nationalism – cannot be easily dismissed.⁵⁷ Moreover, the concepts of ‘development’ and ‘modernization’ are altogether thorny and often critiqued by postcolonial scholars as forms of Eurocentric domination.⁵⁸

An alternative model to the Three Worlds system has been proposed by Mark von Hagen who argues that in order to transcend the binary paradigms of Russia/Orient and Soviet Union/modernisation, the post-Soviet world should be considered in critical discourse as a new Eurasia.⁵⁹ Jennifer Suchland agrees, arguing that ‘rather than categorize the former second world as just a derivative of the postcolonial or of neoliberalism, a territorial understanding of Eurasia emphasizes the point that postsocialism is a unique place and experience’.⁶⁰ However, if the aim, as von Hagen argues, is to dissociate post-Soviet states ‘from state socialism and their former attachments to the Soviet world’,⁶¹ then Suchland’s approach, which inevitably reinforces the connection between the paradigms of Eurasia and socialism, risks further isolating these states within the discursive field of socialism which, ‘unique’ as it may be,

⁵⁷ As Ronald Suny points out, ‘Moscow had governed through local national cadres and promoted national cultures, education in the local languages, and the advancement of native leaders – all within the bounds of a policy that favoured the eventual creation of a single *sovetskii narod* (Soviet people)’. Ronald Grigor Suny, *The Revenge of the Past: Nationalism, Revolution and the Collapse of the Soviet Union* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1993), pp. 129-130. Even in the 1960s, the question of the disappearance of nationalities in favour of a supposedly ethically neutral Soviet identity remained explicit in official rhetoric. In his commentary on the Party Program Nikita Khrushchev declared, for instance: ‘Communists will not conserve and perpetuate national distinctions. [...] It is essential that we stress the education of the masses in the spirit of proletarian internationalism and Soviet patriotism. Even the slightest vestiges of nationalism should be eradicated with uncompromising Bolshevik determination’. Nikita Khrushchev, Report on the Program of the C.P.S.U., October 17, 1961, *Pravda*, October 19, 1961, pp. 1-10 (p. 1), quoted in Alfred D. Law, ‘Soviet Nationality Policy and the New Program of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union’, *The Russian Review*, 22.1 (1963), 3-29 (p. 10).

⁵⁸ See for instance Homi K. Bhabha, *The Location of Culture* (London/New York: Routledge, [1994]; 2004), p.203; Wolfgang Sachs, *The Development Dictionary: A Guide to Knowledge as Power* (London: Zed Books, 1992); Arturo Escobar, *Encountering Development: The Making and Unmaking of the Third World* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1995).

⁵⁹ Mark Von Hagen, ‘Empires, Borderlands, and Diasporas: Eurasia as Anti-Paradigm for the Post-Soviet Era’, *American Historical Review*, 109.2 (2004), 445-468 (p. 446).

⁶⁰ Jennifer Suchland, ‘Is Postsocialism Transnational?’, *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society*, 36.4 (2011), 837-862 (pp. 855-856).

⁶¹ Hagen, ‘Empires’, p. 446.

cannot be fully understood outside of the post-colonial context. In addition, the term Eurasia remains an indeterminate, politically totalising and potentially homogenising category with a relatively muddy history.⁶² More importantly, like the umbrella term post-Soviet, this neutral term glosses the historical and persisting power inequalities between the ‘colonisers’ and the ‘colonised’, and lacks the intense connotations of political struggle associated with colonialism and imperialism, the discursive fields of which, no matter how unsavoury, are nonetheless still relevant in post-Soviet countries.

Russian and Soviet historians have altogether tended to eschew the concept of Russian imperialism or colonialism, so that post-colonial theory has been slower in permeating the field. As Vitaly Chernetsky remarks, ‘throughout the 1990s, postcolonialism was perhaps the only major contemporary theoretical discourse persistently ignored by Russian academics’.⁶³ Epp Annus goes as far as to suggest that ‘post-Soviet Russia is a unique postcolonial (and arguably still colonial) oppressor that refuses to acknowledge its colonial past’.⁶⁴

Western scholars have been much more receptive to considering Soviet imperialism, especially in the Caucasus and Central Asia, as at least partly colonial in nature. When pointing out the diversity of Russian colonised territory and the profoundly different modes of metropolitan expansion, critics of particularistic theories such as ‘internal colonisation’ consider the Russo-Soviet domination of the Caucasus and Central Asia as most closely fitting the standard models of ‘Western colonisation’.⁶⁵ Henry Carey and Rafal Raciborski claim that ‘if cultural differences are significant, then arguably only the Islamic republics in Central Asia, Transcaucasia, and provinces inside Russia have been colonies’.⁶⁶ Indeed, arguments for the

⁶² Harsha Ram in Spivak et al., ‘Are We’, pp. 832-833.

⁶³ Vitaly Chernetsky, ‘On Some Post-Soviet Postcolonialisms’, *PMLA*, 121.3 (2006), 833-836 (p. 834).

⁶⁴ Epp Annus, ‘The Problem of Soviet Colonialism in the Baltics’, *Journal of Baltic Studies*, 43.1 (2011), 21-45 (p. 24).

⁶⁵ Moore, ‘Is the Post’, p.121; Nancy Condee in Spivak et al, ‘Are We’, p. 830.

⁶⁶ Henry F. Carey and Rafal Raciborski, ‘Postcolonialism: A Valid Paradigm for the Former Sovietized States and Yugoslavia?’, *East European Politics and Societies*, 2.18 (2004), 191-235, p. 200.

separateness of Ukraine and Belorussia from the Russian imperial centre hold some force, although considerably less so than arguments about distinctive history in the case of Central Asia and the Caucasus whose languages, religions, social and cultural histories differ from those of Russia.⁶⁷ While Maria Todorova objects to the application of postcolonialism to the Soviet state's relations with the Balkans and Eastern Europe, she considers the former's relationship with Central Asia and the Caucasus as colonial 'par excellence'.⁶⁸ Mykoła Riabczuk talks of the 'rather standard colonialism in the Russo-Soviet Asia and Caucasus'.⁶⁹ David Kenneth Fieldhouse similarly remarks that 'in 1917 Central Asia was a typical colonial society, autocratically governed by aliens, with a growing settler population [...], and a dependent primary economy'.⁷⁰ Nonetheless, one has to note that the ambiguities of Soviet nationalities policy and the influence of Communist ideology ensured that the Soviet political model was not simply reincarnated from Russian imperial policies, but rather took on a distinctive, and at times more progressive imperial form in these regions.

The Caucasus and Central Asia under the Soviet Empire

Societies in the Caucasus and Central Asia display remarkable heterogeneity and ambivalence both in their relationship with Russia and in their self-perception as colonial nations. Due to Armenia's common Christian religion with Russia, and the Armenian genocide, Armenian authors often evoke the rhetoric of Russia as Armenia's saviour from Turkey, problematising

⁶⁷ However, Armenia and Georgia are Christian countries.

⁶⁸ Maria Todorova, 'Balkanism and Postcolonialism, or on the Beauty of the Airplane View', in *In Marx's Shadow: Knowledge, Power, and Intellectuals in Eastern Europe and Russia*, ed. by Costica Bradatan and Serguei Alex Oushakin (New York: The Rowman & Littlefield Publishing Group, 2010), pp. 175-197 (p. 179).

⁶⁹ Riabczuk, 'Colonialism', p. 56

⁷⁰ David Kenneth Fieldhouse, *The Colonial Empires: A Comparative Survey from the Eighteenth Century* (New York: Delacorte, 1966), p. 339.

Russia's identity as a 'coloniser'. In Narine Abgaryan's *Люди которые всегда со мной* (2014), the young protagonist, influenced by this rhetoric, is haunted by a nightmare where her house is crushed by a gigantic bug – her fellow villagers' pejorative metaphor for Turks.⁷¹ By extension, the villagers' criticism of the Soviet policies threatening their local traditions is often directed at the abstract Soviet regime, rather than Russia. Interestingly, despite a similar geopolitical context in Georgia, the rhetoric on Russia as a saviour is absent in Georgian literature. Rather, with twenty percent of the country's territory currently under Russian control, Georgians commonly regard Russia as an 'occupier'.⁷² Meanwhile, 'a very common refrain from Central Asians, and not just the current ruling elite,' Alex Cooley suggests, 'is that the Russians "brought us electricity and education" or that, in fact, the Soviet Union was a political organization forged of "15 sisters [union republics]" of equal stature'.⁷³ Ronald Suny points out, however, that 'empire exists even if peripheral populations are convinced that the result of their association with the empire is beneficial rather than exploitative, as long as the two conditions of distinction and subordination obtain'.⁷⁴ In fact, post-colonial societies, especially the elites, often recognise the benefits, however relative, of colonial influence.⁷⁵ However, that does not stop them from engaging with the realities of imperial and colonial power.

The 'voluntary' nature of the incorporation of the Caucasus and Central Asia into the Soviet Union is debatable at best. Contrary to Lenin's proclaimed plan for 'the establishment of state borders according to the 'sympathies' of the population, and including complete

⁷¹ Narine Abgaryan, *Люди которые всегда со мной* [People who are always with me] (Moscow: АСТ, 2014), p. 217.

⁷² As evidenced by June-July 2019 anti-occupation protests in Tbilisi.

⁷³ Alex Cooley in Collier et al., 'Empire', p. 7.

⁷⁴ *A State of Nations: Empire and Nation-Making in the Age of Lenin and Stalin*, ed. by Ronald Grigor Suny and Terry Martin (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), p. 26.

⁷⁵ For instance, in their autobiographical works and fiction, many North African writers convey their gratitude for having been exposed to French language and culture through Francophone education, all while acknowledging the otherwise traumatic legacies of French colonialism. These include Albert Memmi, Jacques Derrida, Assia Djebar, Maïssa Bey, Malika Mokeddem and others.

freedom of secession’,⁷⁶ in the immediate years after the Russian Revolution, the Bolsheviks violently suppressed expressions of national-determination in the region.⁷⁷ Hence, the Soviet Union has been described as an ‘anti-imperialist Empire’, one that was externally anti-imperialist in its declared animosity to First World predation but evidencing imperialist tendencies.⁷⁸ Nazif Shahrani contends that after conquering Turkistan, the Soviets immediately set out to transform it through a ‘three-pronged attack’: first, a territorial, political and ultimately cultural fragmentation of the region; second, cultural isolation of its peoples both from their historic past as well as other Muslim and Turko-Persian speaking areas in the region; and third, defamation and destruction of religious, especially Islamic, belief, values, and institutions.⁷⁹ However, the temporary early Soviet alliance between Bolshevism and Jadidism at this time (a reform movement among Central Asia’s Muslim intellectuals) suggests some degree of ideological contiguity among Soviet ‘coloniser’/‘colonised’ entities in the region.⁸⁰

As part of the National Delimitation process of 1924–1929, Soviet leaders fixed countless formerly less defined identities in Turkistan into national entities, shaping the states of the region in their current borders. Terms such as Turkistan (homeland of the Turks or Turkic-speaking peoples) implying larger and more inclusive political and cultural identity, suddenly disappeared from public discourse, and instead, new language based ‘nationalisms’ were

⁷⁶ Vladimir Lenin, ‘Итоги дискуссии о самоопределении’ (1916), in *Вопросы национальной политики и пролетарского интернационализма* (Moscow: Politizdat, 1965), p. 129.

⁷⁷ Ariel Cohen, *Russian Imperialism: Development and Crisis* (Westport: Praeger Publishers, 1996), pp. 70-74.

⁷⁸ Nancy Condee in Spivak et al., ‘Are We’, p. 830. For Lenin, imperialism was a capitalist phenomenon, and he criticised those who claimed that it was compatible with socialism. ‘The leaders of the present-day, so-called, “Social-Democratic” Party of Germany’, Lenin wrote, ‘are justly called “social-imperialists”, that is, socialists in words and imperialists in deeds’. Vladimir Lenin, ‘Critique of Imperialism’, in *Imperialism the Highest Stage of Capitalism* (1917) Available at: <<https://www.marxists.org/archive/lenin/works/1916/imp-hsc/ch09.htm>> [accessed 19 January 2017].

⁷⁹ Nazif Shahrani, ‘Central Asia and The Challenge of the Soviet Legacy’, *Central Asian Survey*, 12.2 (1993), 123-135, pp. 128-129.

⁸⁰ On Jadidism see Adeeb Khalid, *The Politics of Muslim Cultural Reform: Jadidism in Central Asia* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998).

promoted through competition for access to strategic resources.⁸¹ Perhaps even more than languages, women in Central Asia were central in these processes as certain patterns of gender relations – in particular specific forms of female dress and seclusion – were often used as national markers.⁸² As Douglas Northrop has argued, the Soviets ‘defined the new Uzbek nation in large part through its distinctive patterns of gender relations and customs of female seclusion, and especially through the heavy cotton-and-horsehair veils worn by Uzbek women’.⁸³ However, while Northrop considers the creation of distinct national identities as colonial in nature, Sergei Abashin has suggested that the Central Asian republics were not simply top-down creations of the Soviet State’s ‘divide and conquer’ policy and that groups such as Jadids and pan/anti-pan Turkists played an important part in the process.⁸⁴

Initially, Communist party ideologues ardently supported native languages and ‘native-language education’, particularly seeking to promote the State and its values.⁸⁵ However, in Turkistan, Central Asian Muslims became culturally isolated, especially from the Muslim world, as the adoption of Cyrillic alphabets ‘rendered the literacy skills of the educated Central Asians obsolete and denied the new generations of Central Asian youth access to their considerable literary heritage written in Arabic-Persian script’.⁸⁶ Among others, Soviet Kazakh writer Bakhytzhan Kanapyanov frequently evokes his fractured identity as one of the traumatic effects of Russification.⁸⁷ Similarly, the preservation of indigenous cultures was also openly championed in Soviet political policy (take, for example, the extensive effort to preserve

⁸¹ Shahrani, ‘Central Asia’, p. 129.

⁸² Douglas Northrop, *Veiled Empire: Gender and Power in Stalinist Central Asia* (Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press, 2003), pp. 33-34.

⁸³ *Ibid.*, p. 34.

⁸⁴ Sergei Abashin, ‘История зарождения и современное состояние среднеазиатских национализмов’ in *Национализмы в Средней Азии: В поисках идентичности* (Saint Petersburg: Алетейя, 2007), pp. 177-207.

⁸⁵ Slezkine, ‘The USSR’, p. 420.

⁸⁶ Shahrani, ‘Central Asia’, pp. 129-130.

⁸⁷ See Caffee, ‘Russophonia’, p. 42.

historic buildings in Central Asia during the first decade of Soviet power).⁸⁸ Nonetheless, the cultural looting which began with the Russian imperial presence in the region in the 1860s and 1870s continued well into the Soviet period, enriching Russian cultural centres such as the Hermitage,⁸⁹ and depriving the colonies ‘of their most significant symbolic monuments, ancient, medieval and modern’.⁹⁰ The cultures of other Soviet republics were not always preserved in their authentic forms since the socialist meta-narrative fed the ‘highly clichéd, essentializing rhetoric of national culture and identity, and the Orientalist practices exoticizing it’.⁹¹ One example is the distortion of Armenian folk music ‘in accordance with Soviet middlebrow culture’.⁹²

From the 1920s, the Soviet Union manifested many traits of ‘federal colonialism’,⁹³ especially during the *korenizatsiya* (nativisation) when genuine efforts were made to set up a different model of governance.⁹⁴ The centre was not as insurmountably demarcated from the colonies as in Western colonial systems, and participation and advancement opportunities were afforded to the Soviet peoples of various ethnicities and nationalities. For instance, while late Soviet Georgia was characterised by a low degree of ethnic Georgian mobility outside the republic, mobility within the republic was very high.⁹⁵ According to Yuri Slezkine, ‘the more rights and opportunities a national minority would enjoy, the more “trust” it would have in the

⁸⁸ Vera Tolz and Svetlana Gorshenina, ‘Constructing Heritage in Early Soviet Central Asia: The Politics of Memory in a Revolutionary Context’, *Ab Imperio*, 2016.4 (2017), 77-115

⁸⁹ Thompson, *Imperial*, p. 114.

⁹⁰ Edward Allworth, *The Modern Uzbeks: From the Fourteenth Century to the Present: A Cultural History* (Stanford: Hoover Press, 2013), p. 216.

⁹¹ Hrach Bayadjan, ‘Becoming Post-Soviet’, *dOCUMENTA* 13 (2012), p. 4.

<<http://www.hatjecantz.de/hrach-bayadjan-5272-1.html>> [accessed 1 January 2019]

⁹² Bayadjan, ‘Becoming’, p. 4.

⁹³ Graham Smith, ‘Post-Colonialism and Borderland Identities’, in *Nation-Building in the Post-Soviet Borderlands: The Politics of National Identities* ed. by Graham Smith, Vivien Law, Andrew Wilson, Annette Bohr and Edward Allworth (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), pp. 1-20, p. 4.

⁹⁴ See Terry Dean Martin, *The Affirmative Action Empire: Nations and Nationalism in the Soviet Union, 1923-1939* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2001); Philip G. Roeder, ‘Soviet Federalism and Ethnic Mobilization’ in *The Soviet Nationality Reader: The Disintegration in Context*, ed. by Rachel Denber (Oxford: Westview Press, 1992), pp. 147-178.

⁹⁵ Laurence Broers, “‘David And Goliath’ and “‘Georgians in the Kremlin’”: A Post-Colonial Perspective on Conflict in Post-Soviet Georgia’, *Central Asian Survey*, 28.2 (2009), 99-118 (p. 104).

proletarians of the former oppressor nation'.⁹⁶ Such tactics of coercion and appeasement also characterise the histories of classical colonies.⁹⁷

However, while giving full weight to the creation of national elites at the republican level and below, David Lane, Cameron Ross, Laurence Broers and Terry Martin highlight the underrepresentation of non-Russian minorities in the Politburo and Soviet politics more broadly.⁹⁸ Furthermore, while some indigenous elites might have held unprecedented power for a colonial context, their activities were restricted by the strict ideological control characteristic of Soviet Communism throughout its existence. Philip Roeder has discussed in detail this remoulding of Soviet elites so that they would implement Soviet policies, such as collectivisation and industrialisation and mass urbanisation parallel with it, leading to the severing of the Soviet peoples, all rural-based, from their traditions.⁹⁹ One example in the Central Asian context is the genocidal settling of the Kazakh nomad millions from 1929 to 1934, as part of the Soviet sedentarisation policies in the region.¹⁰⁰

Although the Soviet Union was supposed to embody a unified family and economic organism, Russia often enjoyed a priority over natural resources, the distribution of goods and

⁹⁶ Yuri Slezkine, 'The USSR as a Communal Apartment, or How a Socialist State Promoted Ethnic Particularism', *Slavic Review*, 2.53 (1994), 414-452 (p. 419).

⁹⁷ For instance, Hubert Lyautey, the first Resident General of the French Protectorate in Morocco (1912–1925), co-opted the Moroccan nobility through support and rewards such as elite private education for its children. Lyautey shrewdly foresaw the benefits of such coercive tactics: 'enlist the ruling class in our service . . .', he argued, 'and the country will be pacified, and at far less cost and with greater certainty than by all the military expeditions we could send there'. Hubert Lyautey quoted in Susan Gilson Miller, *A History of Modern Morocco* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), p. 90.

⁹⁸ *The Transition from Communism to Capitalism: Ruling Elites from Gorbachev to Yeltsin*, ed. by David Stuart Lane and Cameron Ross (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 1999), p. 9; Broers, 'David', p. 103; Martin, *The Affirmative*, p. 179.

⁹⁹ Philip G. Roeder, 'Soviet Federalism and Ethnic Mobilization' in Denber, ed., *The Soviet*, pp. 147-178.

¹⁰⁰ Alun Thomas, *Nomads and Soviet Rule: Central Asia Under Lenin and Stalin* (London and New York: I.B. Tauris, 2018). Thomas argues that while *korenizatsiya* implied that nomads would be better governed by their compatriots, 'new national cadres demonstrated little empathy for nomadic communities' and that the spatial realities of nomadic territory were overlooked in the pursuit of ideological goals, as in other part of the Soviet periphery' (p. 13). He considers Soviet sedentarisation as colonial in nature (see especially pp. 15-23).

the foreign trade sector.¹⁰¹ Soviet official Grigory Zinoviev's September 1920 proclamation suggests that the exploitation under the tsarist regime persisted in the guise of the civilising rhetoric under the communists: '[w]e cannot do without the petroleum of Azerbaijan or the cotton of Turkistan. We take these products which are necessary for us, not as the former [Tsarist Russian] exploiters, but as older brothers bearing the torch of civilization' – Zinoviev declared.¹⁰² The values of socialism were notably undermined by the exploitation of the cotton industry in Central Asia which also resulted in environmental disasters such as the near-disappearance of the Aral Sea.¹⁰³ Such problematic environmental effects of Soviet economic policies were only exacerbated by the Soviet Union's environmental policies. While there exist debates as to whether the Communist ideology supported ecological fairness, critics agree that Soviet economic policies were overall disastrous.¹⁰⁴

From the point of view of Soviet ideologues, electrification, industrialisation, and the physical transformation of the landscape of the 'peripheries' in many ways defined the construction of Soviet nations, languages, and the new Soviet identity.¹⁰⁵ This crucial

¹⁰¹ Kappeler, p. 322; Cyril E. Black, and E.C Helmreich, *Twentieth Century Europe: A History* (New York: Knopf, 1966), pp. 717-718.

¹⁰² Grigory Zinoviev quoted in Shahrani, 'Central Asia', p. 127.

¹⁰³ Karen Bennett, 'Disappearance of the Aral Sea, World Resources Institute, 2008 <<https://www.wri.org/blog/2008/05/disappearance-aral-sea>> [accessed 23 January 2019]

¹⁰⁴ For a nuanced discussion of the connection between Soviet political ideology and Soviet ecology at different periods of Soviet history see Mikhail Myl'nikov, 'Утопия советского экологического проекта и «зелёный» коммунизм' in Mamedov and Shatalova, eds, *Понятия о советском*. For an analysis of Soviet environmental policies see Andrei Vinogradov, V. Zimin, *История российского общественного экологического движения* (Самара: Офорт, 2008). For a discussion on the harmful ecological effects of Soviet policies see Murray Feshbach and Alfred Friendly, *Ecocide in the USSR: Health and Nature Under Siege* (New York: Basic Books, 1992). For arguments challenging the common charge of environmentalists that Marxism has been productivist and has ignored the ecological concerns, as well as this charge's relevance for the 'rise and fall' of Soviet environmentalism see Kunal Chattopadhyay, 'The Rise and Fall of Environmentalism in the Early Soviet Union', *Climate and Capitalism*, November 3, 2014, <<http://climateandcapitalism.com>> [accessed 17 March, 2019]. For key studies on Soviet environmentalism see Charles Ziegler, *Environmental Policy in the USSR* (London: Pinter, 1987); Douglas Weiner, *Models of Nature: Ecology, Conservation, and Cultural Revolution in Soviet Russia* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1988); Feliks Shtil'mark, *History of the Russian Zapovedniks, 1895-1995*, trans. by G. H. Harper (Edinburgh: Russian Nature Press, 2003).

¹⁰⁵ Nariman Skakov, 'Culture One and a Half', forthcoming in *Comintern Aesthetics*, ed. by Steven Lee and Amelia Glaser (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, April 2020).

interdependence of the cultural and the political in the Soviet project is particularly well illustrated by Soviet efforts to foster a multi-ethnic Soviet literature which would fuel the Communist regime's state and nation-building ambitions, its 'national Bolshevism'¹⁰⁶. The key vehicle of this process was the Soviet policy *druzhba narodov* ('Friendship of the Peoples').

***Druzhba Narodov* and the Formation of Russophone Elites**

The Soviet policy *druzhba narodov* emerged in the late 1930s and aimed to consolidate Soviet identity by encouraging fraternity between Russian and non-Russian ethnic groups. It emphasised that the expansion of Russian dominance was agreeable to both sides: this was not 'conquest' or 'annexation', but 'fusion',¹⁰⁷ a claim that remained dominant in state rhetoric throughout the Soviet period.¹⁰⁸ Seeking to convince themselves and the world that the Soviet Union was in both theory and practice an inclusive, multinational community, Soviet officials launched a concerted effort to make non-Russians more visible and thereby render the imagined community as real as possible.¹⁰⁹ Those who looked most distinctly non-Russian were particularly exhibited as labour heroes at agricultural conferences and served as delegates at republican and national congresses.¹¹⁰ Thus, especially during the 1930s, 'to look non-

¹⁰⁶ David Brandenberger, *National Bolshevism: Stalinist Mass Culture and the Formation of Modern Russian National Identity, 1931–1956* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2002)

¹⁰⁷ Taras Kuzio, 'History, Memory and Nation Building in the Post-Soviet Colonial Space', *Nationalities Papers*, 2.30 (2002), 241-264 (pp. 245-246); Martin, *The Affirmative*, p. 439.

¹⁰⁸ For instance, Khrushchev declared the following in 1961: 'The union and consolidation of equal peoples on a voluntary basis in a single multi-national state – the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics – their close cooperation in state, economic, and cultural development, their fraternal friendship, and a flourishing economy and culture constitute the most important result of the Leninist national policy'. Khrushchev, Report on the Program of the C.P.S.U., quoted in Law, 'Soviet Nationality Policy', p. 3.

¹⁰⁹ Meredith Roman, 'Making Caucasians Black: Moscow Since the Fall of Communism and the Racialization of Non-Russians', *Journal of Communist Studies and Transition Politics*, 18 (2002), 1-27 (p. 5).

¹¹⁰ Roman, 'Making', p. 5.

Russian was to some degree advantageous for members of non-Russian nationalities'.¹¹¹ And yet, *druzhba narodov* was not simply a slogan promoted at the top; it had genuine resonance, especially outside of Russia. In her loosely autobiographical novel *В Советском Союзе не было аддерола* (2018)¹¹², Olga Breininger's protagonist (who, like the author, is from an ethnic German background) recounts how her native Kazakh region, Karaganda, embodied the policy's fraternal spirit. Growing up in a multicultural, non-hierarchical setting with Russians, Kazakhs, Germans, Koreans, deported Chechens and exiled Ingushetians, the protagonist lacks awareness of the concept of national identity.

Druzhba narodov took a noticeably different form in the lead-up to, and during the Second World War. From then on, the USSR transformed into an integrated and homogeneous empire with Russian language, the Soviet *lingua franca*, and Russian culture as its centrepieces. The notions of 'second-classness' and 'subordination' began to re-emerge, as evident in the 1937 *Pravda* [the Communist Party's official newspaper] declaration: 'Russian culture enriches the culture of other peoples [...] it is the most advanced, the most humane'.¹¹³ By this time, rhetorical internationalism was firmly replaced by cultural centralisation and a strong emphasis on the leading role of the Russian majority population. The discourse on Russia as an 'Elder Brother', and 'the most outstanding of all the nations forming the Soviet Union' that became explicit at this time echoed the Western European colonisers' self-fashioning as more civilized, modern, advanced, and superior than the nations they colonised.¹¹⁴ Furthermore, Russia constructed itself as a spearhead and saviour of its sibling republics from a common dangerous enemy (as evoked in Stalin's famous toast of May 1945).

¹¹¹ Ibid., p. 5.

¹¹² Olga Breininger, *В Советском союзе не было аддерола* [There Was No Adderall in The Soviet Union] (2015) (Moscow: ACT, 2018)

¹¹³ Astrid S. Tuminez, 'Nationalism, Ethnic Pressures, and the Breakup of the Soviet Union', *Journal of Cold War Studies*, 5.4 (2003), 81-136 (p. 95).

¹¹⁴ Joseph Stalin, 'Toast to the Russian People', May 24, 1945

<<https://www.marxists.org/reference/archive/stalin/works/1945/05/24.htm>> [accessed 18 December 2018]

Russia's discourse on its main role in defeating the Nazis adds a new dimension to the classical Western model of colonialism. The 'colonised' who subscribe to the idea of the colonisers as 'saviours' might close their eyes to certain negative aspects of domination and put aside their hostility in favour of viewing the dominant power as partly justified in its imperialistic ambitions. Moreover, the natural desire of identifying with the victorious power creates a psychological dichotomy in the subjected people and heightens the ambivalence of their identity definition in relation to the coloniser. The surge of Russian-inflected Soviet patriotism after the Great Patriotic War provides one historical example of this phenomenon. The Second World War provided a perfect villain against which the various Soviet nationalities could unite in a common patriotic struggle, and later, Russia's victory over Germany became a powerful source for collective pride. Consider, for instance, Armenian writer Rachy Ovanesian's retrospective assessment of World War II period in his speech at the 1988 Plenum of the USSR Writers' Union:

It seems to me that the happiest period of friendship among our peoples was the cruel years of the Great Fatherland War. In those years, when the question of the Motherland's life or death was being decided, our peoples showed how quickly they could master Russian, or to be more precise, the language of destroying the enemy, they showed how correctly and successfully they found the paths of brotherhood and how equal they were. The danger threatening the Soviet Union made them a real, large, and united family.¹¹⁵

Ovanesian's statement reveals the durability of the idea that Russians led the 'united family' of Soviet republics into 'destroying the enemy', even in a time of *glasnost* when the State officially sought to reveal the horrors of the Soviet past. In fact, such beliefs are also proclaimed by post-Soviet cultural elites, among them Azeri author Rena Yuzbashi: 'Мы все помним Великую Отечественную Войну, мы все помним, что Россия была локомотивом, движущей силой борьбы с фашизмом, и, наверное, Русский народ более всего

¹¹⁵ 'From the 1988 Plenum of the USSR Writers' Union', *Soviet Studies in Literature*, 25.2 (1989), 88-113, pp. 101-102.

потерял'.¹¹⁶ Yuzbashi's comment echoes Vladimir Putin's 2010 statement that the Russian Federation suffered the greatest proportional losses in World War II, a 'historical fact' that is debated by other former Soviet republics, especially Ukraine.¹¹⁷

Through most of the Soviet period, in conjunction with *druzhba narodov*, the Soviet state allotted vast resources to developing and supporting non-Russian Soviet literature. The USSR Writers' Union actively promoted cultural diversity. Each republic had its own Writers' Union, literary journals, publishers, and non-Russians were at times even guaranteed a percentage of most publishers' total annual production.¹¹⁸ In fact, the dynamics of social and cultural subordination inherent within *druzhba narodov* became especially explicit from the 1940s, explaining the persistently strong Russocentric leanings of Russophone cultural elites evidenced by Ovanesian and Yuzbashi. Soviet colonial notions such as primordial ethnicity, backward nations, and Russian cultural and linguistic dominance began to be taken for granted in state rhetoric, as evidenced by the following 1961 declaration by Nikita Khrushchev:

With reciprocal fraternal assistance, primarily from the Great Russian people, all the Soviet non-Russian republics have set up their own modern industries, trained their own national working class and intelligentsia, and developed a culture that is national in form and socialist in content. Many nations which in the past were backward have achieved socialism [...].¹¹⁹

¹¹⁶ Rena Yuzbashi, interview, 'Five o'clock с Азером Гарибом', 26 April 2015, 11:15-11:30 <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=t2qRLJTrH4w>> [accessed 2 August 2019]

¹¹⁷ In a live broadcast 'Разговор с В.В. ПуТИНЫМ' (16 December 2010), Putin maintained the following: 'Если мы посмотрим статистику времен Второй мировой войны, то выяснится, что наибольшие потери в ВОВ понесла именно РСФСР — более 70% потерь. Это значит, что война выиграна, не хочу никого обижать, но в основном за счет человеческих и индустриальных ресурсов РФ. Это исторический факт'. <<https://korrespondent.net/world/russia/1149754-putin-pobeda-v-velikoj-otechestvennoj-vojne-byla-oderzhana-v-osnovnom-za-schet-resursov-rf>> [accessed 2 August 2019]; Ukraine's Ministry of Foreign Affairs denounced Putin's statement as 'кошунственное заявление'. <<http://fablewar.ru/2011/11/vklad/>> [accessed 2 August 2019]. In *Poteri narodonaseleniya v XX veke : spravochnik* (Moscow: Russkaya Panorama, 2004) Vadim Erlikman estimates total proportional losses per country (civilian and military) as higher in Ukraine and Belarus than in Russia (pp. 23-35).

¹¹⁸ At the 1988 Plenum of the USSR Writers' Union, Sergei Baruzdin pointed out that 'the publishing house "Sovetskii pisatel", not just in the past but even today, publishes sixty percent of its books by Russian authors, and forty percent of its books by writers from the republics. 'From the 1988 Plenum of the USSR Writers' Union, *Soviet Studies in Literature*, 25.2, 88-113 (p. 91).

¹¹⁹ Khrushchev, Report on the Program of the C.P.S.U., quoted in Law, 'Soviet Nationality Policy, pp. 3-4.

This rhetoric on Russia's guiding role became a staple of Russophone literature. As Sergei Baruzhdin, Russian member of the Soviet Writers' Union noted in 1988, 'the pompous image of the "elder brother" went on to migrate from literature to literature, from book to book, like some form of obligatory character'.¹²⁰

In the Soviet Thaw of the late 1950s and 60s, post-war decolonisation and the beginnings of a postcolonial consciousness in world literature coincided with Soviet attempts to exert influence and control in newly independent states.¹²¹ The resulting internationalist ideological leaning of Russophone writers of this period is well captured by Rachy Ovanesian's claim that 'a true writer is a banner-carrier of internationalism, and true literature is a banner of internationalism'.¹²² This interpretation persisted throughout Soviet history, as evidenced by Olzhas Suleimenov's description of the sixties' literary generation:

All of us want to be writers who are both national and international, we are all members of one team, though each has his own specific aims. We are marginal personalities, who were born on the border of at least two cultures, and we are all both a bridge between them and a conduit of mutual influences. We represent world culture in our own, and our own culture in world culture'.¹²³

A politically-minded Kazakh writer and public intellectual who was involved in Soviet anticolonial projects such as the Association of African and Asian Writers, Suleimenov used Russian language to construct 'non-Russian—yet completely Soviet—identities'.¹²⁴

From these post-Stalin decades onwards, the Soviet empire maintained itself through 'tolerance of diversity and local national control with the ultimate sanction of the threat or use

¹²⁰ Sergei Baruzhdin's speech, 'From the 1988 Plenum', p. 91.

¹²¹ Caffee, 'Russophonia', p. 48

¹²² Rachy Ovanesian, 'From the 1988 Plenum', p. 103.

¹²³ Olzhas Suleimenov and S. Taroshchinaia, 'We Have Come to Act', *Soviet Studies in Literature*, 25.2 (1989), 17-24, p. 22-23.

¹²⁴ Caffee, 'Russophonia', p. 48.

of armed force (as in Tbilisi in 1956, Erevan in 1965, Alma-Ata in 1986, and Baku in 1990).¹²⁵ However, as Ronald Suny observes, ‘underneath the deceptive stability of the political structures, a fuse had already been lit by the 1960s – with the appearance of a powerful, articulate civil society expressing itself in a national idiom’.¹²⁶ These revived expressions of national consciousness also found their way in literature. Focusing on Suleimenov’s later career, Naomi Caffee makes an argument that as the optimism of the Thaw gave way to the disenchantments of the Brezhnev era, ‘*druzhiba narodov* was ruefully re-imagined as *tiur’ma narodov*’, and Russophone writers became voices of opposition and national self-determination on the local level.¹²⁷ However, Caffee’s analysis suggests a more temperate nature of the subversive potential of these authors’ *oeuvre* than her initial claim would suggest – in fact, she focuses on how Suleimenov ‘subtly’ articulated their difference by ‘manipulating elements of the dominant literary discourse’.¹²⁸ Indeed, even ‘an essential revisionist text of the Brezhnevite and perestroika periods’¹²⁹, Suleimenov’s *Aз u Я* (1975) – which is strangely absent in Caffee’s analysis – resists classification as ‘nationalist’, let alone ‘anti-colonial’. Harsha Ram has problematised the work’s easy association with seminal decolonial texts such as Frantz Fanon’s *The Wretched of the Earth* (*Les Damnés de la Terre*) (1968) and Edward Said’s *Orientalism* (1978). He points out that, on the one hand, the work represents ‘the definitive intervention by a non-Russian Soviet intellectual to address the question of interethnic relations and their consequences for Russian and Central Asian history’.¹³⁰ On the other hand, Ram remarks, ‘Suleimenov’s position has never been one of militant revolt: even

¹²⁵ Suny, *The Revenge*, p. 131.

¹²⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 131.

¹²⁷ *Ibid.* pp. 48-49.

¹²⁸ *Ibid.*, pp. 111.

¹²⁹ Harsha Ram, ‘Imagining Eurasia: The Poetics and Ideology of Olzhas Suleimenov’s *AZ i IA*’, *Slavic Review*, 60.2 (2001), 289-311, p. 289.

¹³⁰ Ram, ‘Imagining’, p. 289.

as he has pleaded for the ethnic dignity of his people, his ultimate vision has been one of “synthesis” and “interdependence” between Slav and Turk’.¹³¹

Due to its controversial nature, *Az u Я* was withdrawn from active circulation in the middle of the Brezhnev era and Suleimenov was instructed to publish a letter of apology.¹³² However, this constituted a rather mild punishment considering the strictness of Soviet censorship. The reason for such lenience on the part of Soviet officials again lies in the policy of *druzhiba narodov* which still held force at this time. The cultural policies under Brezhnev continued to promote non-Russian writers and even granted them preferential treatment, allowing them comparative leeway in political and stylistic iconoclasm and moderate dissent.¹³³ As Anthony Olcott points out in reference to Chingiz Aitmatov’s subversive novel *The Day Lasts Longer than a Hundred Years* (1980)¹³⁴, no one had ‘any illusions about why it was Aitmatov who was given so much leash, when other writers were being jailed for less; had he been Russian, Aitmatov too would have been silenced’. He adds:

Because the USSR of those years was pursuing policies designed to show the wonderful harmony in which the many ethnic groups of the country live and work (as it was then maintained they did), Aitmatov, a Kirgiz, enjoyed a latitude far greater than did his Russian fellow writers, which his ability to write in Russian permitted him to put to socially-useful purposes.¹³⁵

Olcott suggests that ‘this combination of having to publish non-Russians and not really paying attention to what they said’ meant that ‘most of the thematic and even stylistic innovations of Soviet literature in the 1970s and 1980s came from non-Russian writers like Aitmatov, Grant Matevosian, Fazil Iskander, Anatolii Kim, Nodar Dumbadze, Arto Valton,

¹³¹ Ibid., p. 293. Ram quotes Suleimenov from Olzhas Suleimenov, ‘K vzaimozavisimosti’ (1977-78), in *Esse, Publitsistika, Stikhi, Poemy* (Alma-Ata, 1989), pp. 55-56.

¹³² Ram, ‘Imagining’, p. 189, p. 295.

¹³³ Anthony Olcott, ‘Introduction: Non-Russian Soviet Writers Today’, *Soviet Studies in Literature*, 25.2 (1989), 5-16, p. 4.

¹³⁴ The novel almost openly denounced the cultural mankurtisation of Central Asian nations and suggested that the social disintegration of the Brezhnev era was a product of the Soviets’ deliberate erasure of the past.

¹³⁵ Olcott, ‘Introduction’, p. 4.

and others'.¹³⁶ However, the extent of Russophone authors' ideological freedom should not be overestimated. As in the case of national elites, cultural freedom was generally tightly bound by the central state which consolidated power in the 'periphery' and closely monitored both its social and political spheres.¹³⁷ As Nariman Skakov points out, 'the locals could not resist cultural subjugation and were not able to write back to the centre of the Soviet empire [...]'. Almost every attempt to make an autonomous local voice heard was cast as a manifestation of bourgeois nationalism'.¹³⁸ As mentioned earlier, Suleimenov was one of the authors limited by this reality. Indeed, while the Soviet Union developed an enormous body of non-Russian writers, 'conditions for most of these writers, particularly those dependent upon publishing in a home republic, were far from ideal, because of the flagrant favouritism and abuse of position this system encouraged'.¹³⁹ As Uzbek writer Narbai Khudaiberganov complained in 1988:

We in Uzbekistan (is it only among us?) had (and still have) a certain "official view" of life and literature, which elevates certain writers, leaving others in the shade [...]. In this "view" writer number one in Uzbekistan was of course [former Party First Secretary Sharif] Rashidov, who gathered about himself a particular group of writers who in essence led the literary parade and defined the creative climate in the republic, getting generous rewards for their selfless service and devotion to the "father of the nation".¹⁴⁰

Furthermore, as Olcott highlights, 'for all the power and riches many of them accrued, the role these non-Russian writers played in Soviet culture was often an uncomfortable one, for the same literary policies that got them published also trivialized them'.¹⁴¹ With a few exceptions, non-Russian Russophone creative artists from Central Asia could not enjoy the same prestige that was afforded to ethnic Russian authors. As Catriona Kelly demonstrates in her paper on Central Asian filmmakers at Lenfilm, creative artists from Central Asia who

¹³⁶ Ibid., p. 8.

¹³⁷ Skakov, 'Culture One and a Half'.

¹³⁸ Ibid.

¹³⁹ Olcott, 'Introduction', p. 6.

¹⁴⁰ Narbai Khudaiberganov quoted in Olcott, 'Introduction', p. 6.

¹⁴¹ Olcott, 'Introduction', p. 8.

moved to the Soviet metropolis were likely to experience not just ‘spatial dislocation’, but also an acute version of the ‘fear of being singled out as naïve or uncouth incomers’ (to quote Jeff Sahadeo)¹⁴² due to Orientalist perceptions of their culture.¹⁴³ In Leningrad, Kelly adds, ‘attitudes to this ‘periphery’ were particularly condescending, as one of Isaiah Berlin’s informants (probably the poet Anna Akhmatova) told him when he visited the city as a young diplomat in 1946’:

The [official] ‘line’ at present was to devote attention to the lesser-known parts of the Soviet Union, such as Siberia or Tadzhikstan [...] a mass of pseudo-archaic lyrics and bogus ballads and epics and official poetry generally [...] were driving out whatever originality there was among these primitive or semi-medieval peoples. They asserted with much pride that the Leningrad literary papers were commendably free from this incubus, which cluttered up the pages of the Moscow literary weekly, although they made an exception in favour of Georgian and Armenian literature, which contained works of true genius.¹⁴⁴

This situation was ‘fundamentally different to the contemporary case of Kazakh author Chingiz Aitmatov (1928-2008), who was able to invoke regional subjects (as in *Процай, Гультсары!*, 1966) without risk to his status as a major writer’.¹⁴⁵ The same can be said of Abkhazian writer Fazil Iskander and Chuvash poet Gennady Aigi.¹⁴⁶ As evidenced by Berlin’s statement, the cultures of Armenia and Georgia were similarly held in high regard. In fact, of the Soviet Union’s large titular nationalities, only the Russians, Ukrainians, Georgians, Armenians, Jews and Germans were deemed ‘advanced’ and were grouped together as western nationalities, unlike the remaining vast majority of Soviet nationalities that were judged culturally backward.¹⁴⁷ Contributing to this classification was the fact that both Georgia and

¹⁴² Jeff Sahadeo, ‘Soviet “Blacks” and Place Making in Leningrad and Moscow’, *Slavic Review*, 71. 2 (2012), 331-358 (p. 333, p. 340).

¹⁴³ Catriona Kelly, ‘The Black-and-White Poppies of Russian Arthouse: Central Asian Directors at Lenfilm, 1961-1990’, paper presented at an interdisciplinary symposium ‘Central Asia in Russian Language and Culture, 10 March 2019, New College, Oxford.

¹⁴⁴ Kelly, ‘The Black-and-White’.

¹⁴⁵ Ibid.

¹⁴⁶ Ibid.

¹⁴⁷ Terry Dean Martin, *The Affirmative Action Empire: Nations and Nationalism in the Soviet Union, 1923-1939* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2001), p. 23.

Armenia boasted strongly established literary traditions before 1917, unlike Central Asia which historically favoured oral traditions associated with nomadism, thus supposed Oriental ‘backwardness’, rather than anything resembling a ‘Western’ literary or artistic tradition. Such cultural snobbery targeting ‘peripheral’ cultures from non-Russian Soviet republics persisted well into the late eighties, as Lithuanian writer Vitautas Kublius explains:

Apparently, the idea, established in the postwar years, still has not dispersed, that the literature of the fraternal Soviet republics is a grey, monotonous, peripheral literature in which you can find ‘local color’ but you won’t find content that will move mankind at large. The official paternalistic attitude to the national literatures hasn’t disappeared either – cold and calculated compliments conceal the hard conviction that only great nations make great literature.¹⁴⁸

It is important to point out that, arguably, women writers and film directors of the late Soviet period had the same marginal status of ‘not really mattering’. In a key study on Russian women writers, Catriona Kelly considers the example of Tatiana Esenina’s satirical story ‘Женя – Чудо XX-ого века’ (1962). Poet Aleksandr Tvardovsky, then editor of *Novy mir*, was told by a literary censor of the day that he had been unhappy with one passage in Esenina’s story, which had just been published in *Novy mir*. Tvardovsky appeased the critic by deliberately misreading the political dimension of Esenina’s satire, remarking ‘Well, you know these women writers. What can you do?’, to which the mollified censor replied: ‘Women writers. That’s it, women writers.’¹⁴⁹ Kelly points out that while Soviet women writers have not been entirely free of guilt in the formation of negative stereotypes around their works, this exchange ‘indicates the prevalence of the view that flights of charming, if slightly irrational, fancy are characteristic of women’s writing’.¹⁵⁰

¹⁴⁸ Vitautas Kublius quoted in Olcott, ‘Introduction’, p. 8. I slightly modified the original translation in parts where it was grammatically unsound.

¹⁴⁹ Catriona Kelly, *A History of Russian Women's Writing 1820–1992* (Wotton-Under-Edge, UK: Clarendon Press, 1994), p. 349.

¹⁵⁰ Kelly, *A History*, p. 349.

From the 1980s onwards, the coming to the fore of mass nationalist popular fronts signalled the retreat of *druzhba narodov* and its support of non-Russian literatures. Though effectively contained until the ‘Gorbachev revolution’, the dissident movements building up since the 1960s, ones that shaped the oppositional discourse and generated the leading spokespeople for the nation in the late 1980s (Levon Ter Pterosyan in Armenia, Zviad Gamsakhurdia in Georgia and so on), now openly challenged ‘the supranational relationship of superordination and subordination dictated by the imperial system’.¹⁵¹ In Armenia and Georgia, intellectuals and activists began to rapidly undermine the power of local Communist parties and put forward ethnocultural demands against the Russifying programs of the Soviet Communist party.¹⁵² In Central Asia, on the other hand, where dissident movements had not previously existed and a closer relation between the apparatus and the intelligentsia was the norm, Communist apparatchiki maintained their hold on both state and society and managed to suppress the relatively weak “democratic” oppositions.¹⁵³

The changes brought about by *glasnost* and *perestroika* were overall unfavourable to the dissemination of Russophone literature. Mikhail Gorbachev’s introduction of self-financing freed publishers of the necessity to represent other nationalities, so that even the one Soviet journal dedicated to non-Russian literatures, *Druzhba narodov*, devoted more pages to Russians than non-Russians.¹⁵⁴ The result was ‘wholesale disappearance of non-Russian themes, and non-Russians, from the national stage’.¹⁵⁵ This retreat of state paternalism has left non-Russians writers in a difficult situation for several reasons. First, they struggle to find ‘native audiences’ to fall back on since, as noted by Olcott, ‘many of the native languages have too few readers to support a professional literature or supply the resources it requires’.¹⁵⁶ In

¹⁵¹ Suny, *The Revenge*, p. 131.

¹⁵² *Ibid.*, p. 128; p. 141.

¹⁵³ *Ibid.*, p. 128; p. 141.

¹⁵⁴ Olcott, ‘Introduction’, pp. 9-10.

¹⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 10.

¹⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 11.

fact, Sergei Baruzdin has suggested that even such prominent authors as Chinghiz Aitmatov, Grant Matevosian, and Ion Drutse ‘were valued first of all by the all-union reader, and not the local, republican reader’.¹⁵⁷ In fact, Goskino also expressed concern that Soviet viewers in the republics weren’t much interested in films made in the republics.¹⁵⁸ Moreover, ‘many non-Russian writers themselves do not know the language of their nationality well enough to write in it, or in some cases even to speak more than a few simple sentences’.¹⁵⁹ This could explain why countries with strong native-language literary traditions such as the Baltics, or Georgia, have quite easily continued this tradition in the post-Soviet era, whereas Russian has remained the dominant literary language in other parts of the former union, especially in Central Asia. Even ‘so ancient and jealously guarded a language as Armenian’ is often displaced by Russian in cultural productions due to the degree of the Russification of the Armenian intelligentsia.¹⁶⁰ Two Armenian Russophone authors discussed in this thesis, Narine Abgaryan and Maryam Petrosyan, have both regrettably declared their inability to write in literary Armenian.¹⁶¹

Post-Soviet Mythmaking, National Building and Censorship

The dissolution of the Soviet Union has granted greater freedom to creative artists in the Caucasus and Central Asia as they are no longer strictly bound by the need to pay lip-service to dominant political ideologies. The use of literature for propagandist aims – formerly widespread – is now exceptional in the region. Turkmenistan, to be sure, has faced increased

¹⁵⁷ Sergei Baruzhdin’s speech, ‘From the 1988 Plenum’, p. 91.

¹⁵⁸ According to Catriona Kelly, ‘even the most widely-watched Central Asian films, such as *Death of an Ataman* with 30 million viewers, ranked significantly below such pan-Soviet hits as Mosfilm’s *Shield and Sword* (1969), with 227 million viewers, Bollywood’s *Sangam* (Raj Kapoor, 1964), with 115 million, or indeed Mosfilm’s *Anna Karenina* (Aleksandr Zarkhi, 1967), with 81 million viewers’. Kelly, ‘The Black and White Poppies’.

¹⁵⁹ Olcott, ‘Introduction’, pp. 11-12.

¹⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 12.

¹⁶¹ The language choices of these writers are discussed in the following chapters.

cultural isolation since the fall of the Soviet Union, with the only prominent Turkmen woman writer composing odes to the horse of President Gurbanguly Berdimukhammedov.¹⁶² Neither are conditions favourable for writers in Uzbekistan, as demonstrated by acclaimed Uzbek author Hamid Ismailov's exile from his country to the UK in 1992 due to state censorship and the ongoing ban on his books.¹⁶³ Ismailov has made the following comment on his censored novel *The Devil's Dance* (2016): 'I can easily draw parallels between the events in the novel and what is happening today between writers and the authorities. Even today, writers face imprisonment or persecution for their work'.¹⁶⁴ The work was likely perceived as controversial by the State as it sheds unfavourable light on certain historical episodes in Uzbekistan's supposedly glorious pre-colonial golden era (the Uzbek khanate), and Stalin's regime.¹⁶⁵

Elsewhere, literature has generally been one of the most free and uncensored creative mediums due to the falling importance that even authoritarian post-Soviet governments attach to it. Indeed, Lilya Kalas, who has written a daring political satire on Kazakh politics— *Фонд Последней Надежды : Постколониальный роман* (2012) – admits that the flipside of the state's lack of interest in local creative arts has allowed her to escape policing of her subversive work.¹⁶⁶ Nonetheless, open political critiques of Soviet and post-Soviet regimes remain risky. For example, Kazakh journalist Zhanbolat Mamay has faced obstacles organising public

¹⁶² Sputnik, 'Ode Written to Turkmen President's Horse', 27 April 2012

<<https://sputniknews.com/world/20120427173092509/>> [accessed 2 September 2019]

¹⁶³ Ismailov, who currently resides in the UK, fled Uzbekistan in 1992 because of what the authoritarian state described as his 'unacceptable democratic tendencies'. Alison Flood, 'First Uzbek Novel Translated into English Lands €20,000 Prize', *The Guardian*, 8 March 2019, <<https://www.theguardian.com/books/2019/mar/08/first-uzbek-novel-translated-into-english-lands-20000-prize>> [accessed 12 April 2019].

¹⁶⁴ Zaynab Mukhammad-Dost, 'Hamid Ismailov On "The Devils' Dance" and Other Works', *Voices of Central Asia*, <<https://voicesoncentralasia.org/hamid-ismailov-the-devils-dance-and-other-works/>> [accessed 2 September 2019].

¹⁶⁵ *The Devils' Dance* focuses on the nineteenth-century Uzbek poet Oyxon, a slave who was forcibly married to three khans, and the author Abdulla Qodiriy, who was writing her story when he was imprisoned by Stalin's secret police, the NKVD, in 1937. The novel was initially published chapter by chapter on Facebook where it went viral. It was smuggled into Uzbekistan in printed editions following the death of dictator Islam Karimov in 2016. The novel's English translation was recently awarded the EBRD literature prize. Flood, 'First Uzbek'.

¹⁶⁶ My interview with Kalas, 6 June 2017, Almaty, Kazakhstan.

screenings of his historical documentaries on mass political repressions (1920s and 1930s), and the mass famine (1931-1933) (what he assesses as a deliberate genocide of the Kazakh nation) in Kazakhstan. Mamay believes that these obstacles were engineered by the Kazakh government which fears Kremlin and rejects all political and historical evaluations of ‘the crimes committed by the Communist regime’.¹⁶⁷ Both Ismailov’s and Mamay’s cases suggest that critiques of the Soviet regime are generally unwelcome in Central Asia. One reason for this is that in Central Asian republics, independence has become ‘a cover for preservation of the old ruling elites’, the Soviet *apparatchiki* covered with the mantle of nationalism and thus at least covertly subservient to Russo-Soviet state ideologies.¹⁶⁸

While the Russian metropolis no longer appears to be policing, at least directly, the bounds of creative representation outside Russia, having emerged from the confines of Soviet censorship, creative artists from the Caucasus and Central Asia are now facing a new challenge in the form of post-Soviet nation-building and mythmaking. In western empires, nation-states were created prior to the formation of their overseas empires, meaning that disentangling countries such as England and France from their empires was relatively easy because they could fall back upon established pre-imperial nation-states.¹⁶⁹ However, disentangling the ex-colonial nations which have often been radically altered by colonial policies is rarely as straightforward. This is especially true in the post-Soviet context particularly since ‘nations’ in the modern sense ‘are a very recent creation in the ethnic, cultural, and linguistic mosaic of

¹⁶⁷ ‘Власть не хочет давать исторических, политических оценок преступлениям коммунистического режима. Это продиктовано страхом перед реакцией Кремля, который воздвигает личность Сталина в культ современного общества. Сегодня путинский режим пытается обелить большевиков, Сталина, показывая его как спасителя отечества’ – Mamay declares. ‘Онлайн-премьера фильма «Преступления Сталина»’, *Adamdar CA*, 24 September, 2019. <<https://adamdar.ca/en/post/documentary-film-stalin-s-crimes-premieres-online?lang=en-US>> [accessed 6 October 2019].

¹⁶⁸ Suny, *The Revenge*, p. xiv. All first presidents of independent Central Asian states and of Azerbaijan and began their careers as Soviet officials. So did the second president of Georgia, Eduard Shevardnadze.

¹⁶⁹ Kuzio, ‘History’, p. 242.

Central Asia'.¹⁷⁰ Nationalism takes a very different form in the countries of the region than in Russia where the idea of Russian national identity has remained more stable since the Russian imperial period,¹⁷¹ and so does the fictional reflection on the question of post-Soviet identity, as I will demonstrate in this thesis.

When defining their post-Soviet nationhoods, Central Asian states and their leaders eagerly attempt to resurrect their collective pre-Soviet historical, linguistic, and cultural identity in order to develop a sense of anchorage, self-esteem and pride in their ancestors.¹⁷² This search often takes the form ethnic primordialism and autochthonism which involves glorifying the concerned nation's ancient 'golden age', its culture and achievements, its great founders, military leaders and heroes.¹⁷³ As a result, the mythical golden age Turkistan, with all its heroes, has become a source of contestation as all Central nations attempt to lay claim to its glory. According to Sergei Abashin, Uzbekistan's post-independence promotion of 'Turkestan – our common home' suggests the country's pretension to regional dominance.¹⁷⁴ Tajikistan is similarly promoting the idea of 'Greater Tajikistan' to suggest that the country is ancient and much larger than the contemporary version, indeed encompassing most of Central Asia.¹⁷⁵ Similar processes in Kazakhstan are caricatured by Kazakh author Lilya Kalas in her

¹⁷⁰ Douglas Northrop, 'Nationalizing Backwardness: Gender, Empire, and Uzbek Identity', in Suny and Martin eds, *A State of Nations*, pp. 191-223, p. 191.

¹⁷¹ As mentioned earlier, Sovietisation often went hand-in-hand with russification, whereas ideas of nationhood and ethnicity were radically altered in Central Asia through Soviet interventions. However, this is not to suggest that Russian nationhood was not affected by Soviet policies, far from it. As Ronald Suny points out, 'at least a semblance of nationhood had been permitted the major non-Russian peoples, whereas Great Russians were much more limited in manifesting their ethnic national aspirations or enjoying the institutions and privileges of nation state. Buried within a federation within a federation, the Russian 'nation' experienced the same sense of peril that smaller peoples of the Soviet Union felt. The nation was in danger, its heritage squandered, its monuments crumbling, the memory of its past distorted almost beyond recovery'. Suny, *The Revenge*, p. 129.

¹⁷² On national culture-building in post-Soviet Central Asia see Victor Schnirelmann, 'Президенты и археология, или Что ищут политики в древности: далекое прошлое и его политическая роль в СССР и в постсоветское время', in *Империя и Нация в Зеркале Исторической Памяти* (Moscow: Novoe izdatel'stvo, 2011), pp. 357-406.

¹⁷³ Schnirelmann, 'Президенты', *passim*.

¹⁷⁴ Abashin, 'История', pp. 177-207.

¹⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, *passim*.

novel *Фонд последней надежды: (Пост)колониальный роман* (2013) mentioned earlier. The novel, which is based in Burkutstan (an allegory of Kazakhstan) recurrently alludes to the country's typically postcolonial, excessive preoccupation with national culture. In one episode, as the locals pass around a newly printed note of ten thousand 'tuangs'¹⁷⁶, they mock the embarrassing spelling mistake made by the National Bank – Нацбанк who, as they claim, 'по-буркутский не базарят'.¹⁷⁷ Ironically, while the national language in Burkutstan is being displaced by Russian and English, the note itself evidences the state's hypocritical efforts at glorifying indigenous culture. The note features Abu Ali ibn Mubarak,¹⁷⁸ a thinker and healer of the Ancient Orient, who, despite his questionable connection to Burkut culture, is turned into a national symbol through the manipulation of knowledge and visual arts. As we learn from the narrator:

К буркутам он имел такое же отношение, как Макбал Идрисовна к танцу маленьких лебедей. Просто арабского мыслителя угораздило родиться в крохотном горном селении неподалёку от тех мест, где ровно тысячу лет спустя Советская власть построила промышленный город Шыркан, центр металлургии и тяжёлого машиностроения Буркутской советской социалистической республики. Учитывая исламские традиции, ни одного портрета Абу Али ибн Мубарака в действительности никогда не существовало, но это досадное упущение было исправлено при создании Буркутской энциклопедии. Так Мубарак стал символом буркутской государственности и был воплощён в десятках скульптурных монументов, сотнях научных работ и на обложках миллионов школьных дневников. Однако настоящая слава, и не снисшаяся древнему врачу, пришла к нему, когда его полностью нафантазированное безвестным художником-дизайнером благородное бородатое лицо с тонким носом и добрыми раскосыми глазами украсило буркутскую туаньгу.¹⁷⁹

This brief description effectively illustrates the arguments on mythmaking made by scholars like Abashin. It conveys the techniques and stages of the nation-building process which fabricate or twist history, materialise abstract relics and individuals into dominant visual

¹⁷⁶ An imaginary currency evoking Kazakhstani tenge.

¹⁷⁷ Lilya Kalaus, *Фонд*, p. 16.

¹⁷⁸ Mubarak's prototype is Al-Farabi (Alpharabius) a renowned philosopher and jurist of the Islamic Golden Age.

¹⁷⁹ Kalaus, *Фонд*, p. 16.

sources, and consequently imprint them in the collective psyche. The passage also alludes to an essentially arbitrary nature of the construction of national and geographic boundaries, which, in the case of the city Shirkin, were delineated according to the Soviet industrial interests. That the Central Asian presidents are often the spearheads of the building of the national culture is implied by the image of the president's hand next to Mubarak.¹⁸⁰

Perhaps an inevitable side-effect of the heightened nationalism in the Caucasus and Central Asia has been the rise of conservative ideologies in both regions. Previously, Moscow ensured that the subject republics were governed by a clearly defined set of principles of communism, an ideology which had to ideally and eventually suppress all other ideologies, whether religious, cultural, or other. This meant that the demise of the Communist system left an ideological vacuum in the post-Soviet space, clearing the path for new, often radical ideologies.¹⁸¹ In the post-Soviet setting, some countries in the Caucasus and Central Asia can boast a relatively stable ethnic pluralism and a generally secular religious path. In Azerbaijan, Islam has found a modern secular expression.¹⁸² In Uzbekistan, Islam is also widely understood in ways that are profoundly secular, as Adeeb Khalid has argued.¹⁸³ However, tendencies of hegemonic nationalism, ethnocentrism and religious radicalism are also common in the two regions.

In Georgia, the Orthodox Church's controversial attitudes towards women and sexual minorities have made media headlines both locally and abroad. In 2012, Patriarch Ilia II was

¹⁸⁰ Ibid., p.16.

¹⁸¹ Vladimir Tismaneanu, 'The Demise of Leninism and the Future of Liberal Values' in *In Marx's Shadow: Knowledge, Power, and Intellectuals in Eastern Europe and Russia*, ed. by Costica Bradatan and Serguei Alex Oushakine (New York: The Rowman & Littlefield Publishing Group, 2010), pp. 221-243.

¹⁸² According to Altay Goyuhsov, Professor of Islamic History at Baku State University, Azerbaijan is 'the most secular Muslim country in the world'. Goyuhsov quoted in Shahla Sultanova, 'Azerbaijan: Islam Comes with a Secular Face' (EurasiaNet.org, 2013), <<http://www.eurasianet.org/node/67396>> [accessed 15 December 201], para 2.

¹⁸³ Adeeb Khalid, 'A Secular Islam: Nation, State, and Religion in Uzbekistan', *International Journal of Middle East Studies*, 4.35 (2003), 573-598 (p. 573).

criticised for his sermon which instructed women that husbands were heads of a family. ‘When your husband returns from work you have to offer him rest, offer him to wash his feet, offer him food. You need to show warmth to your husband’ – the patriarch advised.¹⁸⁴ The tight association of women and domesticity implicit in the call appears even more striking when contrasted with the affirmation of women’s role in the public sphere made two centuries previously by St. Gabriel Kikodze, The Bishop of Imereti, Georgia (1860-1896) : ‘Christianity requires women to be self-sufficient, to possess the necessary wisdom and courage to act according to their own mind and will. Christianity will not tolerate women to be slavishly dependent on men and serve men’s passions’.¹⁸⁵ Religious conservatism reached new heights in May 2013 when orthodox priests and conservatives physically attacked a small gay pride march in Tbilisi. Their counter anti-homophobia rally to uphold the ‘sanctity of family values’ echoed the homophobic tendencies of the Russian State and Church discourse.¹⁸⁶

While not associated with religion, similar extremist conservative tendencies have recently been displayed in Central Asia, as evidenced by the public scandal following the Woman’s Day march on 8 March 2019 in Bishkek. Disconcerted members of the public, several politicians, and conservative nationalist groups such as Kyrgyz Choroloru were outraged that feminists in the march were joined by queer activists, denounced the occasion as a gay parade, and demanded that the mayor resign for allowing it.¹⁸⁷

¹⁸⁴ Iliia II, ‘A Husband is a Head of a Family’ [ojakhshi mtavari aris qmari], *Tabula*, 29 April 2012 <<http://www.tabula.ge/ge/story/59228-ilia-meore-ojaxshi-mtavari-aris-qmari>> [accessed 20 September 2017]

¹⁸⁵ St Gabriel Kikodze, ‘A Word of the Enunciation’, date unknown, my translation. <<http://www.orthodoxy.ge/tserilebi/gabriel/khareba4.htm>> [accessed 20 May 2017]

¹⁸⁶ ‘Clashes at Gay Rally in Georgia’, *BBC News* <<https://www.bbc.com/news/av/world-europe-22565723/conservatives-attack-gay-activists-at-rally-in-tbilisi>> [accessed 17 March 2019]; See also Tinatin Zhvania, ‘Dzaladobashi gadazrdili anti-gei protesti’ [ant-gay protest turns into violence], Reporter, 20 May 2013 <<http://reporter.ge/dzaladobashi-gadazrdili-anti-gei-protesti-7/>> [accessed 2 September 2019].

¹⁸⁷ RFE/RL’s Kyrgyz Service, ‘Rainbow Rage: Kyrgyz Rail Against LGBT Community After Central Asia’s “First” Gay-Pride March’, RadioFreeEurope/RadioLiberty <<https://www.rferl.org/a/rainbow-rage-kyrgyz-rail-against-lgbt-after-central-asia-s-first-gay-pride-march/29825158.html>> [accessed 17 March 2019]; See also Anna Kapushenko, ‘Мэр Бишкека заявил о законности женского марша.

As these incidents suggest, the identities of post-Soviet women have been highly contested in the region. Madina Tlostanova argues that the disintegration of the Soviet Union changed the content, but not the mechanism for the functioning of the Orientalist and development discourse whereby women are often placed in a subaltern position. On the one hand, we find local regimes whose nationalist discourses are ‘characteristic of young postcolonial nations that permit only specific ideas and propagandistic models of national culture, mentality, creativity, and religiosity’ and closely associate patriarchal values with so-called tradition.¹⁸⁸ On the other hand, there are the ‘ex-colonisers’ and foreign-funded NGOs that similarly ignore that women’s subjectivity ‘is a hybrid, trans-cultural and trans-value product, which cannot be fixed within the primitive dichotomy of the *paranji* versus the mini-skirt’.¹⁸⁹ Such oversight of conflicting subjectivities and fluid gender models in Central Asian and Caucasian locales, for instance neglect of the fact that the ‘Russian imperial model worked in parallel with the Afghan, Turkish, Persian, and Arabic modernization influences’, works to reinforce the stable binary opposition of modernity versus tradition.¹⁹⁰

The result of the above-mentioned dynamics is the tripartite re-Orientalising – from the West and Western mainstream gender discourses, from ‘local self-Orientalized caricatures that still strive to squeeze Central Asia or Caucasus into the procrustean bed of ready-made stereotypes’, and from the new nation-state ‘which is once again just using the woman as a banner of its nation- building’.¹⁹¹ By extension, gender discourses can be similarly characterised by a tripartite scheme which sees women as ‘forever climbing the stairs of

«Кырк Чоро» требовали его отставки из-за участия в акции ЛГБТ-людей’, *Kloop.KZ*, 11 March 2019 <https://kloop.kg/blog/2019/03/11/mer-bishkeka-zayavil-o-zakonnosti-zhenskogo-marsha-kyrk-choro-trebovali-ego-otstavki-iz-za-uchastiya-v-aktsii-lgbt-lyudej/?fbclid=IwAR1Pmfkvxq94JWzdBh0wwCg7rKwMIaO2t_mHDvAyF3tg8JxP6dRNbnMAEvo> [accessed 4 September, 2019]

¹⁸⁸ Tlostanova, ‘Postcolonial’, p. 42.

¹⁸⁹ Tlostanova, ‘The Janus-Faced’, p. 8.

¹⁹⁰ Tlostanova, *Gender*, p. 188.

¹⁹¹ Tlostanova, ‘The Janus-Faced’, p. 8.

modernity — from traditionalism through the Soviet half-traditional, half-modern model to the Western liberated female'.¹⁹²

The centrality of gender in post-Soviet nation-building is evidenced by the discourses around what women are allowed to represent and how they are allowed to be represented. A good example is a recent scandal in Kazakhstan over a public statue of a pair of lovers, a young man and a young woman. In 2005, Nazarbayev ceremoniously unveiled the sculpture – called ‘Lovers’ – in the park of the same name in Astana. Eleven years later, a female citizen of Astana wrote a blog to criticise the depiction of the young woman in the statue for her tight-fitting dress: ‘Что подумают иностранцы, которые будут смотреть достопримечательности нашей столицы, или гости из других регионов Казахстана?’ – she complained.¹⁹³ The post went viral and prompted a member of the then ruling party ‘Нур Отан’ Talgat Sholtaev to cover the scandalous female figure with a cloth (Figure 1). ‘Неужели так выглядят наши девушки? Неужели так будут нас воспринимать иностранцы, думать, что наших девушек не уважают?’ – Sholtaev echoed the indignation of his fellow female detractor.¹⁹⁴ The scandal around the statue led the ministry of culture to open a special investigation and recommend the blurring of the female statue’s silhouette. More broadly, the incident suggests Kazakhstan’s conflicting anxieties over its image in the West as both ‘traditional’ and modern and points to the contested meanings of these terms in Kazakh society.

¹⁹² Tlostanova, ‘Postcolonial’, p. 42.

¹⁹³ Bakhtizhan Bermagabet, ‘Про влюблённую казашку’, blogpost, 3 October 2016 <<https://yvision.kz/post/682840#comment3008413>> [accessed 20 August 2019]

¹⁹⁴ *TengriNews*, ‘Житель Астаны накрыл скандальную скульптуру девушки платком’, 16 March 2016, <https://tengrinews.kz/kazakhstan_news/jitel-astanyi-nakryil-skandalnuyu-skulpturu-devushki-platkom-290828/> [accessed 20 August 2019]

Figure 1. Citizen of Astana Talgat Sholtaev posing in front of a woman's statue covered by him with a cloth. Photo by @talgatramazanuly.¹⁹⁵



In view of these complexities, female creative artists often face the pressures of self-censorship and have to find strategies of navigating around the taboos and constraints imposed on them. This was evident in the exhibition of Kazakhstani artist Zoya Fal'kova that I visited in Almaty in 2016. The ironically titled project, 'Модернизация создания', was hosted in Essentay Mall, a luxurious shopping and entertainment centre which fittingly captures Kazakhstan's self-promotion as a prospering, democratic power on the world stage. The title of Fal'kova's project appropriately echoed the major 160-million-dollar state project 'модернизация общественного сознания' [Рухани Жаңғыру]. Initiated in the same year by former Kazakh President Nursultan Nazarbayev, the project seeks to modernise Kazakh society and reject 'archaic customs and predilections jarring with global standards'.¹⁹⁶ However, detractors considered Fal'kova's project too modern for Kazakhstan's post-Soviet reality, justifying its ironic title. The artist presented a series of nude drawings of his male depicted in poses evoking traditional European-style paintings.

¹⁹⁵ Tenginews, 'Житель'.

¹⁹⁶ 'Ряд архаических и не вписывающихся в глобальный мир привычек и пристрастий нужно оставить в прошлом' – argued Nazarbayev. The project would fund various eclectic initiatives ranging from Kazakh designers' visits abroad to the switch of the national alphabet from Cyrillic to Latin. Sanat Urnaliev, 'Миллиарды на «модернизацию общественного сознания»', RadioFreedomKZ, 15 February 2018, <<https://rus.azattyq.org/a/ruhani-zhangyru-modernizacia-soznania/29040740.html>> [accessed 20 August 2019].

Apprehensive about the reception of her work, Fal'kova, in an act of deliberate self-censorship, gathered some of her more daring nudes behind a wall on which she wrote humorously: 'Цензоры эту возмутительную обнаженку убрали за стенку'. However, two hours prior to the opening, the PR team of Essentay refused to display the nudes, denouncing them as 'pornography'. To salvage the situation, Fal'kova covered up the sexual organs of her partner's portraits with pieces of cloth. Fal'kova's strategic use of clothes (Figure 2) deliberately resonated with the scandal over the statue of lovers a year prior to the exhibition. In retrospect, Fal'kova comments that she turned her act of self-censorship into an act of 'self-actualisation'. This act charged her pieces with added political meaning and attracted more visitors to her project. 'Люди входили и заглядывали под эти платки. [...] давление цензуры можно превратить в некий актуальный инструмент для того, чтобы идти против этой цензуры' – Fal'kova recalls.¹⁹⁷ Incidentally, Fal'kova is not the only female creative artist who has criticised 'Рухани Жаңғыру'. Kazakh author Zaure Bataeva has openly denounced the project as the embodiment of Kazakh's state's internalising of Soviet racism.¹⁹⁸

¹⁹⁷ Aiturgan Azimzhanova, 'О цензуре "внутри себя" поговорили художники, журналисты и правозащитники', *Hola News*, 21 December 2018, <<https://holanews.kz/view/news/32334>> [accessed 20 August 2019].

¹⁹⁸ 'Мы до сих пор не хотим признавать, что мы 70 лет жили в расистской стране и унаследовали ее расистскую культуру. За 25 лет независимости десоветизация никогда не рассматривалась как важная часть модернизации сознания – неудивительно, что наши идеологи вернулись к идеям советской модернизации через Рухани Жаңғыру' – Bataeva declares. Zaure Bataeva, '«Нормальные» и «мамбет» казахи', blog post, 1 August 2019, <<https://www.zaurebatayeva.blog/post/нормальные-и-мамбет-казахи>> [accessed 2 October 2019].

Figure 2. Exhibition guests peeping under the paintings of Zoya Fal'kova. Photo by Yuliya Kozlova.¹⁹⁹



As reactions to Fal'kova's project demonstrate, even the relative political freedom in the sphere of culture has not always operated in gender terms. Self-censorship and societal pressures still restrict the boundaries for representations of/by women, and women writers are also influenced by these constraints. During one of her public appearances, Armenian author Narine Abgaryan was questioned by a female reader who found the author's use of swearwords in her autobiographical novel *Понаехавшая* excessive and complained that 'всё же таки мы армяне и у нас есть какое-то внутреннее табу'. In her response, Abgaryan admitted that she was indeed apprehensive about her language, and even attempted to cancel the publication of her book.²⁰⁰ Abgaryan's comment hints at the extent to which Russophone women might feel pressure to observe propriety dictated to women by their countries' customs.

¹⁹⁹ Центр 1, 'Выставка в Алматы: вместо холста – простыня, вместо красок – свекла', 23 June 2017, <<https://centre1.com/kazakhstan/vystavka-v-almaty-vmesto-holsta-prostynya-vmesto-krasok-svekla/feed/>> [accessed 20 August 2019].

²⁰⁰ Narine Abgaryan, interview, Rau TV (Рау Телестудия), 'Встреча с Писательницей Нарине Абгарян', Дом культуры РАУ, 20 September 2016, 14:22-16:05 <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_CDyTхnyndM> [accessed 11 April 2018].

It has to be emphasised that in the context of these complex post-Soviet realities where societies come to terms with the legacies of the Soviet past all while confronting the nationalistic tendencies of their postcolonial regimes, the originality of post-Soviet writing from the region is a testament to the increasingly daring and independent spirit of creative artists in the region.²⁰¹ Rather than offer up sentimental, nationalistic prose to help the political drive of national mythmaking, these writers often push the boundaries of the acceptable and satirise their post-colonial regimes.

Conclusion

Central Asia and the Caucasus cannot be considered as typical colonies, and neither is Russia a typical ex-colonial metropolis. This is not to suggest that Russia is an internal colony, an idea that, as I hope to have shown, exoticises Russo-Soviet imperialism and perpetuates Russian Orientalist and colonial discourses, both in academia and in Russian foreign policy. Rather, the specificity of Russian Orientalism lies in the fact that it is secondarily derived from Western Orientalism, meaning that the former is always complicated by Russia's historically problematic self-definition vis-a-vis the West. The resulting insecurities have in many ways heightened the Russo-Soviet state's demonstrations of Russian cultural and political

²⁰¹ This is also true of certain post-Soviet states outside of Central Asia and the Caucasus. For instance, post-Soviet women writers in Lithuania, especially Jurga Ivanauskaitė, were heavily criticised for their modern and supposedly unpatriotic styles. Ivanauskaitė's 1993 novel *Ragana ir lietus* [The Witch and the Rain], a love story told by three women, caused a national scandal. The municipality of Vilnius banned the novel from the capital's bookstores, ruling that it could only be sold in shops selling erotic products. Howard Jarvis, 'Jurga Ivanauskaitė. Gone with her Dreams', *Vilnius Now*, 17 February 2008 <<https://www.alfa.lt/straipsnis/170055/jurga-ivanauskaite-gone-with-her-dreams>> [accessed 4 July 2017].

superiority at the expense of colonial policies in the Caucasus and Central Asia. This phenomenon determined the ambiguity of Soviet policies such as *druzhba narodov*, both patronising and enabling, especially in relation to the native intelligentsia in the two regions, and it has also determined the lived reality of many post-Soviet subjects, especially the doubly Orientalised women from the Caucasus and Central Asia.

As I shall demonstrate in this thesis, Russophone writing from the two regions provides a diverse and sophisticated record of the conflicts and contrasts in the Russian imperial/colonial project and its social and cultural echoes in the post-Soviet period. Rather than trying to underline shared characteristics or plot a timeline, or conversely, attempting to separate out authors and geographical areas, the chapters are organised into thematic groupings which have emerged organically in the process of my research.

The study moves from retrospective fiction concerned with evaluating and digesting the Soviet past, to works that seek to accommodate post-Soviet legacies and come to terms with the post-Soviet present, to fictions that move beyond the Soviet experience and look to the future. This sequence suggests a dynamic evolution of post-Soviet identity discourses, as well as of the range and ambition of Russophone cultures in the Caucasus and Central Asia.

Chapter Two

Unhomely Identities: The Traumatic Search for a Post-Soviet Home

Introduction

‘In the House of Fiction you can hear, today, the deep stirring of the “unhomely”’ – writes Homi Bhabha.¹ Bhabha’s concept of the unhomely, based on Freud’s uncanny [*unheimlich*], provides a useful theoretical framework for responding to the experience of alienation and displacement that marks modern existence in general, but especially the post-colonial, and post-Soviet existence more specifically. The resonance of the unhomely can be heard in Armenian writer Mariam Petrosyan’s novel *Дом, в котором* (2009),² Georgian writer and filmmaker Nana Ekvimishvili’s novel *The Pear Field* (2015),³ Georgian author Teona Dolenjashvili’s *Memphis* (2008),⁴ and Kazakh/Russian/German writer Olga Breininger’s novel *В Советском союзе не было аддэрала* (2018).⁵ I argue that post-Soviet literary evocations of the uncanny represent a specific model within wider postcolonial narratives of the unhomely due to such traumatic factors as the rapidity of the Soviet Union’s cultural collapse, the national humiliation with which it was associated, the ambivalence towards its results, the repression of

¹ Homi Bhabha, ‘The World and the Home’, *Social Text*, 31.32 (1992), 141-53 (p. 141).

² Mariam Petrosyan, *Дом, в котором* [The House in Which] (Moscow: Гаятри/Livebook: 2009).

³ Nana Ekvimishvili, *The Pear Field* [Msxlebis mindori] (Tbilisi: Sulakauri Publishing, 2015).

⁴ Teona Dolenjashvili, *Memphis* [Memfisi] (Tbilisi: Siesta Publishing House, 2008).

⁵ Olga Breininger, *В Советском союзе не было аддэрала* [There Was No Adderall in The Soviet Union] (2015) (Moscow: ACT, 2018).

the collective trauma suffered under the Soviet regime, and the radical shift from a communitarian to an individualistic consciousness. In the works analysed, this specificity manifests itself through three key motifs of home, abandoned children, and corrupted natural world, and it is through such interlinked metaphors that a broader discourse of the traumatic search for a psychospiritual homeland and post-Soviet subjectivity is generated.

As John Hawley observes ‘the quest for a home, the return to one’s homeland, has been a constant in world literature, but has taken on greater urgency in recent decades’.⁶ In large part, this is because, as Edward Said remarks, ‘our age—with its modern warfare, imperialism, and the quasi-theological ambitions of totalitarian rulers—is indeed the age of the refugee, the displaced person, mass immigration’.⁷ In his essay ‘The World and the Home’ (1992), Homi Bhabha offers his own interpretation of the phenomenon in a postcolonial context. Bhabha explores his notion of the unhomely by transposing Freud’s exploration of the uncanny or the *unheimlich* to a cultural context. Unhomeliness is not about being physically homeless. ‘It has less to do with forcible eviction and more to do with the uncanny literary and social effects of enforced social accommodation, or historical migrations and cultural relocations.’⁸ Neither is unhomeliness the same as other types of alienation found in the great tradition of literary and intellectual culture embodying exile – represented by Dante, Joyce, Conrad, Hemingway, Fitzgerald, Simone Weil, Theodor Adorno and others. The post-Soviet unhomely is no mere self-alienation, but rather an internal splitting that cannot be dissociated from a traumatic, schismatic context external to one’s self. Unhomeliness is above all a colonial and post-colonial condition and its resonance can be heard in the novels analysed in this chapter. I argue that for the protagonists of these fictions, and to a large extent their writers, the difficulties in

⁶ John Hawley, ‘Theorizing the Diaspora’ in *Global Fissures/Postcolonial Fusions*, ed. by Clara A.B. Joseph and Janet Wilson (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2006), pp. 3-16 (pp. 3-4).

⁷ Edward W. Said, *Reflections on Exile and Other Literary and Cultural Essays* (London: Granta Publications, 2001), p. 374.

⁸ Bhabha, ‘The World’, p. 141.

negotiating an identity are exacerbated by their post-colonial situation. The Freudian uncanny moments which they experience during their identity struggles become a specific part of their ‘cultural’, ‘unhomely’ experience of dealing with the wider identity politics of their nation states.

In Freud’s analysis, uncanny experiences are mysterious, ambivalent and ‘undoubtedly related to what is frightening — to what arouses dread and horror’.⁹ At the same time, the uncanny ‘leads back to what is known of old and long familiar’, suggesting that it rouses the repressed experiences from our unconscious.¹⁰ Indeed, it relates to something ‘repressed which recurs’.¹¹ Thus, the uncanny often occurs when a familiar, comforting, recognisable thing or event is encountered in an unsettling or eerie context to suggest the doubling of the ego. This unlikely conjunction of the familiar and the alien is what determines the dynamic of the uncanny’s power to disturb. The uncanny moment is typically associated with optical tropes such as mirrors and commonly involves self-alienations and split personhoods, doppelgängers, ghosts, *déjà vu* and nightmares.¹² The uncanny also ‘has to do with a strangeness of framing and borders, an experience of liminality’.¹³

The experience of the uncanny is not, of course, unique to the post-colonial situation: indeed, examples can quite easily be found in modernist writing generally. One striking example occurs in Jack Kerouac’s novel *On the Road* (1957). The narrator, Sal, experiences an uncanny moment while he is staying at a hotel and preparing to set out on a road trip from America’s East Side to the West Side:

⁹ Sigmund Freud, ‘The “Uncanny”’, in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud: Volume 17, 1917-1919*, ed. by James Strachey, Anna Freud, Alix Strachey and Alan Tyson (London: the Hogarth Press and The Institute of Psycho-Analysis, 1955), pp. 219-252 (p. 219).

¹⁰ Freud, ‘Uncanny’, p. 220.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 241.

¹² Sadeq Rahimi, ‘The Ego, the Ocular, and the Uncanny: Why Are Metaphors of Vision Central in Accounts of the Uncanny?’, *The International Journal of Psychoanalysis*, 94.3 (2013), 453-76.

¹³ Nicholas Royle, *The Uncanny* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2003), p. 2.

I woke up as the sun was reddening; and that was the one distinct time in my life, the strangest moment of all, that I didn't know who I was – I was far away from home haunted and tired with travel, in a cheap hotel room I'd never seen, hearing the hiss of steam outside, and the creak of the old wood of the hotel and footsteps upstairs and all the sad sounds, and I looked at the cracked high ceiling and really didn't know who I was for about fifteen strange seconds. I wasn't scared; I was just somebody else, some stranger, and my whole life was a haunted life, the life of a ghost. I was halfway across America, at the dividing line between the East of my youth and the West of my future, and maybe that's why it happened right there and then, that strange red afternoon.¹⁴

Sal finds himself at a threshold, in a liminal space in both a literal and metaphorical sense. Geographically and physically, he is located between the American East and West, metaphorically – between his past as a young man, and his future as an independent man seeking an adventure away from his mother's home. Registering the importance of this moment in the evolution of his identity in an eerie and unsettling setting of a motel, Sal experiences an estrangement from his self, perceiving himself an uncanny stranger, a ghost. The difference is that while Sal soon forgets his sense of alienation with the help of a comforting serving of an apple pie with ice-cream, characters in post-colonial fiction cannot so easily suppress the uncanny elements of their identity. The uncanny moments in post-colonial settings are always complicated by a third dimension – the public – the cultural or the political. They are unhomely moments 'where the private and public touch'.¹⁵ The threshold is not only between one's individual selves (as in Sal's case), but between the private and the public. This is a crucial point, and I shall be expanding on it in detail here.

Homi Bhabha transposes the uncanny to the political context and suggests that it underscores the ambivalence and liminality of the national space and one's identity within this space. 'Appearing as a ghost-shadow of the unfamiliar, the unhomely [...] signifies the impossibility of securing a safe continuity for the self, of identifying this self's status with given cultural notions of habitation'.¹⁶ According to Bhabha, the 'unhomely moment relates

¹⁴ Jack Kerouac, *On the Road* (1957) (London: Penguin, 1991) pp. 15-16.

¹⁵ Bhabha, 'The World', p. 149.

¹⁶ Radhika Mohanram and Gita Rajan, *Postcolonial Discourse and Changing Cultural Contexts: Theory and Criticism* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Publishing Group, 1994), p. 108.

the traumatic ambivalences of a personal, psychic history to the wider disjunctions of political existence'.¹⁷ It is 'the shock of recognition of the world-in-the home, the home-in-the-world', of the fact that the personal is the political.¹⁸ In the unhomely moment, 'the recesses of domestic spaces become sites for history's most intricate invasions'.¹⁹ 'The border between home and world becomes confused; and, uncannily, the private the public become part of each other, forcing upon us a vision that is as divided as it is disorienting.'²⁰ As a result, one becomes unable to dissociate one's 'home' from its political and cultural context, one's private sphere becomes contaminated by one's 'public' dimension and one's individual identity becomes confused with the sense of collective identity. As Fflur Dafydd puts it:

Colonisation confuses one's origins, the very root of one's identity, and the world becomes an ambivalent, nebulous and insecure place. The uncanny is [...] that which dissolves any sense of fixed knowledge and causes the disruption of a perceived 'concrete' world. Suddenly one must question where world ends, and self begins. Can the two be separated? In the unhomely moment, nothing is secure. To whom does one 'belong' culturally to oneself, or to a nation-state and cultural collective?²¹

In the unhomely moment, 'private and public, past and present, the psyche and the social develop an interstitial intimacy'.²² The political invades the private, highlighting how, in the post-colonial context, national history is inextricably linked with one's search for identity.

If colonial settings foster a strong bond between private and public due to the colonial power's control of the domestic space of the colonised,²³ then this connection acquires a particular significance in the Soviet context with the Soviet order's special interest in enforcing

¹⁷ Bhabha, 'The World,' p. 144.

¹⁸ Ibid., p. 141.

¹⁹ Ibid., p. 141.

²⁰ Ibid., p. 141.

²¹ Fflur Dafydd, '[A] Shifting / Identity Never Your Own': The Uncanny and the Unhomely in the Writing of R.S. Thomas (unpublished doctoral thesis, University of Wales, Bangor, 2004) <http://e.bangor.ac.uk/4342/2/DX230578_1_0001.pdf>, p. 193.

²² Bhabha, 'The World', p. 148.

²³ See for instance Emily Rose Stevenson's analysis of how the British sought to control Indian women's domestic space. Emily Rose Stevenson, 'Home, Sweet Home: Women and the "Other Space" of Domesticity in Colonial Indian Postcards, ca. 1880–1920', *Visual Anthropology*, 26.4(2003), 298–327.

the merging of one's individual self with a cultural collective. As Hana Havelková puts it, 'the totalitarian government thoroughly suspended individual subjectivity in the form of people's autonomous development as citizens, as owners, as thinking beings, as acting subjects, and as men and women shaping their own lives'.²⁴ Perhaps reinforcing the ideological demands of Soviet Communism was the national ideology of the 'coloniser' itself, one that has historically placed emphasis on privileging the community over the individual – a tendency in large part rooted in Russian Orthodoxy's emphasis on *sobornost'*, a spiritual community which condemns the type of individualism one associates with the West. It is not coincidental that, as Svetlana Boym remarks, 'until recently, many words used in Western public and private spheres lacked Russian equivalents: among them are the words for "privacy," "self," "mentality," and "identity"'.²⁵ In the Soviet era, where there was little space for privacy, "private life" had subversive connotations' – Boym points out.²⁶ As she continues,

it [private life] was not merely an escape from public and political life but also a niche where alternative civic consciousness developed. It was in those kitchensalons of the 1960s, in the crammed rooms of communal apartments, that the dreams of change were first nurtured, long before political opportunities and economic transformations.²⁷

The dissolution of the Soviet has led post-Societies to re-evaluate the meaning of the private space. Even if the home has been re-appropriated from the grip of imperial-political ideology, in the unhomey moments, the private space is still invaded by traumas of the past, as one still asks : 'to whom does one 'belong' culturally to oneself, or to a nation-state and cultural collective?'.²⁸ Due to the close symbolic association between women and domestic

²⁴ Hana Havelková, 'A Few Prefeminist Thoughts', in *Gender Politics and Post-Communism: Reflections from Eastern Europe and the Former Soviet Union*, ed. by Nanette Funk, and Magda Mueller (London: Routledge, 1993), pp. 62-73 (p. 69).

²⁵ Svetlana Boym, *Common Places: Mythologies of Everyday Life in Russia* (Cambridge MA; London: Harvard University Press, 1994), p. 3.

²⁶ Svetlana Boym, *The Future of Nostalgia* (New York: Basic Books, 2001), eBook, p. 242.

²⁷ Boym, *The Future*, p. 242.

²⁸ Dafydd, 'Shifting', p. 193.

space, this question acquires particular pertinence for women. Both colonialism and its inevitable aftermath in the ex-colonies – nationalism – place gender at the centre of their ideologies. Aside from the fact that Western colonisers discursively shaped colonial women as backwards in order to justify their civilising mission, they also encouraged women to act as native instruments of colonialism in their domestic space. The ideology of imperial domesticity is well captured by the following declaration in *The Times* (July 2, 1910):

women are the great home-makers – the social weavers – and they have begun to use their gifts for imperial purposes. They are following up the fight and struggle of men and finding ways to bind the citizens of the Empire together, ways which are slow, quiet, and unobtrusive, but none the less effective and lasting.²⁹

The symbolic association of the feminine with the domestic and the ‘double burden’ prevalent in the Soviet period have persisted in the post-Soviet era.³⁰ Added to this, post-Soviet successor states have made use of women as banners of their nation- building, which inevitably reinforces the link between women and domesticity.³¹ In this context, post-Soviet women writers’ very act of imagining a space, whether private, or domestic, is charged with political meaning. Whether deliberately subversive or not, their unhomely visions of imagined private spaces provide alternative models to colonial and nationalist conceptions of these spaces. At the very least, their fictions do not ‘bind the citizens of the Empire together’ in ‘ways which are slow, quiet, and unobtrusive’, but on the contrary, expose the chaotic and oppressive post-colonial realities of their nation states.

Further exacerbating this process of grappling between communal and private spaces in the post-Soviet space is the specificity of the Soviet colonial trauma. As mentioned previously, the uncanny also deals with repressed memories and experiences that emerge in the present as transformed anxieties. In its transposition into a colonial context, the uncanny becomes the

²⁹ Stevenson, ‘Home’, p. 298.

³⁰ See the Introduction.

³¹ See Chapter One.

unhomely as one is faced with the repressed memories and traumas associated with colonialism, such as colonial violence. If in Freud's uncanny, the repressed memories are mainly connected to individual experiences, in the unhomely, it is often the collective trauma or memory that invades one's individual, private and familiar space in an unsettling, eerie moment. Here again one can speak of the specificity of the post-Soviet unhomely due to the way that the memories of the totalitarian past were repressed in the post-Soviet period. Boym considers that, 'the collective trauma of the past was hardly acknowledged; or if it was, everyone was seen as an innocent victim or a cog in the system only following orders'.³² As Boris Noordenbos similarly observes:

It is commonplace the historical revelations of the perestroika era have not encouraged in Russian society profound debates about the cruelties of collectivization, mass deportations, the Gulag, and other forms of totalitarian repression under Soviet rule. The short-lived fascination (in the press and on television) with past atrocities and injustices was not followed by a thorough, nationwide rethinking of collective responsibility, nor by decisive juridical steps against former Party leaders, or by serious compensations for the victims of Soviet terror and inequities.³³

Noordenbos suggests that the repression of collective Soviet memories, what Alexander Etkind calls 'the repression of repressions',³⁴ in part explains the current instability of Russian narratives about the Soviet legacy, and one might add, the ambivalence towards the dissolution of the Union: 'ever since the late 1990s popular and political stances toward the Soviet past unpredictably oscillate between rejection and loyalty, denial and nostalgia'.³⁵ Boym also suggests that as a result of this phenomenon, one now observes in the post-Soviet space a mass nostalgia similar to a nationwide midlife crisis, 'many are longing for the time of their childhood and youth, projecting personal affective memories onto the larger historical picture

³² Boym, *The Future*, p. 125.

³³ Boris Noordenbos, 'Shocking Histories and Missing Memories: Trauma in Viktor Pelevin's *Čapaev i Pustota*', *Russian Literature*, 85 (2016), 43-68 (p. 43).

³⁴ Alexander Etkind, 'Stories of the Undead in the Land of the Unburied: Magical Historicism in Contemporary Russian Fiction', *Slavic Review*, 63.3 (2009), 631-658 (p. 635).

³⁵ Noordenbos, 'Shocking', p. 43.

and partaking collectively in a selective forgetting'.³⁶ However, the more one represses one's traumatic memories, the more powerfully the uncanny invades one's mind, which is why, as I will demonstrate, post-Soviet literature is dominated by specifically post-Soviet unhomely moments.

In fact, as Noorbendos highlights, unlike public discourse, imaginative fiction from the 1980s and 1990s, has often offered more profound engagements with the atrocity-filled twentieth century: 'Russian novels and stories, especially from the period directly after *perestroika*, have vividly reflected on the problems involved in the collective remembrance (or oblivion) of Soviet history, and have linked these issues to wider philosophical and historiographical concerns'.³⁷ Victor Pelevin's *Чанак и нустома* (1996), which employs the hero's individual shock, trauma and amnesia to reflect on the possibilities of collective memory in the post-Soviet context, may be considered 'a prime example of this tendency'.³⁸

However, the unhomely moments associated with the traumas of the post-Soviet transition, including the black holes of history evoked in the 80s and 90s Russian literature, have somehow escaped critical attention where those experiencing the dislocations are non-Russian. As this chapter shows, the phenomenon is dominant in post-literature from the Caucasus and Central Asia, and not only in writing by women. Kazakhstani author Nikolay Veryovochkin's acclaimed novella *Человек без имени* (2006) evokes the post-Soviet identity-based trauma through its protagonist, a homeless amnesiac living under the neglected memorial of the Great Patriotic War in the city of *Nenuzhensk* (literary meaning a city that is not needed), after the collapse of the 'big country'.³⁹ Every time the homeless man attempts to remember his past, he experiences eerie hallucinations and nightmares (in one of them, he sees himself as

³⁶ Boym, *The Future*, p. 169.

³⁷ Noordenbos, 'Shocking', p. 44.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 44.

³⁹ Nikolay Veryovochkin, *Человек без имени* [Man without a name], *Druzhiba Narodov*, 11 (2006).

a living dead lying on the bottom of the lake), to the point where he can no longer separate dream and reality. In his astute reading, Dmitry Mel'nikov suggests that the story evokes the collective amnesia of the Soviet past which leads to 'the uncanny (the fantastic)' negotiations of a ruptured post-Soviet identity.⁴⁰ However, the uncanny in this story cannot be defined as merely 'fantastic', without reference to Freud's analysis of the term.

Furthermore, the manner in which it appears in the story is not merely Freudian, but also unhomely. The tramp's personal amnesia intersects with the collective repressing of memory in the post-Soviet context, leading to the unhomely visions where one's mind is invaded by the traumas of a collective psyche. The traumatic collective amnesia is also a leading theme in Kazakhstani author Olga Markova's dystopian novel *Воды леты* (2002) set in a post-apocalyptic city where most inhabitants have forgotten who they are.⁴¹

According to Boym, during the early days of *glasnost*, the *mankurt*, a slave who has been tortured into losing a memory, as described in Kyrgyz author Chingiz Aitmatov's novel *И Долгие века длится день* (1980), became a metaphor for homo sovieticus. The critical campaign against the forgetting of the totalitarian past became synonymous with *mankurtisation* of human beings.⁴² Boym remarks that ten years since then, 'it seems that this struggle against *mankurtisation* has become history, and *mankurts* – people without memory – have again fallen into oblivion'.⁴³ However, characters who resemble *mankurts* have on the contrary proliferated in post-Soviet literature in the former Soviet republics. How fitting it is in this context that Kazakh author Nikolay Veryovockin's allegory of post-Soviet *mankurts*

⁴⁰ Dmitry Mel'nikov, 'Literature ad Marginem? Imagining National Territory and Developing New Identities in Post-Soviet Kazakhstani Russophone Writing', paper presented at Workshop on Russophone Literatures, Centre for East European and International Studies (ZOiS) Berlin, March 28, 2019.

⁴¹ Olga Markova, *Воды леты* (Almaty: Мусарет, 2002)

⁴² Boym, *The Future*, p. 169.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, p. 169.

was brought under the limelight by none other than the father of the *mankurt-homo sovieticus*, Chingiz Aitmatov.

As Denis Letnyakov points out, Soviet identity did have at its base ‘concrete symbols that were significant for many people’, including the USSR’s achievements in space, and sport, ‘as well as general sociocultural practices’.⁴⁴ While the ‘extraordinary explosion of anti-imperial mobilization’⁴⁵ (1988-1991) across the Soviet republics signalled a widespread rejection of Soviet values and markers of identity, post-Soviet nostalgia may sometimes stem not only from the loss of socio-economic stability of the Soviet era, but also from the loss of a stable identity, both personal and regional, especially among the young nations of Central Asia. If the Soviet superpower was one large ‘communal apartment’,⁴⁶ the post-Soviet space became one of homelessness not only on a personal level, but in terms of the region’s problematic positioning on the global stage. Not ‘advanced’ enough to be accepted by the European family, and not ‘under-underdeveloped’ enough to qualify as the ‘Third World’, losers in the Cold War in the eyes of the West, and traitors of the communist ideals in the eyes of the global proletariat, post-Soviet nations in the Caucasus and Central Asia often find themselves in a political position of metaphorical homelessness.

As a result, homelessness has become a common trope through which post-Soviet authors evoke their unhomey identities. This is not surprising, since, as noted by Rosemary George, the very term ‘home-country’ ‘suggests the particular intersection of private and public and of individual and communal that is manifest in imagining a space as home’.⁴⁷ Imagining a home in the post-Soviet era thus entails a reflection on what the home was or was not in the Soviet

⁴⁴ Denis E. Letnyakov ‘Critical Commentary on the Concept of “Soviet Empire”’, *Russian Studies in Philosophy*, 55:3-4 (2017), 293-304 (p. 295).

⁴⁵ Mark Beissinger, ‘Soviet Empire as “Family Resemblance”’ *Slavic Review*, 65.2 (2006), 294-303 (p.295).

⁴⁶ Yuri Slezkine, ‘The USSR as a Communal Apartment, or How a Socialist State Promoted Ethnic Particularism’, *Slavic Review*, 2.53 (1994), 414-452.

⁴⁷ George, Rosemary Marangoly, *The Politics of Home: Postcolonial Relocations and Twentieth - Century Fiction* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), p. 11.

period and a redefinition of one's place in a new space, the independent nation-state, that is no longer part of a communal home.

The uncanny moments in post-Soviet writing occur at moments where one's self-identity is facing a struggle: the Soviet, the colonial, the public, the communitarian, the traumatic versus the post-Soviet/colonial, the private, the torn, the liminal, the (also) traumatic. In Mariam Petrosyan's *Дом, в котором* (2009) this conflict occurs in a fictional subversive space evoking the 'crammed rooms of communal apartments' that Boym refers to – a mysterious boarding house for disabled children. In this private space, Petrosyan develops her 'alternative civic consciousness', in resistance to both the Soviet order and the equally problematic post-Soviet/colonial nationalism.

Mariam Petrosyan's *Дом, в котором* (2009)

'Must the novel be a house? [...] Is the novel also a house where the unhomely can live?'⁴⁸ – asks Bhabha. An affirmative answer to this question can be found in Mariam Petrosyan's novel *Дом, в котором* [*The House in Which*] (2009) which tells of a fictional mysterious boarding school for students with mental and physical disabilities. There are no grand actions in the plot, rather the narrative focuses on the interactions between the students and their magical experiences in the mysterious parts of the House known as 'изнанка' (Inside Out). Mariam Petrosyan was born 10 August 1969 in Yerevan, Armenia, in a half-Russian, half-Armenian family who spoke Armenian, but whose literary language was Russian. Following in the footsteps of her great-grandfather Martiros Saryan, a famous Armenian painter, Petrosyan

⁴⁸ Bhabha, 'The World', p. 142.

began her career as an artist before becoming famous as a writer.⁴⁹ The widely acclaimed *Дом, в котором* took her twenty years to complete and is her only novel to date.⁵⁰ The author struggles to identify herself firmly and fully with either of the two categories of Russian or Armenian writers and belongs to the category of Russophone writers who find themselves in a marginal position. When asked about her cultural affiliation, and whether cultural belonging is important to her, Petrosyan conveys her identity struggle. Initially, she claims to be a Russian writer, but then immediately contradicts herself, explaining that since she lives in Armenia and has no deep understanding of Russian life, she feels uncomfortable when being labelled a Russian writer:

Знаете, я затрудняюсь сказать, я собственно Армянка, но писателем я себя ощущаю, конечно, скорее русским. Поскольку я практически никогда не была в России, то я почти не нахожусь в этой ипостаси. Я тут живу своей армянской жизнью, а это русское писательство связано как-то с ... я даже не могу назвать себя русским писателем.⁵¹

By struggling to define her cultural affiliation in relation to single nation or a specific geographical entity in her response, Petrosyan suggests her own internal liminality and her contention of being labelled according to standard markers of nationality. In fact, in another interview, Petrosyan explicitly declares: ‘У меня нет привязки ни ко времени, ни к стране, ни к национальности’.⁵² Bhabha argues that post-colonial ‘counter-narratives of the nation [...] continually evoke and erase its totalizing boundaries – both actual and conceptual’ and ‘disturb those ideological manoeuvres through which “imagined communities” are given

⁴⁹ After graduating from an art college, Petrosyan worked as a cartoonist at Armenfilm in Armenia, then joined Soyuzmultfilm in Moscow where she lived until 1995, and returned to Armenfilm where she worked until 2000.

⁵⁰ Among other awards, the novel won third place in the ‘readers’ favourite’ section of the Russian literary prize ‘Большая книга’ (2009) and won the prize ‘Русская премия’ (2009). It has also been translated in more than a dozen languages, including English, with the title *The Gray House*.

⁵¹ Mariam Petrosyan interviewed on Radio Van, March 7, 2016, 16:30-17:00

<<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dJkhXr2qCU0&t=5896s>> [accessed 28 August 2019].

⁵² Konstantin Mil’chin, ‘Дом, в котором Мариам Петросян’, interview with Mariam Petrosyan, *Русский Репортер* 24(152) 23 June, 2010 <http://rusrep.ru/2010/24/mariam_petrosyan/> [accessed 27 August, 2019].

essentialist identities'.⁵³ Petrosyan's fictional space which she creates from her marginal position allows her to escape and challenge the traditional understandings of national belonging. The ambivalence of her own national belonging is reflected in the author's attempt of rendering the house supranational. In reference to the setting of her story, Petrosyan claims: 'мне бы хотелось, чтобы это было в нигде и везде. Чтобы никто не мог сказать с уверенностью что это какая-то конкретная страна'.⁵⁴ To this aim, she deliberately employs non-Russian and non-Armenian nicknames for her protagonists.

As mentioned earlier, Freud's notion of the 'uncanny' 'has to do with a strangeness of framing and borders, an experience of liminality'.⁵⁵ In Bhabha's hypothesis, the unhomely also deals with liminality, a state of being caught between the prescribed binaries, a space one enters when one is neither one thing nor the other.⁵⁶ It destabilises traditional notions of national belonging or centre and periphery, and highlights how 'that boundary that secures the cohesive limits of the western nation may imperceptibly turn into a contentious internal liminality that provides a place from which to speak both of, and as, the minority the exilic, the marginal and emergent'.⁵⁷ By being located in an in-between position, the unhomely exposes prescriptive terms and polarities, showing how binaries cannot exist as pre-given, fixed, identities, but are destined to become radically, continually disarranged.⁵⁸ Petrosyan's sense of in-betweenness resulted from her ambiguous cultural identity is echoed in her construction of the house. The house is literally 'liminal' (from the Latin word for 'threshold'), located both on the margins of some unknown city, as well as on the 'neutral territory between two worlds', uniform blocks of flats on one side, and deconstructed buildings on the other.⁵⁹ In her interviews, Petrosyan

⁵³ Homi Bhabha, 'DissemiNation: Time, Narrative, and the Margins of the Modern Nation' in *Nation and Narration* ed. by Homi Bhabha (London/New York: Routledge: 1990), pp. 291-322, p. 300.

⁵⁴ Mariam Petrosyan, Radio Van, 14:48-14:58.

⁵⁵ Nicholas Royle, *The Uncanny*, p. 2.

⁵⁶ Bhabha, 'The World', especially p. 149.

⁵⁷ Bhabha, 'DissemiNation', p. 300.

⁵⁸ Dafydd, 'Shifting', p. 194.

⁵⁹ Petrosyan, *Дом*, p. 7.

often mentions that above all, she created the fictional space of the house for herself,⁶⁰ echoing Bhabha's suggestion that the novel can indeed be a house which houses the unhomely. By creating a fictional universe which is in-between realities and temporalities, Petrosyan resembles 'a subject that inhabits the rim of an "in-between" reality', whose 'inscription of this border existence inhabits a stillness of time and a strangeness of framing'.⁶¹

In the context of post-independence rise of nationalism characteristic of post-Soviet and indeed post-colonial countries, it is significant that Petrosyan creates precisely such neutral in-between universe. As Elleke Boehmer observes, 'nationalism, like patriarchy, favours singleness—one identity, one growth pattern, and will promote specifically unitary or "one-eyed" forms of consciousness'.⁶² Petrosyan's novel is far from such 'one-eyed consciousness'. The text is disorienting in its markers of time, space and identity, the narration tends to unexpectedly shift from first to third person, from one of the numerous characters to the other, to the present from the past, and back again, disturbing the chronology. By being 'в нигде и везде', the text employs the mode of magic realism, 'an amalgamation of reality and fantasy', a genre often associated with postcolonial writing. Interestingly, as Sarah Upstone suggests, in magic realism, allegorical representations of home hold immense power of contaminating the colonial vision:

The home is not only a space of postcolonial resistance because it is reclaimed from its colonial service; it is a space of postcolonial resistance because it is instead a site of hope and awakening - not closed down into order, but opened up to marvellous possibility.⁶³

⁶⁰ Mariam Petrosyan interviewed in St Petersburg, 19 July 2016, 7:41-7:44
<<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XHScQbbPaZM>> [accessed 1 September, 2019]

⁶¹ Bhabha, 'The World', p. 148.

⁶² Elleke Boehmer, *Stories of Women: Gender and Narrative in the Postcolonial Nation* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2005), p. 39.

⁶³ Sarah Upstone, 'Domesticity in Magical-Realist Postcolonial Fiction: Reversals of Representation in Salman Rushdie's "Midnight's Children"', *Frontiers: A Journal of Women Studies*, 28.1/2 (2007), 260-268 (p. 265).

In this regard, Petrosyan's novel suggests a very interesting, unusual perception of the 'unhomely' – as a source of strength and subversion. Adhering to the precepts of magic realism, time in Petrosyan's novel is cyclical, rather than linear. Same things happen more than once. Within the house there exists a parallel universe, or 'изнанка' ('Inside Out'). Some characters have an ability of travelling to parallel spaces, some of them, once leaving the house, return to it again as children, repeating their cycle. Borders, mixing and change are important themes. The writer maintains ironic distance not to compromise the magical world view and the supernatural is unquestionably integrated into authentic descriptions of humans. Throughout the work, a definite shift from one mode of writing to the other never occurs, and the novel remains suspended between the conventions of both realism and fantasy.

Again, Petrosyan's marginal position is pertinent here, since as Robert Kroetsch and Linda Kenyon observe, 'magic realism as a literary practice seems to be closely linked with a perception of "living on the margins", encoding within it, perhaps, a concept of resistance to the massive imperial centre and its totalizing systems'.⁶⁴ According to Upstone, the magical-realist novel refuses both colonial and national metaphors of home, instead opening it up to diverse meanings encompassing the fluid and subversive.⁶⁵ The genre 'also draws upon transformative strategies that facilitate a new form of resistance'.⁶⁶ Upstone argues that if 'nineteenth-century fiction's representation of domesticity . . . helped to formulate the ordered space we now recognize as the household', 'the postcolonial magical-realist novel's disordering of this space maybe seen to hold the same potential now: a force not only reflecting the status quo but also offering pathways towards new experience'.⁶⁷

⁶⁴ Linda Kenyon, 'A Conversation with Robert Kroetsch', *The New Quarterly*, 5.1 (1985), quoted in Stephen Slemon, 'Magic Realism as Post-Colonial Discourse', *Canadian Literature*, 116 (1988), p. 10.

⁶⁵ Upstone, 'Domesticity', p. 265.

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 265.

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 266.

At the same time, Upstone stresses that ‘this is not to suggest that magical-realist texts avoid allegorical elements; indeed, they are often steeped in them’.⁶⁸ Rather, magic realism uses metaphor and allegory ‘not to serve order or an ideal, but rather to reveal inconsistencies and the fact that the discourse of order is both inherently false and – from a post-colonial point of view – immensely damaging’.⁶⁹ Petrosyan’s seemingly apolitical novel is no exception to this pattern as while offering a model of a new experience of supranational belonging, it also employs allegories pertaining to the Soviet order. In fact, apart from being located in-between and outside of time, her fictional space is also located in between history – it contains the worlds which alternately appear as Soviet and post-Soviet.

Magic realism’s upsetting of colonial orders acquires a special significance in post-Soviet literature due to the Soviet regime’s emphasis on conformity and order over individualism. While Petrosyan’s novel is pronouncedly more fantastical and apolitical than other novels analysed in this chapter, subtle references to the Soviet era provide the crucial context for understanding the protagonists’ struggle with identity. The first chapter, which can be read as an allegory of the Soviet order, sets the scene for Petrosyan’s fictional deconstruction of this very order through the alternative, subversive and mysterious parts of her house. The chapter is narrated by one of the protagonists Kuril’shik who recounts how he is expelled from his group, called Fazany [Фазаны], the Komsomol type, prudish, rule-abiding students, due to not conforming to their rules of uniformity by wearing bright red sneakers. Kuril’shik is called into the headmaster’s office where a massive red fire extinguisher hangs above his head, as a portrait of Soviet leaders would, making it hard for Kuril’shik to concentrate. He remarks that this ideal placement allows the headmaster to hide away:

⁶⁸ Ibid., p. 265.

⁶⁹ Ibid., p. 265.

Он до того приковывал внимание, что приглядеться к самому директору уже не получалось. Сидящий под антикварным огненным дирижаблем, наверное, на что-то такое и рассчитывает. Думать можно только о том, как бы эта штука не свалилась и не убила его прямо у тебя на глазах. Ни на что другое не остается сил. Неплохой способ спрятаться, оставаясь на виду.⁷⁰

The headmaster bears an uncanny resemblance to Soviet bureaucrats who could count on authoritarian figures to shirk responsibility for their victims, but who ultimately remained under constant threat of being crushed by those on top, as the headmaster would be if the extinguisher fell on him. It is in this context that Kuril'shik has to negotiate his identity. On top of dealing with feelings of alienation and loss that plague him, he has to determine his 'political' affiliation, thus to decide which of the several groups in the house he belongs to, the conformists of his present group, or the rebels of other chaotic groups.

Fazany, the group to which Kuril'shik initially belongs exists as a separate world from the rest of the house and is ruled according to an order which is reminiscent of Soviet Communism. This order denies any show of individuality, enforces and favours conformity, group mentality and obedience through posters, slogans and instructions. 'Minute by minute', everyone has to follow a strict, tedious timetable: 'Сидячая гимнастика. Застилка кроватей. «Помоги одеться соседу - и сосед поможет тебе». Умывание. . . «Жди своей очереди и не задерживай других» . . . Столовая. Уроки. Обеденный перерыв. Уроки. Время для отдыха. И так до бесконечности'.⁷¹ The immaculately clean rooms with their 'стройные ряды железных кроватей' reflects the order of the group.⁷² Everyone has to be alike, 'все как у всех, ничего лишнего', lead the same mechanical existence where 'каждое движение доведено до автоматизма' and have the same 'collective' feelings and concerns.⁷³ The fact that Fazany are the only group in the house who do not travel to 'изнанка', the magical part of

⁷⁰ Petrosyan, *Дом*, p. 13.

⁷¹ *Ibid.*, p. 21.

⁷² *Ibid.*, p. 20.

⁷³ *Ibid.*, p. 21.

the house, emphasises their rejection of freedom and creativity in favour of a robotic existence which stifles critical thinking. ‘Фазанья жизнь не располагала к тому, чтобы узнавать что-то новое. Она вообще мало к чему располагала. [...] Коллективные страхи – не простудиться бы, коллективные мечты – баранья котлетка на завтрак.’⁷⁴

Other groups in the house, and especially the fourth group where Kuril’shik moves, serve as a foil to Fazany and perhaps evoke the chaos of the post-Soviet order, with an exception of its nationalistic tendencies which Petrosyan shrouds in magic realism. The groups operate in a violent but individualistic manner. Echoing Petrosyan’s attempt to posit her fiction outside of time and space, members of this group are ordered to free themselves ‘от любого вида измерителей времени: будильников, хронометров, секундомеров, наручных часов и т. д.’.⁷⁵ For these characters, their unhomely ‘border existence inhabits a stillness of time’.⁷⁶

The first of these non-conformist groups that Kuril’shik encounters are Birds [Птицы]. In describing this encounter, Petrosyan employs the metaphor of a deceptive tree which vividly evokes Kuril’shik’s identity troubles. As we shall see, other authors in this chapter also heavily employ naturalistic imagery for similar purposes. When Kuril’shik participates in a student exhibition entitled ‘My love for the World’ (Моя любовь к миру), he submits a painting with an ironic title ‘The Tree of Life’ featuring a deceptive tree. At first sight, the crooked branches of the tree seem to be bearing pears, but at a closer look skulls and worms become apparent instead. Kuril’shik’s world, then, is deceptive, hopeless and grim, and he is haunted by this vision.⁷⁷ Importantly, this vision resurfaces to plague him at a defining moment of his self-definition, his attempt of figuring out which of the groups in the house he could belong to. Birds are the first group he has to consider.

⁷⁴ Ibid., pp. 19-20.

⁷⁵ Ibid., p. 42.

⁷⁶ Bhabha, ‘The World’, p. 148.

⁷⁷ Petrosyan, *Дом*, p. 13.

Birds are known for their ridiculous attire which serves as a carnivalesque foil to the Komsomol attire of Fazany. They wear enormous bibs with childish pictures printed on them and carry pots of their favourite plants. As Kuril'shik notes, their apparel creates a grotesque contrast with their physiognomy, 'при их трауре и гнусных физиономиях, смотрится это опять же цирком'.⁷⁸ When seeing them and entertaining the thought that he might have to join them, Kuril'shik freezes in a daydream and his imagination conjures a nightmarish vision 'осязаемое просто до жути'.⁷⁹ In the nightmare, he finds himself in the Birds' dark, damp bedroom where 'окна заросли плющом' and 'всюду растения в горшках и в кадках'.⁸⁰ Birds are sitting around doing needlework, getting up from time to time to deliver their work for assessment to their leader Vulture [Стервятник] sitting on a mantelpiece. Failing miserably at needlework, Kuril'shik panics that he will fail the test and pay with his life. All flustered, he knocks down a pot geranium, and this is what follows:

Падает гигантская герань, размером с хороший куст сирени, осыпается земля, разлетаются глиняные черепки.

Среди разгрома на полу – белый, чистенький человеческий череп без нижней челюсти. Все вокруг замирают, смотрят на меня и на череп. Потом раздаётся мерзкое хрюканье.

– Да-да, Курильщик, ты не ошибся, – говорит Стервятник, соскакивая с каминной полки и ковыляя в моем направлении. – Это наш предыдущий новичок, мир его праху!

Он смеется, показывая невозможно острые, акульки зубы...⁸¹

Kuril'shik's vision recreates the imagery of his painting in the unhomey setting of the Birds' eerie room. The large geranium plant which looks healthy and normal is in fact growing on skulls, pointing to how intertwined death and life are in Kuril'shik's vision, as in his painting the 'Tree of Life'. To his horror, Kuril'shik discovers that one of the skulls belongs to a dead newcomer like him. He is tormented with mixed feelings regarding his future identity. On the

⁷⁸ Ibid., p. 23.

⁷⁹ Ibid., p. 23.

⁸⁰ Ibid., p. 23.

⁸¹ Ibid., p. 23.

one hand, he is terrified that he will fail the test and end up as a skull under Birds' plants, like the dead newcomer before him, on the other hand, he is not eager to associate his identity with Birds, but he would do 'что угодно, только не жить больше в первой'.⁸² In the vision, Vulture, the group's leader, displaces the supreme authority figure – the headmaster Akula, and the association between them is reinforced by Vulture's 'shark-like' teeth. Kuril'shik's search for identity is again overseen by a hostile authority figure. Even in the microcosmic setting of an individual group that is supposed to provide an alternative to the conformist Fazany, his belonging and sense of self is still determined by a political order. In Kuril'shik's uncanny nightmare, the private comes together with the public, his internal sense of alienation and despair is magnified by the politics of belonging in the house.

In this regard, it is important to comment on the symbolism of the geranium plant in Kuril'shik's vision, which, like Kuril'shik's red sneakers, stands for individualism and non-conformity which challenges the Soviet order. According to Svetlana Boym, 'geraniums were purged and physically eradicated in Stalin's time'.⁸³ This was part of a general hostility to plotted plants of all kinds as 'petit-bourgeois' [мещанские]. In 'Rubber Plants and the Soviet Order of Things', a chapter of her study, *Common Places*, Boym analyses the famous Soviet painting *The New Apartment* (1952) by Aleksandr Laktionov which depicts a family moving into their new home (Figure 3).⁸⁴ The painting, 'an icon of Soviet civilization', represents Stalinist domestic bliss, an official ideal of domestic space, except for one detail – the rubber plant in the foreground. When the painting was first exhibited in the early 1950s, it was censored by critics who accused it of 'celebrating the petty bourgeois values of philistinism and banality embodied in the rubber plant, and of "putting a varnish" on Soviet reality'.⁸⁵ As

⁸² Ibid., p. 24.

⁸³ Boym, *Common Places*, p. 8.

⁸⁴ Ibid., p. 8.

⁸⁵ Ibid., p. 8.

Boym explains, the rubber plant was regarded ‘as the last sickly survivor of the imagined bourgeois greenhouses, or a poor relative of the ubiquitous geranium in the windowboxes of middle-class residents’.⁸⁶

Figure 3. Aleksandr Laktionov, *The New Apartment* (1952).



What is even more interesting in Boym’s reading of the painting, aside from the symbolism of the rubber plant, is how Boym goes on to describe what she perceives as the eerie effects produced by the image. *The New Apartment* was exhibited in 1952-1953, when

⁸⁶ Ibid., p. 8.

massive show trials of ‘cosmopolitans’ in Soviet Russia resulted in the persecution and murder of thousands of Jews.⁸⁷ This leads Boym to make the following observation:

Perhaps the brightly lit scene of moving into the new apartment is so paranoiacally codified because behind the threshold, in the unrepresentable space of cultural memory, lurks another scene – that of removing someone from their old apartment –the scene of arrest and home search that was an everyday occurrence of the Stalinist perestroika of life from the 1930s to the 1950s.⁸⁸

What Boym is describing here is a quintessentially unhomey moment where ‘the recesses of domestic spaces become sites for history’s most intricate invasions’, where the traumas of collective history invade one’s most private, comfortable space – in this case both the physical apartment in the painting, and Boym’s uncanny response to it.⁸⁹ It is an unhomey moment commonly evoked in postcolonial fiction.⁹⁰ In this regard, *The New Apartment* closely resembles Kuril’shik’s nightmarish vision not only due to the centrality of the geranium plant, but also the unhomey moments that creep into both of them. The geranium plant cracks open to reveal human skulls. The skull facing Kuril’shik is missing its jaw, as if the person to whom it belongs had been forbidden to speak. The individuality of *Birds*, as expressed by the geranium plant, is thus built on the deaths of the silenced and the repressed that have gone before, and perhaps of those who have given their life in pursuit of individualism. As noted earlier, in the uncanny moment, the border between home and world becomes confused, and,

⁸⁷ Ibid., p. 8.

⁸⁸ Ibid., p. 8.

⁸⁹ Bhabha, ‘The World’, p. 144.

⁹⁰ One particularly fitting example here is Iraqi woman writer Buthainah al-Nasiri’s short story ‘Al-‘Awdah ila baytihi’ (‘Homecoming’) (1996) which revolves around a Jewish couple who move from Germany to Israel. Knowing that their new home has been appropriated from a Palestinian family, the couple fail to settle in. Instead, they experience unhomey nightmares (such as their bedroom being turned into a battlefield), and auditory and visual hallucinations such as ghosts of previous inhabitants. For the analysis of the story see Ferial J. Ghazoul, ‘Iraqi Short Fiction: The Unhomey at Home and Abroad’, *Journal of Arabic Literature*, 35 (2004), 1-24.

uncannily, ‘the private the public become part of each other, forcing upon us a vision that is as divided as it is disorienting’.⁹¹

It is important to note that the geranium plant reappears later in the book in yet another nightmare that Kuril’shik sees. In the vision, Kuril’shik is being buried alive by Fazany, when suddenly, he glances at a geranium plant on a windowsill. The plant grows to immense proportion, eventually covering the whole room and saving Kuril’shik.⁹² Given the allegories of the Soviet order that pepper Petrosyan’s narration, it might not be too far-fetched to suggest that what the author is invoking in Kuril’shik’s visions, at least subconsciously, is the unhomely moment when the repressed memories of the totalitarian era are transformed into identity anxieties so common in the post-Soviet, post-colonial era. One has to bear in mind here the peculiarly widespread experiences of displacement across the Caucasus and Central Asia, such as the flight of Kazakhs over the border during collectivization or Central Asia’s (particularly Kazakhstan’s) hosting of the deported populations, such as Kalmyks, Germans, and Crimean Tatars after WWII, experiences explicitly evoked by texts analysed later in this chapter.

Besides allusions to the Soviet order, in its temporal hybridity, Petrosyan’s novel also evokes the traumas of the post-Soviet transition, a period which further prompts manifestations of the unhomely. The house – which used to be white but has turned grey and is facing demolition – reflects Petrosyan’s account of the dilapidating infrastructure in Armenia, and its capital Yerevan, ravaged by the traumatic transition period:

Армения могла бы стать хорошей съемочной площадкой для фильма ужасов, боевика или постиндустриальной стрелялки. В нескольких шагах от центра Еревана начинаются следы запустения. На выезде из города уже настоящая разруха — полуразваленные дома, ископаемые тракторы, заржавевшие автозаправки. И все это на выжженном солнцем плоскогорье. Тяжелая жизнь и ужасы блокады в первой половине 90-х здесь предмет культуры.⁹³

⁹¹ Bhabha, ‘The World’, p. 141.

⁹² Petrosyan, *Дом*, pp. 428-429.

⁹³ Petrosyan in Mil’chin, ‘Дом’.

The bloodshed of the nineties translates in Petrosyan's fiction into the violent rules of hegemonic masculinity that operate within the house. The nicknames of Petrosyan's protagonists sound like those of *vory v zakone* and members of streets gangs that held powerful influence in the post-Soviet space of the nineties, especially in Russia, Georgia and Armenia.⁹⁴ Indeed, each group in the house (except the law-abiding Fazany) has its own head, 'вожак'. Periodically, the heads participate in a ceremony where all the group members circle around and watch them fight each other to death to establish their superiority. The graduation which takes place every six years is a particularly violent occurrence. Terrified of the outside world and reluctant to leave, students lose control. No one is safe in the house at this time, not even the students' favourite teacher Elk [Лосъ], who ends up getting killed. We learn that around thirty murders have taken place in the house. Considering this, it is strange that Petrosyan normalises and glosses over such violence by describing her fictional space as a happy place: 'Я думаю, что это весёлое место, светлое место в общем-то'.⁹⁵ Violence – an inseparable part of the author's imagining of her private space – determines the author's ambivalent relations to post-Soviet realities and informs the unhomely moments of the protagonists, as evidenced in Kuril'shik's visions. Such unhomely meetings between the private and the public, the personal and the political, are not exclusive to Petrosyan's fiction, as I will now go on to discuss.

⁹⁴ Svetlana Stephenson, *Gangs of Russia: From the Streets to the Corridors of Power* (Ithaca/London: Cornell University Press, 2015), p. 153; See also Evgenia Zakharova, 'Black Matsoni: The Pragmatics of the Tbilisi Street Code', *Forum for Anthropology and Culture*, 13(2017), 247-279.

⁹⁵ Mariam Petrosyan interviewed in Moscow, 19 June 2014, 12:40 – 12:58
<<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qhGyJeFR5c4&t=749s>> [accessed 1 September 2019]

Nana Ekvimishvili's *The Pear Field* (2015)

Nana Ekvimishvili's novel *The Pear Field* (2015), which focuses on a home for abandoned children with learning difficulties in the 1990s Tbilisi, also echoes the wider post-Soviet and post-colonial literary preoccupation with the search of a psycho-spiritual homeland and the definition of a post-Soviet identity. Like Petrosyan, Ekvimishvili employs fiction as a 'place from which to speak both of, and as, the minority the exilic, the marginal and emergent'.⁹⁶ As the author explains, her novel is about how disabled or abandoned children have to invent their own rules of survival, of communication, justice or injustice, and how they cope with their everyday life.⁹⁷ They are outcasts in a society which refers to them by the derogatory name of 'retards' and treats them accordingly. It can be argued that these children symbolise a sense of marginality, damaged identity and vulnerability that can be detected among post-Soviet nations. The absence of father figures points to both the physical absence of men in the context of post-Soviet crisis of masculinity, as well as the metaphorical orphaning of post-Soviet nations after the dissolution of the Soviet order and the retreat of the fatherly role played by the Soviet state.⁹⁸

The struggles of Ekvimishvili's protagonists echo the struggles of post-Soviet Georgia as it emerges from Soviet rule. Growing up in the nineties, a period which saw Georgia become

⁹⁶ Bhabha, 'DissemiNation', p. 300.

⁹⁷ Nana Ekvimishvili interviewed on The Morning Show, Imedi TV, Georgia, May 13, 2015, 11:07-11:17, <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BZRr31KJVYY>> [accessed 28 August, 2019].

⁹⁸ On this topic see, among others, Sergei Kukhterin, 'Fathers and Patriarchs in Communist and Post-Communist Russia' in *Gender, State and Society in Soviet and Post-Soviet Russia* ed. by Sarah Ashwin (London: Routledge, 2000); John Shoeberlin, 'Doubtful Dead Fathers and Musical Corpses: What to Do with the Dead Stalin, Lenin and Tsar Nicholas?', in *Death of the Father: An Anthropology of the End in Political Authority*, ed. by John Borneman (Oxford: Berghahn Books, 2004).

independent at a heavy cost of internal conflicts, civic unrest, increased crime, food shortages and a crisis of masculinity, deeply marked Ekvitimishvili. Her works recurrently evoke this dark and bittersweet period of Georgian history.⁹⁹ As Ekvitimishvili explains in an interview, her emigration to Germany allowed her to reflect on her childhood experiences and analyse the role of Soviet legacies.:

What I considered in Georgia to be normal and ordinary, what I accepted, even though a lot of things at the time were abnormal, and we knew that they should not be happening, became more intense, more surprising, more painful from a distance. In reality, we lived in such violence, which I thought to be the norm, and the Soviet legacy was so tragic for us . . .¹⁰⁰

Ekvtimishvili suggests that to a large extent, her first novel is written in an attempt to digest her childhood traumas:

The Pear Field is something that I have been carrying in me for a very long time, it relates to my life and my memories. Memories that never end, that I never forget and do not want to forget. Memories of a time when everything was in chaos, when people in Tbilisi and Georgia were no longer themselves, when they lost a human face.¹⁰¹

An important theme for Ekvitimishvili is the value of each human being, of different people, of people with different opinions, which she argues was taken for granted in the Soviet period and continues to be disregarded in the post-Soviet period. Ekvitimishvili explains:

When the Soviet Union was collapsing, I was a child and I was constantly observing, asking myself all sorts of questions: what are we fighting against? [...] Why is Georgia not free [...]? What is independence, and what does it mean to me? What should be changed? Where is this restriction, this communism, this order, where is it? As more time passes, the more I find myself capable of answering these questions and linking them to our present reality. When I was a child, for example, it [the Soviet order] was expressed in the neckties, in the tanks advancing on the Rustaveli avenue on the 9th of April.¹⁰² But the important thing is that the Soviet order does not only manifest itself in such tangible things, it is in one's way of thinking, it sits deep within the

⁹⁹ Ekvitimishvili's award-winning semi-autobiographical debut feature *In Bloom* (2013; co-directed with Simon Gross) follows two teenage girls in Tbilisi in the 1990s.

¹⁰⁰ Ekvitimishvili, *The Morning Show*, 12:12-12:40.

¹⁰¹ Nana Ekvitimishvili interviewed on *Midday Show* [Shuadze], GDS channel, 11 December 2015, 3:46 -4:27, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bi_GJ6-mlFs> [accessed 28 August 2019].

¹⁰² The April 9 tragedy refers to the Soviet troops' bloody quelling of the peaceful anti-Soviet, pro-independence demonstrations in Tbilisi on April 9, 1989, which left 21 people dead, and hundreds of people wounded, poisoned and maimed.

human consciousness and we are still struggling with it today. It was important for me to convey to some extent, the Soviet legacy in this novel, its effects on the relationships between children and adults, between people, our relationship with those weaker than us.¹⁰³

The abandoned children in Ekvimishvili's fictional house and the people in the society around them can be read as a collective allegory for what Ekvimishvili perceives as a dehumanised and uniform early post-Soviet Georgian identity. The harsh order operating within her fictional house, as well as outside of it, lends itself to be read as a metaphor for the intangible legacies of the Soviet order. The theme of abandoned children chosen by Ekvimishvili seems particularly important in the context of post-Soviet Georgia's search for identity. The chaotic Georgia of the 1990s can also be regarded as a metaphorical orphan disorientated after emerging from the paternalistic supervision by the Soviet State.

While Ekvimishvili is critical of Soviet legacies, her narrator highlights certain benefits of the Soviet paternalistic state, pointing out that the marginalised members of society, the orphans and the disabled, would be protected by schemes that would provide accommodation and jobs for them.¹⁰⁴ After the dissolution of the Soviet order, the orphanage in the novel becomes dilapidated, like the country itself. The image of the block of houses near the orphanage captures the crumbling order of the country and sets the atmosphere of hopelessness and death which dominates the novel. The right side of the building is missing, as if it had been 'ripped out', due to a fire or an earthquake, while its left side comprises the unhomey homes of its inhabitants who remain in the building. 'Overall the building is weirdly tilted, as if the side where people still live has been bent downwards towards the earth by the weight of its inhabitants, as if the whole block was slowly drowning into earth.'¹⁰⁵

¹⁰³ Nana Ekvimishvili, Q&A, Ilia State University Tbilisi, June 24, 2016, 9:26 - 11:20 <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=F--OiKQ-zGc>> [accessed 30 August 2019]

¹⁰⁴ Ekvimishvili, *The Pear Field*, p. 41.

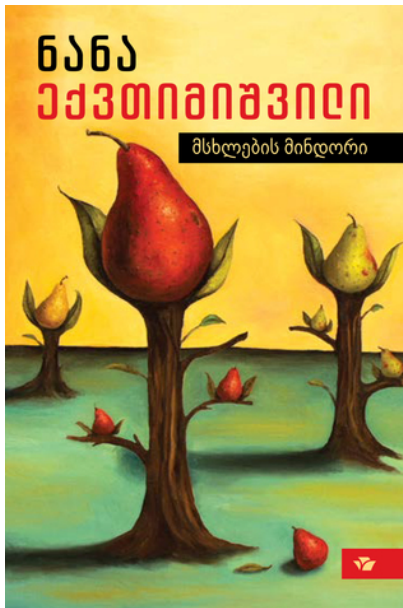
¹⁰⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 32.

The fact that the West takes over the support of the orphanage by sending humanitarian aid hints that it is replacing the Soviet state as a potential adoptive parent for the country. The abandoned children's only hope is to be adopted by westerners, echoing Georgia's hopeful gaze towards the western world. The pear trees that grow in the swamp field on the grounds of the boarding house, also featuring in the book's cover (Figure 4), lend themselves to be read as a metaphor for the abandoned children, and perhaps for Georgia as whole. Although the pears are ripe and appear delicious, they are tasteless, and thus symbolise deceptive fruitfulness and unfulfilled potential. Moreover, reaching them demands crossing the swamps, thus – a vain effort. The futility of such an effort mirrors the deception of an American couple who arrive in Georgia to adopt Irakli – one of the boys in the house.

Like the pears that are better off attached to their tree, Irakli also refuses to swap the boarding house for the glamorous promise of the American dream. Emigration would erase the boy's efforts of creating a semblance of a home and identity for himself in the home. Ironically, belonging to a physical home of the Americans would lead him to lose any semblance of rootedness that he can lay claim to and to perceive the unhomely nature of his identity even more painfully.¹⁰⁶ The house in Georgia may be unhomely, but it is the only real and familiar one these children have. This is why the protagonist Lela never leaves the house even though she is eighteen and no longer officially eligible to remain.

¹⁰⁶ This is precisely the experience of female protagonists in the next two novels analysed. Their emigration only heightens their self-perception as abandoned, homeless children.

Figure 4. The Cover of the Georgian edition of *The Pear Field* (2015).



The children in the home represent the most vulnerable segment of early post-Soviet Georgian society, one ruled by chaos and injustice. Uncoincidentally, the novel opens with an incident where Sergo, one of the children in the home, is run over by a car. The driver escapes punishment and is not even interrogated. Similarly, everyone turns a blind eye on the abuses taking place in the home, on how the headmistress appropriates the humanitarian aid, how the male caregiver sexually abuses the children including the protagonist Lela, how children themselves rape little newcomer girls near the pear field. Growing up as a witness to this level of injustice leads the protagonist Lela to suffer in pain and develop intense feelings of vulnerability and a lack of security which manifest themselves in her nightmares. In one of her nightmares she sees an apartment of a woman called Mzia who lives in a block of flats near the orphanage, with her plump little daughter. Lela visits Mzia with her friend Irakli whenever he wants to telephone his mother. Mzia's home is the only secure space that Lela is allowed to enter, a place where 'reign supreme cleanliness and a magical smell of baked pastry'.¹⁰⁷ Lela's

¹⁰⁷ Ekvimishvili, *The Pear Field*, p. 47.

sense of hopelessness and her painful familiarity with injustice turn this homely place into a grotesque, unhomely setting in her nightmare:

In the hallway, Mzia's child is lying on the floor, as if she were a sick person lying in bed, but no one is paying any attention to her and she moans calmly, thrown away in a corner like a used towel . . . Lela notices that the hairy mole on her face has grown to cover half of her face. Suddenly a pensive-looking district inspector slowly enters the room, followed by Mzia. It seems that he fails to notice the children and, tired and sad looking, he heads towards the door. Mzia opens the door, Firuz [the inspector] halts and looks back at her as if about to say something, but instead shrugs his shoulders:

'There is no such thing here...they must be out of their mind ... what idiots' – he retorts and leaves. Mzia closes the door. At this moment, Lela notices that the back of Lela's head is cracked open in the middle, letting out a stream of blood . . .¹⁰⁸

Lela's dream reveals her deep fears and insecurities. Firstly, it points to her pessimistic, or perhaps realistic worldview. She suspects that Mzia's child, who seems to have a secure home and identity, can equally become a victim of neglect and injustice reigning in her world. Moreover, the appearance of the inspector in her dream is an unhomely moment where 'the private and public develop an interstitial intimacy'.¹⁰⁹ We can only speculate what the inspector is referring to by 'here', the orphanage or Georgian society. His enigmatic retort might be suggesting that he is aware of the abuses in the orphanage but chooses to turn a blind eye on them, the same way that the community turns a blind eye on the severity of not investigating the car accident which took Sergo's life. Either way, the presence of the representative of a public sector in Mzia's house suggests the contamination of Lela's private sphere with the public domain. The cancerous mole on the girl's face together with Mzia's cracked and open skull speak of Lela's fear that sickness and imminent death will similarly corrupt all markers of security and comfort around her.

¹⁰⁸ Ibid., pp. 87-88.

¹⁰⁹ Bhabha, 'The World', p. 148.

This general sense of corruption and abandonment evoked by Ekvimishvili is often echoed in the melancholic outlook of young people in post-Soviet Georgia.¹¹⁰ For example, in an article in which young people in the Caucasus are asked to select an object which represents their identity, a Georgian respondent, Giorgi Jinoridze, explains his choice of a blooming tree:

For me, identity is revealed through emotions rather than objects. One spring day, I was coming back from work when I saw a blooming tree near [Tbilisi's] Station Square; the surrounding was so grim, that tree looked like an innocent adolescent about to be filmed in pornography. I can use the same comparison for our country. Georgia should be heaven on earth, but, unfortunately, indecent people corrupt its beauty. I am not like those people, I am like my country.¹¹¹

The metaphor of a blooming tree is reminiscent of Ekvimishvili's image of the pear field and Kuril'shik's painting 'Tree of Life'. Both trees are rooted in grim surroundings, both are visually appealing, but corrupt. In addition, in both metaphors, the denoting subjects are young children who themselves serve as an extended metaphor for the whole country. In both cases, the identity of a young post-Soviet Georgia becomes inseparable from the identity of its new post-Soviet generation. Natural imagery, alongside the metaphor of a house and abandoned children, is central in these novels' exploration of identity. Images of nature are constantly subverted by, or juxtaposed with motifs of loss, waste, decay, as well as of drowning, destruction, and bleak future. Ekvimishvili's house is dilapidated, and full of rotting, unpleasant smells. As mentioned previously, Petrosyan's house used to be white but has turned grey and is facing demolition. By confronting the readers with the unhomely metaphors which subvert the traditional symbols of security, stability and fertility, such as a house, or a tree, these novels effectively convey a sense of loss and desperation at the heart of the characters' identity struggles. In addition, politics and the public sphere are tightly linked to the identity politics of these fictional characters behind all of whom lurk hostile authority figures, whether

¹¹⁰ The Georgian youth's bleak vision of their country is captured particularly well by a documentary film *When the Earth Seems to be Light* (2015) (co-directed by David Meskhi, Tamuna Karumidze and Salome Machaidze) on young skaters, artists and musicians in Georgia.

¹¹¹ Ikin Huseynov, Sona Kocharyan and Tamuna Chkareuli, 'It Is, I Am', *Chaikhana* <<https://chaikhana.org/en/story/699/it-is-i-am>> [accessed 20 August 2018].

Kuril'shik's headmaster, the caregivers of Ekvtimishvili's abandoned children or the 'indecent people' that Giorgi Jinoridze is referring to.

Teona Dolenjashvili's *Memphis* (2008)

Teona Dolenjashvili's *Memphis* (2008) similarly explores the questions of an unhomely quest for a post-Soviet home and identity through intertwining motifs of an abandoned child and contrasting imagery of nature and death. Born in 1977, Dolenjashvili graduated with a degree in Journalism and Filmmaking from the Department of the Tbilisi State University. For several years she worked at the Georgian Television as a feature broadcasting director and author. She began actively publishing her literary works from 2004. Her works have been translated from Georgian into German, English, Italian, Spanish, Russian, Ukrainian, Lithuanian, Slovak and Azeri languages.¹¹² *Memphis* is narrated by a female protagonist, Ana. The narrative follows her traumatic childhood and youth in the 1990s Tbilisi and her subsequent emigration to Germany and Switzerland. The theme of abandonment is central in the book. Ana's father leaves her and her mother when Ana is still young. Later, Ana's mother also mysteriously disappears. This inexplicable vanishing haunts Ana until she discovers, alongside the readers, that in order to provide for her daughter, Ana's mother became an organ donor and died during an operation.¹¹³ As in previous novels, the protagonist's unhomely quest for identity is

¹¹² Teona Dolenjashvili, Personal Page, Goodreads <https://www.goodreads.com/author/show/5227460.Teona_Dolenjashvili> [accessed 1 September 2019].

¹¹³ It has to be mentioned here that narratives on dystopian institutions have nothing inherently post-Soviet and are widespread, for instance, organ donation features centrally in Kazuo Ishiguro's *Never Let Me Go* (2005). However, dystopias do acquire a specific function in postcolonial literatures do the connection between decoloniality and utopian thinking, as I shall discuss in Chapter Five.

informed by the traumas and the ambivalence associated with the post-Soviet transition.

Ana's ambiguous relation to the Soviet past manifests itself in her 'paradoxical nostalgia for the aesthetic of socialist-realism and Soviet architecture'.¹¹⁴ 'More than once, when walking in the bright street of Paris, Vienna or Zurich' she has felt 'an urge to wander in those plain buildings, narrow Khrushchyovkas and dusty, low-ceiling rooms'.¹¹⁵ Ana's nostalgia is 'paradoxical' since she associates these very buildings, including her school, with the stifling Soviet regime. In Ana's description of her 'ordinary grey school', the monotonous classrooms, 'identical like peas in a pod', and causing 'an absurd sensation of repetition in space', point to the Soviet ideology's suppression of individuality. The stagnation of the Soviet order is contrasted with the vivid imagery of the 'beautiful garden' full of poplar trees, a natural alternative that transcends grey political reality.¹¹⁶ Such 'organic' anti-Soviet discourse was also typical of the 1970s and 1980s, as manifested in the 'village prose' movement, the ecological protests in Siberia.¹¹⁷

Schools, such as one described by Dolenjashvili, are unhomely, liminal buildings on the threshold of political times. Physically, they have remained mostly unchanged as the ordered, if somewhat stifling, Soviet school system was replaced by post-Soviet chaos and violence. In Ana's childhood, when dissident movements were on the rise, her school constituted 'a shambolic mix of soviet attributes and the new wave of the national movement' which later 'completely washed over the ideological colour red'.¹¹⁸ As evidenced by Ana's nostalgia for Soviet architecture, schools are the unhomely spaces where the familiar and nostalgic traces of Soviet security are battling with the symbolism of nascent nationalism and the invasion of post-

¹¹⁴ Dolenjashvili, *Memphis*, p. 18.

¹¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 18.

¹¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 18.

¹¹⁷ I would like to thank Catriona Kelly for pointing out this parallel. See also Kathleen F. Parthé, *Russian Village Prose: The Radiant Past* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1992).

¹¹⁸ Dolenjashvili, *Memphis*, p. 18.

Soviet chaos. It is unsurprising, therefore, that such buildings and institutions are central in the novels and symbolise their authors' own liminal positioning between the Soviet and the post-Soviet.

Just as buildings or houses are steeped in politics and become focal points for the negotiation of the protagonists' and their author's identities, so nature in Dolenjashvili's novels is far from representing a neutral metaphor. As in the previous novels, the images of childhood, death and nature are interlinked in a single metaphor that recurs throughout the book. Subverting traditional symbolic associations of children with innocence, and harmony with nature, as manifested, for instance, in common depictions of children with doves,¹¹⁹ children in this novel become actors in a play of death, as in Kuril'shik's nightmare of Birds. In one prominent example of this metaphorical subversion, the protagonist observes children in the yard burying a dead bird and placing flowers on its grave. The blooming apple and plum trees and the green shovel used by the children symbolise life and nature and contrast with the solemn burying ritual enacted by the children.

Of course, what the protagonist observes is only a common game among children as they begin to explore death. But in the political context of post-Soviet Georgia, the scene acquires a symbolic charge as a harbinger of the children's dark future as they will most likely face and/or commit violence, like the protagonist's friend Nika whose social circumstances later turn him into a criminal. 'Today they were playing with death, having harmless fun, but soon the real and ruthless games would begin in their lives' – Ana remarks.¹²⁰ Similarly to Petrosyan's novel, *Memphis* points to violence as an inseparable aspect of post-Soviet life in the nineties. In Georgia, violence permeated all aspects of life, including children's lives, and

¹¹⁹ Such paintings were popular in the eighteenth, nineteenth and early twentieth-century Europe. Some examples include Anne-Geneviève Greuze's *Innocence, a Girl with a Dove* (circa 1795), Jean-Baptiste Greuze's *Girl with Doves* (1800), Hugh Collins's *Three Young Children with Doves* (date unknown) and Picasso's *Child with a Dove* (1901).

¹²⁰ Dolenjashvili, *Memphis*, p. 16.

violence among children persists as one of the most pressing problems in the country.¹²¹

Dolenjashvili later employs the metaphor of nature in a more explicitly political context when Ana and Nika debate whether trees are living beings. To support her argument that ‘some trees are more alive than humans’, Ana gives an unhomely example of an eerie forest in Siberia:

Until 1937 the forest was but an empty field. Then, the field became a ground where prisoners were buried alive and artificial forests were grown. Olga Okudzhava¹²² was also among those sentenced to death. Just imagine Galaktion¹²³ in this artificial forest, a living graveyard, walking through the wind and seeking a tree with the prisoner’s number 126, the tree feeding on his beloved, the tree under which his wife’s heart is beating. Perhaps those were the trees that were blowing in the wind, or...those were the leaves passing through her hair in his verses...¹²⁴

Ana is referring to the Medvedev Forest Massacre of September 11, 1941 where 158 purged prisoners were executed by the order of Soviet officials.¹²⁵ Resonating with Kuril’shik’s painting in Petrosyan’s novel, life in Ana’s vision is built on death. Trees are again employed as metaphors and are juxtaposed with violence, death and loss of identity in the colonial context. The burying of the victims echoes the burying of the bird by the children in Ana’s yard, and also resonates with Kuril’shik’s nightmare where he is being buried alive by Fazany.

Alexander Etkind has proposed that ‘haunted by the unburied past, post-Soviet culture has produced perverse memorial practices’ – ‘in a land where millions remain unburied, the

¹²¹ The most recent publicised case is the Khorava Street Murder of December 1, 2017 which took the life of two teenage boys. For a long time, this criminal case was at the centre of current political debates in Georgia. See for instance, ‘Murder on Khorava Street: Public Knowledge and Attitudes towards Court Decision’, IDFI, 20 July 2018, <https://idfi.ge/en/khorava_street_case> [accessed 30 October 2018]; ‘Tbilisi City Court’s Verdict on Murder of Two Boys Caused Outrage among Citizens’, Georgian Journal, 31 May 2018, <<https://www.georgianjournal.ge/society/34537-tbilisi-city-courts-verdict-on-murder-of-two-boys-caused-outrage-among-citizens.html>> [accessed 30 October 2018].

¹²² Olga Okudzhava was the wife of the famous Georgian poet Galaktion Tabidze and the aunt of the popular Soviet musician Bulat Okudzhava. She was purged and executed by a firing squad, along with 157 other prisoners, in the forest of Medved’ near Orel, Russia on September 11, 1941.

¹²³ The famous Georgian poet Galaktion Tabidze (1892 –1959), commonly referred to in Georgia as simply Galaktion.

¹²⁴ Dolenjashvili, *Memphis*, p. 63. The protagonist is paraphrasing quotes from Galaktion Tabidze’s poem ‘The Wind Blows’ [Kari Kris] (1920).

¹²⁵ Michael Parrish, ‘The Orel Massacres, the Killings of Senior Military Officers’ in *The Lesser Terror: Soviet State Security, 1939-1953* (Westport, Conn: Praeger, 1996), pp. 69-109.

dead return as the undead. They do so in novels, films, and other forms of culture which reflect, shape, and possess people's memory'.¹²⁶ Incidentally, Etkind devotes particular attention to 1937 and 1938 mass massacres in the pine forest near Belomor Canal, Russia as one example of a traumatic event that sparked ghost visions. The uncanny vision of Ana and other protagonists can be partly situated within the phenomenon identified by Etkind. Etkind argues that Soviet repressions, such as the massacre near Belomor, were indefinite and unreliable (e.g. people could disappear without a trace, sentences could be revoked and reinstated etc.) meaning that 'death could not be recognized as death, and survival could not be relied upon as life'.¹²⁷ Thus, Etkind argues, soviet totalitarianism provided a fertile ground for ghost-making which persists to this day.¹²⁸ Etkind aptly perceives such ghost-making as uncanny, because, as he points out, 'in Freud's logic, if the loss is not recognized, it is repressed; [...] henceforth, it threatens to return as the uncanny. The failure to recognize death as death produces the uncanny'.¹²⁹

However, the manner in which the repressed memories of the mysterious and tragic fates of Soviet victims invade Ana's and Kuril'shik's visions is not only uncanny (they are no mere ghost visions), but also unhomely. Ana's uncanny tree from Siberia is later reincarnated in her vision linking Soviet and post-Soviet violence, as well as her own life haunted by death. In this vision, or nightmare, she sees a tree being torn from its roots and its 'leafless, robbed trunk' being blown into her mother's room. When she wakes up, she finds her aunt Neliko unconscious on the ground.¹³⁰ The uprooted tree evokes the image of Siberian trees built on equally uprooted victims of Soviet deportations and executions. One might recall here the famous scene from Tengiz Abuladze's *Repentance* (1984) where a shipment of logs arrives at

¹²⁶ Etkind, 'Post-Soviet Hauntology', p. 182.

¹²⁷ Ibid., p. 186

¹²⁸ Ibid., p. 186.

¹²⁹ Ibid., p. 186

¹³⁰ Dolenjasvhili, *Memphis*, p. 75.

the railway station from a distant Soviet labour camp, and the mother (Nino) and her daughter (Keti) search the log piles for a possible message from the imprisoned father (Sandro) (Figure 5). The harrowing scene depicts other women similarly looking for messages etched on logs, evoking the sheer number of prisoners, most of whom would disappear without a trace, desperate to reach out to their families.

Figure 5. Tengiz Abuladze, Repentance (1984). Film Still.



Reflecting how the political invades the private, the metaphorically charged tree in Ana's vision literally invades her home and acts as a reminder and harbinger of the deaths of Ana's mother and aunt, both victims of a troubled post-Soviet order. As we know, the 'unhomely moment relates the traumatic ambivalences of a personal, psychic history to the wider disjunctions of political existence'.¹³¹ In this moment, 'the recesses of domestic spaces become sites for history's most intricate invasions'.¹³² The unhomely crossover between personal and

¹³¹ Bhabha, 'The World', p. 141.

¹³² Ibid., p. 144.

worldly manifests itself in Ana's dream to suggest how she is haunted by the 'psychic history' of the Soviet past which was repressed and not properly examined in the post-Soviet era. In this unhomey moment, her individual identity becomes confused with the sense of collective identity to point to specifically post-Soviet, post-colonial trauma.

As foreboded by Ana's dream, her aunt Neliko dies. Following her death 'all the pale violets that grew in the clay pots on the balcony wilted simultaneously. The pots now resemble wombs without foetuses or abandoned and cold houses'.¹³³ In light of her dream, the allusion to empty houses evokes not only the protagonist's own empty house, but also the abandoned houses of victims of Soviet repressions and deportations. The association of dying nature with empty houses and infertility once again links the protagonist's psychic traumas of history with her personal experience of being metaphorically homeless, abandoned and having gone through an abortion, all experiences which destabilise her identity. Ana perceives her identity formation as inseparable from her country's search for identity. Her inner struggles echo the troubles of her country, and she highlights that her 'physical and existential loneliness coincided with [her] country's heaviest, hungriest and darkest years'.¹³⁴ In fact, Dolenjashvili herself suggests that her protagonist's fate and identity are strongly interlinked with 'the wider disjunctions of political existence'.¹³⁵ The author highlights that despite the novel's eclectic genre, it tells 'an absolutely realistic story' of Georgia, 'and more importantly of [her] country's search for a place in the global context, in the European context'.¹³⁶ Georgia's most recent history thus 'plays out alongside the life' of Dolenjashvili's protagonist.¹³⁷

In addition to serving as a symbol of death, both of Ana's aunt and of the victims of the Medvedev Forest Massacre, Ana's dream also warns about Ana's own death. After going

¹³³ Dolenjashvili, *Memphis*, pp. 215-216.

¹³⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 41.

¹³⁵ Bhabha, 'The World', p. 141.

¹³⁶ Interview with Teona Dolenjashvili, Georgian Broadcaster, Feb 23, 2016, 1:42-1:50, <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=no5jU8X4bIA>> [accessed 17 September 2018].

¹³⁷ Dolenjashvili, Georgian Broadcaster, 1:54-1:57.

through an abortion, Ana unsuccessfully attempts suicide through gas poisoning. As she falls asleep, she sees the image of children burying a bird:

I was being diluted into something warm and viscous, as in a soft, loving fog. But from time to time, some pictures appeared in this fog [...]. I saw someone's hands playing on our piano a melody that was familiar, but distorted and unpleasant. A blind woman was sitting on a chair and was looking at me with her white eyes with missing pupils. Scared, I ran to the kitchen, but the blind woman was there too. She offered me an empty glass. Downstairs, the children were playing in the yard, digging up holes with their hands and burying a dead bird inside it. Then they jumped merrily on the grave, flattening the earth [...] when the curtain fell, I saw my mother. She had come back! She had come back!¹³⁸

By falling asleep, or dying, Ana is reverting back to her foetal state and dissolving her identity. The warm and viscous fog envelops her like a placenta in a womb, and indeed, at the end of her hallucination she imagines being reunited with her mother. Her return to a foetal state of non-being is uneasy and nothing to be celebrated, however, as suggested by the eeriness of the children's joyful jumping on the graveyard and the unhomeliness of her home. There she hears a familiar, but strange, unpleasant, quintessentially uncanny melody and is haunted by the ghost of a blind woman who visited her mother before her disappearance.

It is later revealed that this blind woman sold her eyes in order to provide for her children and visited Ana's mother to direct her to the organisation where she could similarly sell her organs to save her child. As Freud points out, the 'fear of damaging or losing one's eyes is a terrible fear of childhood' and psychoanalyst Sadeq Rahimi has shown how uncanny experiences are 'typically constructed through and associated with themes and metaphors of vision, blindness, mirrors and other optical tropes'.¹³⁹ The blind woman who visited little Ana terrified her and introduced an element of unhomeliness in her home, and later her memories of her home. But aside from her inevitable association with terror, the blind woman represents Ana's fear that one day she might also have to give up her eyes, or other organs, like her mother.

¹³⁸ Dolenjasvhili, *Memphis*, p. 95.

¹³⁹ Freud, 'The Uncanny', p. 231; Rahimi, 'The Ego', p. 453.

In the same way that the blind woman prompted Ana's mother to give up her life for the sake of her daughter, she is now offering Ana an empty glass as a symbol of death. The empty glass which Ana receives, as if as a reward for her mother's sacrifice, also suggests that Ana's mother physically saved her child but took away her daughter's sense of self, a sense she can only recover by metaphorically returning to her mother's womb. In fact, after her mother's death, Ana loses the sense of her identity more quickly, becoming a stranger to herself. This process is hinted at by her aunt who tells Ana that she has a face 'like a mirror'.¹⁴⁰ The condition only intensifies when Ana finds out that she is pregnant with the child of Nika, her childhood sweetheart who turned into a criminal and betrayed her.

At a time of discovering her pregnancy, Ana is already estranged from her body. The author once again employs the imagery of nature to describe her alienation from herself. Once pregnant, Ana feels that there is 'still something living' within her, within her 'dead, bloodless body, a body stuck to the bed like a dried-out herbarium butterfly'.¹⁴¹ However, she makes the traumatic choice of terminating her pregnancy and cutting ties with her old self in favour of becoming empty. Reflecting on this decision, Ana suggests that the kind of uncanny splitting of self that I identified in Kerouac's novel occurs for her in a directly physical sense:

I was a ruthless, soulless murderer . . . but I understood that one who destroys also has one privilege. She creates free spaces. I was free. Empty. From the mental burden [...] from a non-existent love, blind patience, false morale, useless insecurities, in short, the material from which I moulded the face of a stupid, sentimental girl.¹⁴²

As mentioned earlier, Ana struggles with who she is even before her traumatic abortion. From a young age she is haunted by an unhomely feeling which manifests itself through her uneasy relation to her childhood home. On the one hand, Ana retains certain happy memories

¹⁴⁰ Dolenjasvhili, *Memphis*, p. 45.

¹⁴¹ *Ibid.*, p. 89.

¹⁴² *Ibid.*, p. 91.

of her childhood, in the beginning of the novel she asserts that ‘perhaps [her] childhood was not that bad after all’.¹⁴³ But as she grows up and becomes conscious of the horrors in both her life and the life of others around her, an uncanny feeling begins to creep up into her mind and her ‘big, light house’.¹⁴⁴ Every single night she suffers from a frightening nightmare that from a corner of her room a terrifying devil creeps up to chase after her through the dark rooms room from which she can find no exit.¹⁴⁵ For Ana, this is no simple childhood nightmare, rather, it is a manifestation of her unhomely identity. When Ana returns to Georgia from Germany, she realises that the devil in her dreams was the uncanny, ‘dark’, part of herself against which she had been struggling all along:

This time it is not the black, terrifying devil with horns that frightens me, but rather myself, my stranger’s face plunged into darkness. I cannot see clearly, I cannot distinguish, maybe that is why I cannot recognise my face, it has lost its previous appearance, has acquired unfamiliar and ugly traits, it has come to resemble someone else, someone dreadful, someone terrifying. This face troubles me, terrifies me . . .¹⁴⁶

Ana’s experience of feeling estranged from herself is an uncanny experience par excellence. In the study *Strangers to Ourselves*, Julia Kristeva explores the notion of internal foreignness, the feeling that one is somehow a stranger to oneself, and argues that this occurs when, as noted by Freud, ‘the archaic, narcissistic self [...] projects out of itself what it experiences as dangerous or unpleasant in itself, making of it an alien double, uncanny and daemonic’.¹⁴⁷ Kristeva explains that this repression of part of our self leads to a feeling of dislocation and hinders the subject from experiencing one’s identity as whole and ‘autonomous’:

¹⁴³ ‘I had plenty of loving care from my mother, we lived in a big, light house and the straw box in my room was full of various toys’, Dolenjashvili, *Memphis*, p. 9.

¹⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 9.

¹⁴⁵ Dolenjashvili, *Memphis*, p. 31.

¹⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 208.

¹⁴⁷ Julia Kristeva, *Strangers to Ourselves*, trans. by Leon S. Roudiez (Columbia University Press, 1991), p. 183.

Strange is the experience of the abyss separating me from the other who shocks me — I do not perceive him, perhaps he crushes me because I negate him. Confronting the foreigner whom I reject and with whom at the same time I identify, I lose my boundaries, I no longer have a container, the memory of experiences when I had been abandoned overwhelm me, I lose my composure. I feel “lost,” “indistinct,” “hazy”.¹⁴⁸

Echoing Kristeva’s argument, for Ana, the process of understanding her ‘other’, her childhood self becomes a process of understanding herself. By negating her previous self, she turns it into her dark, demonic alter ego, a demon haunting her in her dreams. It is as if she were the direct subject of Kristeva’s words, as it is indeed the memory of her experiences of being abandoned that plague her. The protagonist’s allusion to her difficulty in differentiating between dream and reality also suggests the influence of the uncanny which causes ‘uncertainty, in particular regarding the reality of who one is and what is being experienced’.¹⁴⁹ Ana can only reach autonomy or find herself by confronting her repressed traumas, and after her return from Germany, she is forced to do just that.

Freud explores the uncanny as a discourse of the ‘self’, seeing it as a personal reaction to one’s individual surroundings that occurs for a reason, rather than merely being a random occurrence. ‘The better orientated in his environment a person is,’ writes Freud, ‘the less readily will he get the impression of something uncanny in regard to the objects and events in it’.¹⁵⁰ One somehow makes oneself susceptible to the uncanny, according to Freud, for the uncanny is never simply ‘out-there’ waiting to strike but is rather an individual condition that depends on one’s own personal circumstances, one’s relation to objects and subjects in the surrounding world. Being surrounded by familiar objects in her house confronts Ana with the uncanny elements of her identity. As she spends time in her childhood home, she faces her demons and the ghost of her childhood self. In the mirror she confronts her fragmentary,

¹⁴⁸ Kristeva, *Strangers*, p. 187.

¹⁴⁹ Royle, *Uncanny*, p. 1.

¹⁵⁰ Freud, ‘The Uncanny’, p. 221.

insecure, transitory self, two faces that are ‘mortal enemies’.¹⁵¹ Ana cannot tell which one of them is more real, ‘the old one which ended its life’ within the walls of her house, or the one which she has been ‘inventing, embellishing, moulding all these years’ since her emigration.¹⁵²

It is unsurprising that Ana’s struggle leads to a doubling of the self through her reflections in the mirror. One of the manifestations of the uncanny is the way in which it destabilises identity through sudden, alienating factors that lead one to feel outside oneself and to believe that one’s identity is not fixed, or stable, but rather capable of crumbling at any given moment.¹⁵³ For Freud, this sense of insecurity is often symbolised by the appearance of the double. The double is a real of fictitious formation which in some way challenges one’s own individual identity. It can occur in the appearance of someone who is similar to oneself, and yet fundamentally a very different person.¹⁵⁴ When faced with a double one questions one’s true identity and looks at oneself from a distance, a different perspective, from the outside. As Freud explains, this involves a ‘doubling, dividing and interchanging of the self’.¹⁵⁵ For Ana, the double is always a younger version of herself. Her reference point is always her ambiguous childhood which complicates her present identity and leads her to question her ‘true’ self.¹⁵⁶

Ana cannot figure out whether to turn her back on her traumatic childhood and deny the identity of her young years. Despite their darkness, these are the years that are most dear to her, as she admits, many times ‘when staying in the world’s most expensive resorts and hotels’ or her own ‘ultramodern penthouse’, she had ‘wished to return to those cold, hungry and poor days in Tbilisi’.¹⁵⁷ Thus, Ana is not only struggling to find unity within herself, but to reconcile her traumatic experiences in Georgia with her experience of emigration, and to therefore define

¹⁵¹ Dolenjashvili, *Memphis*, p. 180.

¹⁵² *Ibid.*, p. 180.

¹⁵³ Dafydd, ‘Shifting’, p. 30

¹⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 30.

¹⁵⁵ Freud, ‘The Uncanny’, p. 235.

¹⁵⁶ Dolenjashvili, *Memphis*, p. 29.

¹⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 73.

a unified national identity. Her childhood in Georgia is a prison that she holds dear. She perceives people in her elite circle in Germany as ‘mechanic birds with something broken inside’, and she herself becomes ‘a walking dead’¹⁵⁸, a ‘walking corpse’.¹⁵⁹ In Georgia she finds that she might be able to detach the artifice from herself, regain part of her human face and re-establish harmony with her surroundings: ‘this land [Georgia], its sun, wind, faces, voices meltaway the balm of Memphis, the earth is gaining back its unity, its life...’. Her home in Tbilisi gives her a sense of ‘stability, self-assurance, and balance’. Her own personal doubling is mirrored in the doubling of her surroundings, the greyness of the post-Soviet world against the coloured brightness of the Western world from which she returns.

Later in the novel, on a turned-off TV screen Ana again sees a reflection ‘of a silly and sentimental girl whose life ended in this house’.¹⁶⁰ Her response is to once again attempt metaphorically reverting to the foetal position to negate her identity which is inextricable from that of her country:

I am covering myself with a blanket, curling up in a foetal position...the darkness and the cigarette smoke blur my face, help me to not see it, to forget it. [...] here, in these four walls surrounded by autobiographical objects, I am attempting to deny myself once more ... before the love as heavy and tormenting as my native land becomes irrevocable and begins a new sly game. Once again, I have to cut out my stomach, suck up the heat running in my veins as if through electric wires, tear out this entangled mass and throw it away somewhere far.¹⁶¹

At this point in the novel, Ana starts to develop feelings for Irakli, a reformed bully who used to compete for Ana’s affection with her childhood friend and sweetheart Nika. However, after Nika’s betrayal (he becomes a criminal and robs Ana), she can no longer put faith in love. In the same way that she tore out the foetus of her aborted child with Nika, she now wants to tear out her growing feelings for Irakli out of her heart. The imagery of electric wires suggests

¹⁵⁸ Ibid., p. 145.

¹⁵⁹ Ibid., p. 149.

¹⁶⁰ Ibid., p. 229.

¹⁶¹ Ibid., p. 230.

that her denial of selfhood is leading to her mechanical, robotic existence. In addition, since the negotiation of her identity is constantly complicated by her concern and ‘heavy’ love for her country, her means of coping with her troubled selfhood involves not simply denying love and motherhood, but also revoking her painful national identity. When Ana comes back to Georgia, she realises that her identity is still as intertwined with her country’s painful history as ever, that she and her country are one entity, that they are in fact ‘identical’:

I am sitting here, pretending that I miss foreign cities, trying to forget this wet land, this sorrow, this place, heavy with stone, time, heavy with blood. But I know that I will fail. Wherever I go, I am still here, built into its concrete and proud of it. Wherever I am, I still carry it with me. I am part of this land, and so identical to it. Old. Wet. Soaked. By these pains, full of the past. And so heavy. Heavy with stone, bones, heavy with blood.¹⁶²

Like her country, Ana finds herself in a marginal, liminal, homeless position, and it is fitting that she employs geographical markers, as well as the metaphor of a tramp (also employed by Nikolay Veryovochkin in *Человек без имени*) to signify her uncanny, in-between identity:

I am already dead. Only a small, insignificant part of me is breathing. I live on the border. On the border, in the margin. People living on borders cannot be subjected to classification. I am a tramp stuck in Tokaido station number fifty-three with a faint, daguerreotype memory. A passenger wandering aimlessly in an endless and noisy circle, unable to find warmth and calm in any of the temporary shelters and hotels. People like me are on a constant run. They escape classification. They cannot find love; they cannot make decisions.¹⁶³

Again, we are reminded that the uncanny ‘has to do with a strangeness of framing and borders, an experience of liminality’,¹⁶⁴ and that the unhomely is similarly rooted in a ‘border existence’¹⁶⁵. Ana is in a liminal realm, between life and death, dream and reality, the East and the West. The reference to daguerreotypes is also significant. Daguerrotypes – photos made on

¹⁶² Ibid., p. 218.

¹⁶³ Ibid., p. 240.

¹⁶⁴ Nicholas Royle, *Uncanny*, p. 2.

¹⁶⁵ Bhabha, ‘The World’, p. 148.

silver-plated copper and developed with mercury vapour – were often called ‘a mirror with a memory’.¹⁶⁶ Their reflective surface could be tricky to view. The author thus once again associates her protagonist with the uncanny object of a mirror to suggest that she can be as difficult to decipher as a daguerreotype. Ana is increasingly struggling to perceive herself, she becomes increasingly detached and mechanical, a tramp and wanderer without an identity.

Ana’s sense of alienation and trauma inherent in negotiating her post-Soviet identity can only be overcome through confronting her and her country’s Soviet past and its intangible legacies (the latter, as we saw, is a key concern of Ekvtimishvili’s). Ana begins this process when she visits her mother’s friend at her apartment. The space is decorated with various ‘relics of the past’ gives a glimpse into the life of an older, Soviet generation, ‘the little girls and boys who were inspired by foreign films and forbidden music, the youth that fought the absence of free space and the monotonous Soviet hell with their striking aesthetic, their ability to love and their make-believe’.¹⁶⁷ But soon Ana realises that her host’s generation coped with the Soviet reality not only through resistance, a show of individuality in one’s private space, but also denial, ‘a deliberate choice of closing one’s eyes on the dark aspects of life’ – a collective amnesia, or the *mankurtisation* that Boym refers to.¹⁶⁸

When Ana confronts her host with the dark mystery of her mother’s disappearance, the woman refuses to entertain any possibility that her friend died during an organ transplantation. According to Ana, this is the legacy that the post-Soviet generation inherited from their predecessors – ‘a flexibility of own’s psychology and protective instincts, a certain ability to not notice, to deliberately avert one’s eyes from the ugliness of life’.¹⁶⁹ Rejecting this legacy and refusing to be defined by the past, Ana decides to speak up. When she discovers the dark

¹⁶⁶ ‘Mirror with a Memory’, *Daguerreobase* <<http://www.daguerreobase.org/en/news/20-news-archive/51-a-mirror-with-a-memory>> [accessed 1 September, 2019]

¹⁶⁷ Dolenjasvhili, *Memphis*, p.189.

¹⁶⁸ Boym, *The Future*, p. 169

¹⁶⁹ Dolenjasvhili, *Memphis*, p. 191.

secrets of the clinic ‘New Life’ which did in fact take her mother’s life, she wishes to speak up and expose the injustice, unlike her mother’s friend:

The guilty will pay [...] and one day there will be no hunger in our country, no cold, no poverty, no injustice. People will no longer be humiliated, terrorised, insulted. No more will men be degraded, women assaulted, children murdered. This land will no longer be split, severed, destroyed. This land will no longer be turned into a bloody laboratory, a hole for experimental rats, a dwelling for cloned humans, an infertile desert, a landfill of dirty waste.¹⁷⁰

Ana compares her country to an ‘infertile desert’, echoing her own infertility and the trope’s recurrence in previous novels (as evidenced by Kuril’shik’s painting ‘Tree of Life’ in Petrosyan’ novel, or the rotting pear field – a symbol of Georgia’s decay – in Ekvimishvili’s novel). Ana can never find a home, an identity, until her country and her compatriots are suffering from the painful legacies of the Soviet order and the aftershock of its dissolution.

Olga Breininger’s *В Советском Союзе не было аддэрола* (2018)

Ana’s journey of coping with her identity troubles and her deterioration into a supranational, mechanic being resonates with the path of Olga Breininger’s protagonist in *В Советском Союзе не было аддэрола* (2018) which also examines the theme of a search of a home in the post-Soviet world. Breininger’s novel is roughly based on the author’s life.¹⁷¹ It follows an unnamed protagonist who grows up in Kazakhstan, does graduate work at Oxford and eventually emigrates to the United States where she is chosen to take part in the ‘experiment of the century’.¹⁷² The aim of the experiment is to create a new generation of superhumans, a breed of perfect beings who are highly intelligent, but cold, rational and free of national

¹⁷⁰ Ibid., p. 251.

¹⁷¹ Breininger was born in Kazakhstan in 1987. She graduated from Maxim Gorky Literature Institute, completed an MA degree at the University of Oxford and a PhD at Harvard.

¹⁷² Breininger, *В Советском*, p. 8.

allegiance. Breininger also employs the motif of an abandoned child to explore her unnamed female protagonist's struggle to find a home. Like Ana, the protagonist is constantly negotiating her identity in relation to her past, and in particular her childhood. Peculiarly, however, even though she has loving parents and is never abandoned, unlike the characters of the previous novels, she comes to perceive herself as an abandoned child. This self-perception is made particularly evident during an episode where the protagonist is staying at a New-York hotel during her experiment. At this point, her face and her physical body are so uncanny, that like Ana, the protagonist cannot even look in the mirror and face her reflection. When she does, she sees an orphaned child rather than a grown woman that she is. In this uncanny moment, she also sees a double – a mere ghost of herself, a blank canvas (a metaphor also employed by Ana) that can assume any identity:

В отблесках машин, мчащихся внизу, по Бродвею, вижу свое отражение в зеркале. И все эти отблески, и полусвет, и зеркало, в котором нет меня, а есть только моя смутная тень, заключенная в клетку массивной золоченой рамы, и мысль о том, что стоит лишь протянуть руку – и хрупкая картина исчезнет, и останется только бледная девчонка, жмурящая глаза [...] вот что останется, белый лист, на котором можно нарисовать все что угодно. Поэтому я никогда не включаю свет, застывая в том пространстве между сном и явью [...] И так я день за днем – покинутый ребенок, а ночь за ночью – смутный силуэт той, которая может быть кем угодно влиться, как расплавленное олово, в любую форму, застыть в любой фигуре, быть чьей угодно женой, сестрой, подругой и идеалом.¹⁷³

The protagonist's 'true' identity, linked to her self-perception as an orphan, is delimited, enclosed and 'imprisoned' by a frame, while her skills as a chameleon are, on the contrary, malleable like molten tin, flexible and limitless. These are the skills that the protagonist develops on purpose, since if she cannot have a single identity, she will adopt endless identities, if she cannot belong to a single place, she will belong everywhere and embrace her identity as an eternal migrant. But of course, this chameleon identity which she carefully creates, like Dolenjashvili's protagonist Ana, is fragile and leaves her in constant fear that 'хрупкая

¹⁷³ Ibid., pp. 179-182.

картина исчезнет'. As mentioned earlier, the uncanny condition leads one to believe that one's identity is not fixed, or stable, but rather capable of crumbling at any given moment. In addition, like Ana, the protagonist has a thwarted experience of reality as she constantly finds herself between two worlds, 'в состоянии между сном и нереальностью, передвигаясь как в тумане'.¹⁷⁴ Her experience falls in the realm of the uncanny which, as alluded to earlier, involves 'uncertainty, in particular regarding the reality of who one is and what is being experienced'.¹⁷⁵ Like Petrosyan's characters, she is an unhomely subject 'that inhabits the rim of an "inbetween" reality'.¹⁷⁶

In the final chapter of the novel written in the form of a supposed speech delivered at the summit of the Big 20, the speaker blames the leaders of globalisation for her inability to find a permanent home : 'Я – ваша сирота. Мы – ваша ошибка'.¹⁷⁷ She explains that a 'homeless' and 'orphaned' person like her is forced to survive through 'destruction' and adopting a nomadic lifestyle: 'Я буду отрицать одну эмиграцию другой, следующей . . . Я буду передвигаться бесконечно'.¹⁷⁸ While the speech raises the issue of globalisation, it is the post-Soviet context that is more crucial for understanding the protagonist's identity malaise. For instance, as the author herself has explained to me, the protagonist was selected as a perfect specimen for the creation of a superhuman owing precisely to her post-Soviet identity:

Она является таким типичным продуктом постсоветского пространства, человеком, у которого было не то чтобы отнято, но у которого не было возможности построить четкую идентичность, потому, что все эти вещи, которые традиционно определяет идентичность, опять же дом, семья, отношения, работа, просто география, у нее ничего этого не было.¹⁷⁹

¹⁷⁴ Ibid., p. 25.

¹⁷⁵ Royle, *Uncanny*, p. 1.

¹⁷⁶ Bhabha, 'The World', p. 148.

¹⁷⁷ Breininger, *В Советском*, p.200. The speech is probably delivered by the protagonist, although she claims that it could have been someone else: 'хотя неизвестно достоверно, я ли это или кто-то другой' (p. 197).

¹⁷⁸ Ibid., pp. 200-201.

¹⁷⁹ Olga Breininger interviewed by Tamar Koplatadze, *Любовь, дом и адерол. Поиск идентичности в современном мире*, GoViralkz, June 2018 <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DUPSKdIeb3c>> [accessed 22 August 2018].

Breininger suggests that the experience of her protagonist is a typical post-Soviet experience in terms of her struggle to define an identity. However, the author seems to contradict herself by finding the root of her protagonist's problem in a very personal and individual experience of a lack of home, family and relations, which are not necessarily conditioned by politics. The statement is even more ambiguous since the protagonist does in fact have a home and a loving family.

Indeed, Breininger's own experience of a happy childhood in multicultural Karaganda, recounted in the 'central' chapter on Karaganda,¹⁸⁰ renders her assessment of the Soviet experience more positive and nostalgic than that of some of previous authors. In her academic piece, Breininger comments on the phenomenon of imaginary Soviet nostalgia in reference to Vsevolod Nepogodin's novel *Девять дней в мае* (2014), arguing that it affects young people with no direct memory of Soviet past and who accentuate its positive elements, ignoring, or completely denying its objectively negative dimensions.¹⁸¹ Olga's protagonist also undoubtedly feels nostalgia for the Soviet order, although in her case, it is not imaginary since she has actual living memories of growing up as a child in Soviet Kazakhstan. Olga admits that like her protagonist, she tends to idealise this period of her life, the only time when she had a sense of belonging (чувствовала свою сопричастность к чему-то), in the book's central chapter on Karaganda: 'Я хотела показать мир, в котором все было хорошо, который был понятен, который был эмоционально насыщенным, который больше не существует'.¹⁸² If Dolenjashvili's protagonist Ana feels patriotism in relation to Georgia, Breininger's protagonist pledges her allegiance to a home that no longer exists – the Soviet Union. 'Я –

¹⁸⁰ The author considers this chapter as the most important in the book (Koplatadze, Goviralkz).

¹⁸¹ Olga Breininger, 'Постколониальная литература. Случай Всеволода Непогодина'

[Postkolonial'naia literatura. Sluchai Vsevoloda Nepogodina], *Novy Mir*,

<<http://novymirjournal.ru/index.php/projects/preprints/128-breininger>> [accessed 22 August 2018]

¹⁸² Breininger in Koplatadze, GoViralkz.

продукт экспорта своей уже несуществующей великой державы, которой – единственной – я чувствую себя обязанной, и я обещаю отдать долг’ – she claims.¹⁸³

Indeed, the first part of the novel is entitled ‘Советский Союз, которого уже никогда не будет, и города, о которых все забыли’, evoking both nostalgia for the Soviet order and the metaphorical homelessness caused by the collapse of the USSR. According to Breininger, the Soviet spirit of the friendship of the peoples that reigned in Karaganda produced a positive model of a multicultural community, one unlike the current disorienting globalised society.¹⁸⁴ She explains that the multicultural setting of her town where people of various ethnicities, Russians, Germans, Kazakhs, exiled Chechens, deported Ingushetians, live peacefully side by side, ensured that she grew up without an awareness of the concept of national identity.¹⁸⁵ Similarly, her protagonist only discovers the concept of national belonging when a Russian girl, Katya, moves to her class and shows her how the rest of the world operates. Every time Katya calls someone’s name, she follows up with identifying their ethnicity, ‘Мой друг Руслан, чеченец... – говорила она. Или: – Та девушка, Катя, она еврейка’, prompting the protagonist to realise that national differences are ‘important, very important’.¹⁸⁶ Karaganda’s multicultural space is crucial for the protagonist and marks a split between her two identities: her identity before and after Karaganda. She accordingly develops a ‘double’ vision: ‘сталкиваясь с любым новым явлением или предметом, я как бы раздваивалась и оценивала глазами себя прежней и себя сейчас’.¹⁸⁷

Not only does the protagonist grow up in a setting of cultural harmony, but she is also surrounded by a loving family and friends. In light of such a positive experience of childhood, the author’s earlier statement that her protagonist is a typical post-Soviet individual with no

¹⁸³ Breininger, *В Советском*, p. 198.

¹⁸⁴ Breininger in Koplatazde, GoViralkz.

¹⁸⁵ Ibid.

¹⁸⁶ Breininger, *В Советском*, p. 47.

¹⁸⁷ Ibid., p. 89.

stable home, family or identity is, again, ambiguous. It has to be mentioned here that in her teenage years, the protagonist emigrates to Germany and does suffer deeply from the treatment she and her parents receive as emigrants. However, unless the author is implicitly blaming her emigration on post-Soviet politics in Karaganda, the roots of her identity malaise remain unclear. It can be argued that despite all of her idealisation of her life in Karaganda, the author is in the process of evaluating just how healthy the model was and, more importantly and more broadly, assessing the extent of the Soviet order's colonial nature. Indeed, the protagonist begins to reflect on these questions after discovering the contrast between the Russian girl's perception of the world and her own. This contrast leads her to question how exactly the unique multicultural order of Karaganda came about, 'кто-то ведь должен был ее придумать и построить'.¹⁸⁸ While reflecting on this question, she begins to suspect the complex colonial dynamics behind an attractive ideal:

Сейчас бы я сказала: я поняла, какая пропасть разделяет идею, реальность и ее осознание. История города ответила на часть моих вопросов, но некоторые вещи я так и не смогла понять: например, почему у нас дружба народов была, а у Кати из Москвы ее не было. И сама Катя не понимала, о чем я спрашиваю.¹⁸⁹

The protagonist wonders why *druzhiba narodov* was not a widespread ideal in the whole of the Soviet Union. By realising that Russia did not implement this model as successfully as Kazakhstan, she begins to understand the colonial dynamics between the 'centre' and the 'periphery'. 'The older brother' could dictate an ideal for its sibling republics but retain the privilege of not following it himself. In fact, while idealising her Soviet childhood, Breininger is not blind to the colonial dynamics within the Soviet Union. In a scholarly article, she argues that the Soviet Union, despite its specificity, was a colonial empire in many respects.¹⁹⁰ In

¹⁸⁸ Ibid., p. 47.

¹⁸⁹ Ibid., p. 47.

¹⁹⁰ Breininger writes: 'Ни Российская Империя, ни Советский Союз не были колониальными державами в классическом смысле этого слово – но, безусловно, представляли собой модель

addition, while the protagonist paints her life in Karaganda in bright colours, at the end of the novel, she unexpectedly puts aside her rose-tinted glasses and mentions that her country was also plagued by violence and poverty characteristic of the post-Soviet period:

Я вообще-то родилась и выросла в стране, где однажды две зимы подряд не было света и горячей воды, где чайник кипятили над костром на улице, а спали в зимней одежде. А однажды на моих глазах четырнадцатилетний (хотела сказать мальчик – куда там) русский muzhik [sic] забил другого до полусмерти монтировкой из-за пачки сигарет.¹⁹¹

Breiningер's conflicted feelings about her past translate in her protagonist's difficulty in critically assessing the roots of her identity troubles. The repressed unhomely moments when the protagonist is unsure of her identity seem to contribute to the intensity of her sense of disorientation and alienation in her later life. Even as a child, before her traumatic emigrations, the protagonist experiences unhomely moments in the form of nightmares where political history invades her private sphere and makes her feel uneasy and uncertain about who she is. She deliberates that being a descendant of Soviet exiles of German descent makes her an exile herself. Even without a direct experience of the trauma of forced displacement, she is vicariously haunted by the traumas of her descendants:

В непонятном мне далеком августе сорок первого за один-единственный день перестала существовать Республика немцев Поволжья. Будто ее никогда и не было. Суровые и страшные в моих детских снах вереницы теплушек несли депортированных немцев (а если немцев, спрашивала я сонно, то, значит, это наших родственников? Это кого? Бабушек и дедушек?) без запасов воды, пищи и без теплой одежды в Сибирь и Среднюю Азию. Около полумиллиона таких моих бабушек и дедушек прибыли в Казахстан.¹⁹²

государственности, где деление на центр и периферию и дисбаланс власти между ними, были существенными и намеренными, и зачастую совпадали с этническими границами. В этом смысле Россия сегодня выступает как прямая наследница СССР, открыто подчеркивая свою преемственность и давая поводы размышлять о «реваншизме» новой политики». Breiningер, 'Постколониальная'.

¹⁹¹ Breiningер, *В Советском*, p. 200.

¹⁹² *Ibid.*, p. 29.

Breinger's protagonist suffers from a recurrent nightmare, like Dolenjashvili's protagonist Ana who is chased by the same devil in her every dream. Their nightmares enter the realm of the uncanny since the uncanny moment deals with something 'repressed which recurs' and can present itself in the form of a recurring dream.¹⁹³ By nature, the uncanny is a mysterious and ambivalent experience. It is 'undoubtedly related to what is frightening — to what arouses dread and horror',¹⁹⁴ but at the same time, it cannot be viewed solely in terms of negation, for 'the uncanny is that class of the frightening which leads back to what is known of old and long familiar',¹⁹⁵ to what may be recognisable or comforting. The people in the protagonist's dream are both unknown and strangely familiar to her, they are the millions of grandparents who could be her own, those whose traumas of deportation she can conjure in her unconscious. Her dream is also unhomely as it 'relates the traumatic ambivalences of a personal, psychic history to the wider disjunctions of political existence'.¹⁹⁶ Like Ana who is haunted by the psychic memory of the Georgian victims of deportations through the nightmare of an uprooted tree, so Breinger's protagonist is haunted by the traumas of her deported ancestors. As Bhabha explains, the unhomely has to do 'with the uncanny literary and social effects of enforced social accommodation, or historical migrations and cultural relocations. [...].'¹⁹⁷ In the stirrings of their unhomely dreams, both Ana and Breinger's protagonist vicariously experience the shock of historical relocations of their ancestors, their world invades their home, leaving them disorientated.

The protagonist's emigration to the West further destabilises her identity. She receives a shock upon realising that outside of Karaganda, national identity is a key determinant of a person's life. 'With all the notions of the friendship of the peoples' in her head, the protagonist

¹⁹³ Freud, 'The Uncanny', p. 241.

¹⁹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 219.

¹⁹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 220.

¹⁹⁶ Bhabha, 'The World', p. 141.

¹⁹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 141.

is not ready to acknowledge that from then on, ‘her background and national identity would determine who [she] is’.¹⁹⁸ Consequently, she ends up developing a cold, detached and mechanical persona to fit the demands of her surroundings. Prompted by the leader of the experiment which aims to turn her into a superhuman, she learns to look at herself ‘не как на живого человека, а как на сплав конфликтных жизненных экспериэнсов’.¹⁹⁹ Like Ana, she becomes an uncanny double, a mirror, a homeless wanderer: ‘Дом, – говорю я себе зеркальной, – это то, что может быть у других, но никогда у тебя’.²⁰⁰ She travels the world, conducting anthropological surveys, hoping that through her respondents, she will discover where her home is.²⁰¹ But every journey takes her further from herself, making her lose parts of herself: ‘с каждым перемещением становишься другим человеком и, переходя из одной точки в другую, теряешь где-то посередине одно свое «я»’.²⁰² In order to retain at least a part of herself, the protagonist attempts to clearly mark the boundaries within herself, to imagine a territory that will remain constant throughout her movement through chaos:

В мире, который можно перевозить в багаже и в котором отсутствуют любые ориентиры и привязки, единственное, что остается, чтобы не потеряться окончательно, – это придумать себе правила и отграничить ими территорию твоего мира от окружающего хаоса. Ведь хоть что-нибудь – что-нибудь одно хотя бы! – должно оставаться неизменным, иначе теряется всякая вера и желание жить.²⁰³

The protagonist’s deliberate retreat into herself brings to mind Sri Lankan woman poet Jean Arasanayagam’s lines: ‘I have no country now but self/ I mark my boundaries extend demesnes/ Even beyond the darkness of those regions/ Still to be explored . . .’.²⁰⁴ As John

¹⁹⁸ Breininger, *В Советском*, p. 81.

¹⁹⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 17.

²⁰⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 178.

²⁰¹ *Ibid.*, p. 178.

²⁰² *Ibid.*, p. 179.

²⁰³ *Ibid.*, pp. 179-180.

²⁰⁴ Jean Arasanayagam, ‘I Have No Country’, in *Concert of Voices: An Anthology of World Writing in English* ed. by Victor J. Ramraj (Ontario: Broadview Press, 2009), pp. 35-36.

Hawley remarks, Arasanaygam's ironic use of a word such as 'demesnes' in this context underscores 'the narrowing, rather than extension, of one's world – the willy-nilly regression to an interior search when the world beyond one's body becomes irretrievably foreign'.²⁰⁵ Breininger's protagonist is similarly becoming alien to the world and her expansive conquering of geographical territories only increases her sense of alienation.

Returning to her home in Karaganda only heightens the protagonist's anxiety. Year after year, she returns to her parent's house in the hope of regaining herself, only to realise that the person she has become can no longer feel at home, that what was once familiar to her has become strange, unfamiliar, that she can no longer fit into this world which has remained unchanged.²⁰⁶ At the same time, the protagonist contradicts herself by highlighting how the world of her childhood and youth, the days when she was a DJ, only exist in her memory, that everything has in fact changed in her country, and that she can only recollect her old world in her mind.²⁰⁷ The protagonist's ambiguous relation to her homeland highlights the ambivalence of her national belonging. We are left wondering whether what constitutes home for her is not a physical territory, but rather an ideal, a dream of a Soviet home, one that was lost with the dissolution of the Soviet Union. She is struggling to figure out whether her homeland is Soviet or post-Soviet and her contradictory accounts on the extent of how far it has changed suggest that is indeed both. Like the protagonist, her homeland is located in a liminal position between historical periods which means that returning to Kazakhstan only heightens the protagonist's sense of dislocation. This is why she is a metaphorical orphan, an unhomely subject haunted by a shock of a radical cultural relocation resulted from the retreat of a Soviet home and the ambivalence resulted by its post-Soviet transformation.

²⁰⁵ John Hawley, 'Theorizing the Diaspora' in *Global Fissures/Postcolonial Fusions* ed. by Clara A.B. Joseph and Janet Wilson (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2006), pp. 3-16, p. 4.

²⁰⁶ Breininger, *В Советском*, p. 27.

²⁰⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 54.

Conclusion

This chapter has examined post-Soviet fictional narratives on the search of a psychospiritual homeland and argued that they are dominated by specifically post-Soviet unhomely moments which reveal their authors' and protagonists' ambivalent identities. Like post-Soviet nations, this generation of authors and their characters are located in the historical threshold whereby they have to assess Soviet legacies and come to terms to what extent they are now past the 'Soviet', or post-Soviet. Consequently, their private negotiations of identity are always influenced by wider political considerations and they struggle to dissociate their individual identity from a collective identity.

The unhomely moments which emerge from these confusions are exacerbated by the ambivalence towards the Soviet experience. Some, like Breininger, are more explicit about Soviet nostalgia. For her protagonist, the experience of alienation is especially intense due to her idealised childhood in Karaganda, the embodiment of the friendship of the peoples, and her disillusionment upon confronting an altogether different, unwelcoming world after her emigration. Other writers, especially Georgian authors, are more critical of the Soviet past and its legacies, in particular her society's reluctance to uncover and protest against injustice. Although in varying degrees, all authors deal with the violence associated with Soviet colonialism and the post-Soviet reality. Even in the seemingly apolitical and 'happy' space of Petrosyan's home, characters like Kuril'shik are plagued by the dichotomy of individualism versus collective mentality that also characterised the Soviet era. The writer echoes magic realism's disordering of singular visions to create an alternative vision opposing both the stifling Soviet order and post-Soviet nationalisms.

Regardless of the degree of their criticism, the unhomely experiences of the protagonists are invariably informed by the humiliation associated with the post-Soviet transition as well the trauma of repressed memories of the Soviet past which was not properly examined in the post-Soviet era. The novels suggest a sense of loss experienced by post-Soviet countries after the retreat of the paternalistic Soviet State through the recurrent motif of abandoned or disabled children. This metaphor is invariably coupled with natural imagery, most commonly through uncanny visions and nightmares. The specificity of these visions within the post-Soviet uncanny might be attributed to the peculiarly widespread experiences of displacement across the Caucasus and Central Asia. These unhomely moments encapsulate the characters' feelings of alienation, loss, corruption and decay and inform the specificity of the post-Soviet postcolonial condition.

Chapter Three

Navigating the Russian Literary Market as a Russophone Trickster Writer

Introduction

‘Can the subaltern speak?’ – asks feminist postcolonial scholar Gayatri Spivak in her seminal essay which considers the historical and ideological factors obstructing the possibility of being heard for those who inhabit the periphery.¹ In the post-Soviet space, Spivak’s question bears particular relevance to the consideration of how ‘subaltern’ Russophone women migrant writers attempt to be heard against Orientalist discourses prevalent in the former imperial metropolis. If the previous chapter considered the psychological dimension of the post-Soviet decolonisation, this chapter examines its cultural side and analyses how women writers negotiate their literary voices in view of Russia’s persisting cultural hegemony relative to the countries in the Caucasus and Central Asia.

While there exists an enormous literature on migration, the phenomenon remains understudied from gender-critical, postcolonial and interdisciplinary perspectives.² Migration has been regarded as being ‘genderless’ or has been viewed from an androcentric perspective.³

¹ Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, ‘Can the Subaltern Speak?’, in *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture* ed. by Carl Nelson and Lawrence Grossberg (Champaign, Illinois: University of Illinois Press, 1988), pp. 271-313, p. 293.

² Sabine Gatt and others, ‘Migration from a Gender-Critical, Postcolonial and Interdisciplinary Perspective’, *Österreichische Zeitschrift Für Soziologie*, 41.3 (2016), 1-12

³ Gatt and others, ‘Migration’, p. 2.

Studies that go against this trend do not systematically consider the interplay of gender with other dimensions of inequality such as class, ethnicity or people's cultural-religious background.⁴ Thus, cumulative effects such as multiple discrimination (e. g. of women of colour from the South in lower-class positions), but also status inconsistencies (e. g. the privileged position of upper-class women from the South) do not come into focus.⁵ By means of comparing fictional immigration accounts of two writers from different backgrounds, this study adopts an intersectional analytical perspective, considering that 'apart from gender, other categories of difference – for instance, class, skin colour, global context of origin, culture/religion, body – also have a significant influence in a migration context'.⁶

Critical works specifically focusing on post-Soviet women migrants from former Soviet republics rarely offer much insight into women migrants' attitudes and concerns, building on a few answers by informants to specific, predetermined and often superficial questions. These studies tend to be prone to repetition, speculations, generalisations and Orientalising. The only extensive critical inquiry on women migrants from CIS countries, edited by Elena Tyuryukanova, covers a broad range of issues from 'gender roles in migration' to 'problems of integration' and plans for the future, but only dedicates one to three pages to each question.⁷ Olga Tkach and Olga Brednikova have produced numerous co-authored studies that delve deeper into the topics in question by quoting their informants, but these also tend to be repetitive and rather Orientalising.⁸ In this regard, the analysis of autobiographic migrant

⁴ Ibid., p. 3.

⁵ Ibid., p. 3.

⁶ Ibid., p. 6.

⁷ *Женщины-мигранты из стран СНГ в России*, ed. by Elena Tyuryukanova (Moscow: Макс Пресс, 2011)

⁸ For instance, when discussing linguistic obstacles to women's integration, Olga Tkach concludes that migrants 'чувствуют себя вполне комфортно и без знания языка' without elaborating on her means of gauging their supposed contentment. To support her claim, Tkach gives an example of an Uzbek woman Gela in a manner that bears a tone of judgment and arguably portrays Gela as a downtrodden Oriental woman. Gela, she writes 'находится в Петербурге уже 8 месяцев. Она приехала в Россию, ни слова не говоря по-русски. Сейчас она может объясняться, однако все внешние коммуникации старается делегировать мужу, сразу же звонит ему и предлагает своим

narratives in literature contributes to a more nuanced and intimate understanding of women's experiences of displacement.

When negotiating their identities as migrants, women face a double burden as (post)colonial subjects, being constructed as inferior both due to their ethnicity and gender. As Kate Averis has shown on the example of Francophone diasporic women writers, the lost homeland does not necessarily represent a locus of secure locatedness for migrant women, but a site in which identity was often already problematic, as indicated by the disaffected ties to the homeland which they frequently evoke even before displacement.⁹ Indeed, male protagonists in post-Soviet novels and films on immigration arrive in Russia with a sense of relative privilege accorded to them by the gender orders in their home countries. For example, at no point in Eduard Bagirov's novel *Гастарбайтер* (2007)¹⁰ or Eleonora Kasymova's *Таджик* (2007)¹¹ do the male protagonists, economic migrants from Turkmenistan and Tajikistan respectively, present themselves as inferior to Russians in gender terms. In Kasymova's *Таджик*, Er, a Tajik *gastarbaiter*, feels like a master in his home country, 'он там хозяин', and his persistent virile habitus in Russia wins him approval from women, rather than

собеседникам поговорить с ним. То есть муж выступает для Гели не просто переводчиком, но и посредником в общении'. See Olga Brednikova and Olga Tkach, 'Трудовые Мигранты в Санкт-Петербурге: Выявление Проблем и Выработка Рекомендаций. Результаты Исследования', St Petersburg, 2012, 73pp., p. 61

<[https://www.academia.edu/18643890/Бредникова_Ольга_Ольга_Ткач_и_др._2012._Трудовые_мигранты_в_Санкт-](https://www.academia.edu/18643890/Бредникова_Ольга_Ольга_Ткач_и_др._2012._Трудовые_мигранты_в_Санкт-Петербурге_выявление_проблем_и_выработка_рекомендаций._Результаты_исследования._С.-Петербург_73_с)

[Петербург_выявление_проблем_и_выработка_рекомендаций._Результаты_исследования._С.-Петербург_73_с](https://www.academia.edu/18643890/Бредникова_Ольга_Ольга_Ткач_и_др._2012._Трудовые_мигранты_в_Санкт-Петербурге_выявление_проблем_и_выработка_рекомендаций._Результаты_исследования._С.-Петербург_73_с)> [accessed 27 May 2018]. See also Olga Brednikova and Olga Tkach 'Reshaping Living Space: Concepts of Home Represented by Women Migrants Working in St. Petersburg' in *Cultural Diversity in Russian Cities. The Urban Landscape in the Post-Soviet Era*, ed. by Cordula Gdaniec (Oxford and New York: Berghahn Books 2010); Khalimakhon Otambekovna Khushkadamova, 'Женское лицо миграции', (Moscow, 2010), 99-104

<<http://www.isras.ru/files/File/Socis/2010-5/Hushkadamova.pdf>>; Irina Britvina and Marina

Kiblit'skaia, *Жизнь мигрантки в монограде* (Moscow: Knigodel, 2004).

⁹ Kate Averis, *Exile and Nomadism in French and Hispanic Women's Writing* (Oxford: Legenda, 2014)

¹⁰ Eduard Bagirov, *Гастарбайтер* [Gastarbaiter] (Moscow: Популярная литература, 2007)

¹¹ Eleonora Kasymova, *Таджик* [Tajik] (2008) <<https://www.proza.ru/2016/02/22/278>> [accessed 25 August 2019]

criticism.¹² This is not to say that gender constructions of the male ‘other’ in post-Soviet and postcolonial migrant discourses are unproblematic, far from it.¹³ Yet the concepts of agency and strategic tactics of adaptation and survival have been extended especially rarely to female migrants.¹⁴ And due to women’s central role in the Soviet civilising project, women authors themselves have faced a double burden when speaking as ‘subalterns’.

My analysis focuses on two autobiographical novels, Uzbek author Bibish’s *Танцовщица из Хивы, или история простодушной* (2004)¹⁵ and Armenian author Narine Abgaryan’s *Понаехавшая* (2011)¹⁶. References will also be made to *Ток шоу для простодушной* (2005),¹⁷ the sequel to Bibish’s first autobiography. These novels are of particular interest for several reasons. First, they are the only Russophone fictional accounts on women’s migration journeys from the two regions to post-Soviet Russia, and they have both achieved notable literary success among Russian and, in Bibish’s case, international readers.¹⁸ Furthermore, Bibish’s and Abgaryan’s intimate autobiographical insights differ from the

¹² Kasymova, *Таджик*, p. 60. Er saves a Russian peasant woman Katya who falls in love with him, making her happier than she ever was with her drunkard Russian ex-husband. Er’s virility is still arguably couched in Orientalist terms, due to the historical association of Eastern men with machismo, however, this stereotyping is arguably more positive than women migrants’ construction as supposedly backwards and in need of liberation.

¹³ For example, in Larisa Sadilova’s *Она* [She] (2013), Russian woman Nadya tames her Tajik husband’s wild, insatiable sexual appetites and helps him become more ‘civilised’ and integrated in the Russian society. In Abgaryan’s novel *Понаехавшая*, male migrants from the Caucasus are depicted as sexually violent, driven by instinct and in need of disciplining, as discussed later in the chapter.

¹⁴ Gatt and others, ‘Migration’, *passim*.

¹⁵ Bibish (Hadjarbibi Siddikova), *Танцовщица из Хивы: Или история простодушной* [The Dancer from Khiva: The Story of a Simple soul] (Saint-Petersburg: Azbuka-Klassika, 2004)

¹⁶ Narine Abgaryan, *Понаехавшая* [Foreigner] (Moscow: АСТ, 2011)

¹⁷ Bibish, *Ток шоу для простодушной* [A Talk Show for a Simple Soul] (Saint-Petersburg: Azbuka-Klassika, 2005).

¹⁸ Aside from these two Russophone authors, Kazakh author Aigul Kemelbayeva has written a novel in Kazakh, *Мунара* (Tower) (2002), some parts of which (especially the first chapter) are based on her student years in Moscow. The work won Soros-Kazakhstan Fund’s main literary prize (2002–2003). The first chapter ‘Bala bagushy’ (‘The Nanny’) follows a female protagonist, a Kazakh university student, who takes up work as a nanny to support herself in in Moscow during the dissolution of the Soviet Union. It was translated into English in 2018 by Zaire Batayeva and Shelley Fairweather-Vega and is available at <<https://www.wordswithoutborders.org/article/january-2018-kazakh-writing-sabyr-aigul-kemelbayeva-shelley-fairweather-veg?src=intro>> [accessed 20 July 2019].

distanced, if not somewhat patronising and Orientalising views of migration and precarity displayed in recent works on post-Soviet women migrants, both fictional and academic.¹⁹

Although Abgaryan and Bibish are authors with different social backgrounds and experiences of integrating in Russia, in order to succeed in the Russian market, both had to come to terms with self-Orientalising pressures in relation to their national and gender identity, in line with the representational tradition of immigrants prevalent in Soviet and post-Soviet culture, as I shall go on to discuss. They thus risked presenting their migration journeys as experiences of personal liberation and civilisation as supposedly backward Oriental women. Building on the concept familiar in postcolonial studies as ‘trickster discourse’ (as developed by Gerald Vizenor and others), I shall argue that in their autobiographical fiction, these authors adopt a literary persona of a comic fool. Through seeming replication of the values surrounding them, they subtly ironise Orientalist notions pertaining to primordial ethnicity, backward nations, friendship of the peoples, and Russian cultural and linguistic dominance. What emerges in their works is a culturally hybrid Russophone trickster who responds to Russia’s complex imperial and decolonizing impulses, as well as the official government sponsorship of positive heroes from the migrant community.²⁰ While the authors’ ‘subaltern’ status hinders them from speaking without collusion with dominant discourses, their trickster strategies grant them a degree of leeway in appropriating and consequently deconstructing them.

In ‘Can the Subaltern Speak’ (1988), Spivak illustrates her arguments on female subaltern subjects’ double inability to be heard with the example of *sati*, widow self-immolation in India. In 1829, British colonisers prohibited *sati*, a religious ritual they deemed a barbaric practice of traditional Hindu patriarchal society. Spivak observes that the

¹⁹ In terms of cultural stereotyping one may consider Sergey Dvortsevov’s *Aïka* (2018) (winner of best actress at Cannes 2018), an example of a rather patronising comment on migrant precarity, and Larissa Sadilova’s *Она* (2013) which I analyse later in the chapter.

²⁰ This phenomenon is discussed later in the chapter.

interpretations of this act have ranged from denouncing the British civilising mission, the case of ‘white men saving brown women from brown men’, to invoking the Indian nativist argument that ‘the women actually wanted to die’.²¹ However, Spivak considers that both arguments, while not necessarily untrue, merely ‘legitimize each other’ because they obscure ‘the testimony of the women’s voice-consciousness’.²² Bill Ashcroft and others have interpreted Spivak’s analysis as suggesting that ‘no act of dissent or resistance occurs on behalf of an essential subaltern subject entirely separate from the dominant discourse that provides the language and the conceptual categories with which the subaltern voice speaks’.²³ As they point out, by the same token, the very existence of post-colonial discourse itself is an example of such speaking, since ‘in most cases the dominant language or mode of representation is appropriated so that the marginal voice can be heard’.²⁴

The colonial ban on *sati* bears an uncanny resemblance to *hujum* – the Soviet mission to unveil and ‘liberate’ Central Asian women.²⁵ Echoing the civilising mission of the West, Soviet policymakers displayed a tendency to construct women in the Caucasus and Central Asia as backward and exotic.²⁶ More generally, Soviet official nationality policies and the accompanying ethnic identity-shaping notions such as primordial ethnicity, the civilisation of backward nations, friendship of the peoples, and Russian cultural and linguistic dominance, found a potent visual embodiment not just in literature, but in Soviet cinema, which often reinforced the unequal relationship between Russians and their ‘younger brothers’ in the Soviet

²¹ Spivak, ‘Can the Subaltern’, p. 93.

²² *Ibid.*, p. 93.

²³ Spivak’s controversial essay has been interpreted in various ways by critics, however I tend to agree with Bill Ashcroft et al.’s interpretation quoted above, see *Post-Colonial Studies. The Key Concepts*, ed. by Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths, and Helen Tiffin (London and New York: Routledge, 2003), p. 201.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 201.

²⁵ As discussed in the Introduction.

²⁶ See the Introduction.

Union.²⁷ It is the Orientalist discourse shaped by this context that emigre women authors have to appropriate in order to make their ‘subaltern’ voices heard.

Russia’s post-Soviet marketable culture is characterised by Orientalist tropes which convey the message that while Russia might be a hostile space, it offers female migrants a chance to be liberated from their supposedly oppressive, patriarchal regimes. Indeed, it is possible to trace a dialogue between the representations of Russo-Central Asian/Caucasian relations in the Soviet and post-Soviet cultural productions by Russian writers and filmmakers. One may consider, for example, parallels between Orientalist tropes in Soviet director Dziga Vertov’s films, Andrei Platonov’s Turkmen novella *Джан* [Soul] (1933-4), Andrei Konchalovsky’s film *Первый Учитель* (1965), and post-Soviet Russian director Larisa Sadilova’s film *Она* (2013).

The Soviet civilising mission perhaps found its most potent visual embodiment in Dziga Vertov’s films on *hujum*. Vertov’s celebratory film on Lenin, *Три песни о Ленине* (1934) opens with a ‘song’ entitled ‘В черной тюрьме было лицо мое’ (My Face Was in a Dark Prison) (Figure 6). The opening sequence features seven shots of veiled women and is intercut with the written words: ‘Слепая была жизнь моя. Без света и без знаний я была рабыней вез цепей’. After the song portrays Lenin’s achievements, a veiled woman praises Lenin: ‘Если он видел мрак, он делал свет, из пустыни делал сад, из смерти-жизнь’. The discourse of bringing ‘light’ and freedom to the ‘enslaved’ women in the Eastern ‘darkness’ echoes the colonial dichotomy of light versus dark inherent in civilising missions (e.g. the colonial denotation of Africa as a ‘dark continent’). The concept of a male Soviet hero

²⁷ The civilisation of wilderness narrative is explicit, for instance, in Viktor Turin’s *Турксиб* (1929) which depicts the industrialisation of the supposedly backward Central Asian terrain. For an analysis of other Soviet movies that exemplify this trend, including Ivan Pyr’ev’s *Свинарка и пастух* (1941), Mikhail Chiaureli’s *Падение Берлина* (1949), Rezo Chkheidze’s *Отец солдата* (1964), Shaken Aimanov’s *Земля отцов* (1966) and Georgy Danelia’s *Mimino* (1977), see Elena Monastireva Monastireva-Ansdell, ‘Renegotiating the “Communal Apartment”’: Migration and Identity in Soviet and Contemporary Eurasian Cinema’, *Studies in Russian and Soviet Cinema*, 11.3 (2017), 228-49.

liberating Central Asian women remained dominant in later years, as evident in Platonov's *Джан*.

Figure 6. Dziga Vertov, *Три песни о Ленине* (1934), Song One: 'В черной тюрьме было лицо мое'. Film Still.



Джан revolves around Turkmen-born protagonist Nazar Chagataev who is tasked to travel from Moscow to Central Asia in order to bring the nomadic Dzhan nation into the Communist fold. At the end of the novella, Chagataev brings a young girl, Aidym, back to Moscow in the hope that 'когда Айдым станет ученой девушкой, она сама придет домой на Усть-Урт и научит всех, кто ее дождется, как правильно жить дальше'.²⁸ Once in Moscow, Chagataev takes Aidym shopping and buys her European shirts, skirts and coats. Now that Aidym is clothed in supposedly more civilised attire, the narrator remarks that she has been transformed, and Chagataev realises that she is a beauty.²⁹ Chagataev thus begins to fulfil his mission of liberating and modernising Central Asia and its women under the guidance of the Soviets. As Philip Bullock remarks, in *Джан*, women of Turkmenistan serve as a

²⁸ Andrei Platonov, *Джан* (Moscow: ФТМ, [1933-4] 1964), p. 77.

²⁹ Platonov, *Джан*, p. 78. [Айдым сразу изменилась в новой одежде: Чагатаев увидел, что она красавица].

‘metonymic representation of Central Asia’s liberation through the intervention of Soviet ideology’.³⁰ Similar symbolism prevails in Andrey Konchalovsky’s *Первый Учитель* (1965), based on the eponymous story by Chingiz Aitmatov, where a Bolshevik hero rescues an orphaned illiterate heroine from her brutal husband and sends her to her bright future in Tashkent. Both works thus partly enact the colonial script of ‘white men saving brown women from brown men’ described by Spivak, since women remain mute in their narratives.³¹

Uncanny echoes of Orientalist tropes in Soviet culture are evident in Larisa Sadilova’s *Она* (2013) which, ironically, is often perceived as one of the most liberal films on immigration on the market.³² According to Sadilova, the film’s message ‘coincides’ with Vladimir Putin’s publicized views on the national question, especially his call to use the individuals’ adherence to a (Russo-centric) ‘common cultural code’ and not their ethnicity as a basis for distinguishing between ‘us’ and ‘them’.³³ The film’s protagonist, Maiya, is a young girl who emigrates from Tajikistan to Russia to escape an arranged marriage and reunite with her boyfriend Khamid, a fellow Tajik and migrant-worker. Once she is in Russia, Nadya, the common-law wife of Maiya’s uncle, becomes Maiya’s mentor. When both Maiya’s uncle and boyfriend insist that Maiya dress modestly and cover her head, and attempt to keep Maiya in seclusion, Nadya quickly contests their patriarchal authority. She teaches Maiya not to fear the men in her life and, ‘in an echo, whether conscious or not, of the Soviet era unveiling of Muslim women that is evoked in many of the 1920s and 1930s films of Dziga Vertov’, proceeds to strip the headscarf off of Maya and dresses her in a tank top and jeans.³⁴ When Maiya is abandoned by her boyfriend, Nadya assumes responsibility over her. She also ‘feeds’, as she claims, and

³⁰ Philip Ross Bullock, “‘The Mountain of the Mind’: The Politics of the Gaze in Andrei Platonov’s *Dzhan*”, *Slavic Review*, 73 (2014), 751-771 (p. 752).

³¹ Spivak, ‘Can the Subaltern Speak?’, p. 293.

³² Beumers discusses the supposedly liberal and feminist messages of the film (“A Hero’, p. 173); See also Monastireva, ‘Renegotiating’, p. 235.

³³ Monastireva, ‘Renegotiating’, p. 235.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 239.

nurtures both her Tajik relatives in Russia and the extended Tajik nation. In a story reminiscent of Soviet Russia's civilising mission to free women from its young sister republics, a Russian woman acts as an older sister to liberate the oppressed Tajik woman and save her people. The film's title 'she' could as well refer to the true hero of the film – Nadya, rather than the victimised and objectified Maiya who lacks agency and is given no powerful voice. In this context, the fact that Maiya actually remains silent for the major part of the plot because she speaks no Russian is rather fitting. Further problematizing women migrants' portrayal in the film is the fact that 'the female subject is not liberated to desire and to formulate her own agenda': Maiya's happiness ultimately rests in the hands of a man, her new romantic interest, Roma.³⁵ Maiya is a subaltern who does not even speak.

Similar myths on the patriarchal Orient and the East/West binary more broadly are actively fed by the Russian media, especially due to the country's need to counter the influence of Turkish dramas popular in both Russia and Central Asian countries.³⁶ Russia's response to Turkish dramas and their message on Turkey's liberalism can be found in series such as Domashny channel's *Восточные жены* (2017) which tell cautionary tales revolving around ill-fated Russian women married to Middle Eastern men, and portray the Middle East as volatile and patriarchal, unlike Russia.³⁷

Bibish and Abgaryan have had to establish their careers against this background of persisting stereotypical perceptions and 'Othering', both cultural and social. However, this was not their sole concern. If subaltern migrant women struggle to speak, their obstacles are compounded by the pressures of speaking as diasporic writers. In order to highlight these

³⁵ Jeremy Hicks, 'She'. Introduction delivered at the 16th Russian Film Symposium, University of Pittsburgh, May 2014, quoted in Monastireva, 'Renegotiating', p. 239.

³⁶ Other examples of Orientalist Russian dramas include state-owned news channel Russia 24's 'special report' by Anna Afanaseva, *Наташкина любовь. Турецкие слезы* (with interviews of troubled women in Turkey, and Domashny channel's *Восток-Запад [East/West]* (2016-2018) the 'first Russo-Turkish series'. Yasemin Y. Celikkol, 'Transnational Media in Eurasia: Russian Media Counters Turkish Dramas', paper presented at IPEAS Conference, Lisbon, 4 July 2019.

³⁷ Celikkol, 'Transnational'.

difficulties, it is important to compare post-Soviet and postcolonial markets of migrant writing and consider the specific postcolonial dynamics of post-Soviet marketable culture.

Migrant Narratives in Postcolonial and Post-Soviet Contexts

Not only does migrancy represent a central trope of postcolonial literature, but migrant writers have been some of the most globally acclaimed authors within the field.³⁸ One reason for this high visibility, besides literary merit, has been the fact that ex-colonial powers generally retain an economic and military upper hand on their ex-colonial territories and tend to provide wide support to migrant literature in the form of advances, publicity, and prizes.³⁹ As Elleke Boehmer has argued, this phenomenon perpetuates the power asymmetries obtaining under colonialism: ‘crudely put, the promotion of postcolonial migrant writing offers a suggestive instance of the appropriation by Europe and America of resources in the Third World’.⁴⁰ Such appropriation ‘effectively keeps in place a cultural map of the world as divided between the richly gifted metropolis and the meagrely endowed margin’.⁴¹ In addition, Boehmer points out, migrant literatures tend to appeal to readers because, ‘though bearing all the attractions of the exotic, the magical, and the other, they participate reassuringly in aesthetic and ethical languages privileged in a host culture and can accord well with its political agendas’.⁴² Readers

³⁸ These include Salman Rushdie (India/UK), Ben Okri (Nigeria/UK), Derek Walcott (St Lucia/USA), Jean Rys (Dominica, UK), Léopold Sédar Senghor (Senegal/France); Jamaica Kincaid (Antigua/USA), Caryl Phillips (St. Kitts/ Britain/USA), Nourbese Philip (Trinidad and Tobago/Canada); Olive Senior (Jamaica/Canada); Amitav Ghosh (India/USA); Nuruddin Farah (Somalia/South Africa); Vikram Seth (India/Britain/USA), and others.

³⁹ Elleke Boehmer, *Colonial and Postcolonial Literature: Migrant Metaphors*, 2nd ed (Oxford: New York: Oxford University Press, 2005), p. 232.

⁴⁰ Boehmer, p. 231.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, p. 232.

⁴² *Ibid.*, pp. 229-230.

in the ex-colonies may find that they are entertained yet at the same time morally absolved by being made to confront neo-colonial problems expressed in migrant writing and films.⁴³

One of the key concerns of postcolonial theory has been to establish how the continued power asymmetries and cultural patronage determines the positions of postcolonial writers in the countries that used to be colonies. Due to their ‘privileged’ status as in-betweens, or mediators between two cultures, migrant writers have often been celebrated as being in a position of ‘peculiar insight, blessed with a specific awareness of the relativity of cultural rules and forms’.⁴⁴ And yet, migrant narratives have also been read in postcolonial theory as revealing the fact that ‘no act of criticism is entirely free of complicity in that which it criticizes’.⁴⁵ In fact, postcolonial writers and directors who originate from the ‘periphery’ and who gain success in the metropolis are often criticised for representing, or becoming part of, the privileged elite whose work ‘willy-nilly remains collusive with and an expression of that neo-colonial world’.⁴⁶ As Boehmer points out, these cosmopolitans

thus participate in the time-worn processes through which those in the West scrutinize the other, the better to understand themselves. For reasons such as these, although migrant writers are themselves often vociferously opposed to neo-colonial malformations, their work has drawn criticism for being a literature without loyalties, lacking in the regional and local affiliations which are deemed so necessary at a time of mass globalization.⁴⁷

⁴³ Ibid., p. 232. The popularity of francophone post-colonial migrant writing in France, and the accompanied box-office success of films made by North African filmmakers, both interrogating colonial legacies, testifies to this phenomenon. See Delphine Letort, ‘Introduction: Postcolonial Migration Stories on Screen’, *Black Camera*, 6.1 (2014), 92-95, p. 92.

⁴⁴ Andrew Smith, ‘Migrancy, Hybridity, and Postcolonial Literary Studies’ in *The Cambridge Companion to Postcolonial Literary Studies*, ed. by Neil Lazarus (Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2004), pp. 241-261, p. 246; On the similar privileged position ascribed to exiled writers see Carine M. Mardorossian, ‘From Literature of Exile to Migrant Literature’, *Modern Language Studies*, 32.2 (2002), 15-33, especially p. 16.

⁴⁵ Smith, ‘Migrancy’, p. 246.

⁴⁶ Boehmer, *Colonial*, p. 232.

⁴⁷ Ibid., p. 232. For an example for such a critique see Femi Osofisan, ‘Warriors of a Failed Utopia: West African Writers Since the 70s’, *Leeds African Studies Bulletin*, 61 (1996), 11-36 <<https://lucas.leeds.ac.uk/article/warriors-of-a-failed-utopia-femi-osofisan/>> [accessed 2 September 2019].

In this context, female emigre creative artists from Islamic countries face a double pressure of collusion with dominant ideologies. To this day, the wider hegemonic discourse of migration is still marked by an explicitly Eurocentric stance and a specifically ‘postcolonial arrogance’, as several critics have pointed out.⁴⁸ According to this discourse, the West or the Global North have a mission to civilise and emancipate the East and the Global South, including its immigrants; this includes the idea that the woman of colour needs rescuing from the barbaric man of colour.⁴⁹ As Lila Abu-Lughod has argued, through the homogenizing constructs of victimised Eastern women and of Muslim women as victims of Islam, the ex-imperial powers continue to live out their colonial rescue fantasies and attempt to legitimize interventions of various kinds, even military ones.⁵⁰ The image of the apprentice refugee/migrant in general and the Muslim woman in particular is further reinforced by Western secular feminism.⁵¹ Thus, Western readers in the ex-colonial empires are inclined to read the migrant protagonist's arrival in the ex-imperial centre as a narrative of progress from oppression to freedom.⁵² This reading is compounded by their knowledge of the sexual oppressiveness and often volatile political situation that immigrant authors leave behind in their home country.⁵³

This situation is comparable to the post-Soviet context. Madina Tlostanova has argued that Orientalist stereotypes, both Russian and Western, pigeonhole Central Asian and Caucasus women ‘as stereotypical downtrodden and retarded Orientals/Muslims, or as Soviet modernized party activists and Westernized emancipated gendered subjects — invariably

⁴⁸ Sabine Gatt, Kerstin Hazibar, Verena Sauermann, Max Preglau and Michaela Ralser, ‘Migration from a Gender-Critical, Postcolonial and Interdisciplinary Perspective’, *Österreichische Zeitschrift Für Soziologie*, 41 (2016), 1-12, p. 3.

⁴⁹ Gatt and others, ‘Migration’, p. 3.

⁵⁰ Lila Abu-Lughod, *Do Muslim Women Need Saving?* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press: 2013).

⁵¹ Chandra Mohanty, ‘Under Western Eyes: Feminist Scholarship and Colonial Discourses’, *Boundary 2*, 12-13 (1984), 333-358, passim.

⁵² Carine M. Mardorossian, ‘From Literature of Exile to Migrant Literature’, *Modern Language Studies*, 32.2 (2002), 15-33 (p. 22).

⁵³ Mardorossian, ‘From’, p. 22.

rejecting their culture to become New Women according to the standards of Soviet or Western modernism'.⁵⁴ Thus, Russian cultural and media projects only fuel these stereotypes on the supposedly oppressed Eastern women in need of Russian liberation. Inevitably then, Russophone writers from the Caucasus and Central Asia, and migrant women writers in particular, run the risk of fictionalising their host countries into the alter ego against which Russianness is measured and unconditionally valorised.

Indeed, post-Soviet Russophone authors are facing many of the characteristically postcolonial dilemmas as they navigate the Russian cultural market and determine their cultural and political allegiances. Like other ex-colonial metropolises, Moscow is highly preoccupied with the theme of migration. Responding to the need of re-evaluating relations with the migrant 'Others' of the former Soviet 'East' in the post-colonial context, and in large part due to the Russian state's encouragement to promote works focusing on inter-ethnic encounters, migrants have become increasingly visible in post-Soviet culture, as I will discuss below.

Unlike capitalist empires, the Soviet Union was supposed to be administered according to the Communist principles of equality. However, the often-unequal distribution of resources under the Soviet regime has led to characteristically postcolonial patterns of post-Soviet migration.⁵⁵ After the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991, Russia saw a significant migrant wave of ethnic Armenians, Azerbaijanis, and Georgians trying to escape violent ethnic conflicts and severe economic problems in the Caucasus.⁵⁶ From the 2000s onwards, economic recovery brought in a new wave of immigrants, mostly attracted by new opportunities in the labour market, predominantly from Ukraine, Moldova, and Central Asian states.⁵⁷ Bibish and Abgaryan are also among migrants from the Caucasus and Central Asia who sought better

⁵⁴ Tlostanova, *Gender*, p. 41.

⁵⁵ Abashin, 'Советское', pp. 47-48.

⁵⁶ Alexey Bessudnov, 'Ethnic Hierarchy and Public Attitudes towards Immigrants in Russia', *European Sociological Review*, 32.5 (2016), pp. 567-80, p. 567.

⁵⁷ Bessudnov, 'Ethnic', p. 567.

opportunities in Russia. The increased presence of immigrants from the Southern former Soviet republics in Russia has caused a reciprocal need to renegotiate the terms of the ensuing intercultural encounter in a new, post-Soviet setting.

Special government incentives in the latter half of the 2000s have significantly contributed to the surge of cultural representations of immigration, especially in Russian cinema. At a meeting of the presidential councils in the city of Vladimir on 22 July 2011, the then Russian president, Dmitry Medvedev, supported the work of the state commission in Russian cinema as ‘simply essential for a certain kind of films [...] which form a positive image of the country for foreign and Russian citizens, calling for an active lifestyle through the example of the heroes portrayed on screen’.⁵⁸ Several organisations were created to implement the decree ‘On the Priorities of the National Cinema Industry’ (2011) which instructed filmmakers to make films ‘about interethnic relations and the problems of tolerance in society’.⁵⁹ Already at the 2010 Kinotavr film festival in Odessa, ‘Russia’s Cannes’ — the main competition featured no less than three films dealing with the plights of Russia’s migrant workers: Dmitry Mamuliya’s *Другое небо* (2010), Andrey Stempkovsky’s *Обратное движение* (2010) and Yusup Razykov’s *Гастарбайтер* (2009).⁶⁰ The difficult plight of immigrants is also evoked in Zulfikar Musakov’s *Восточный двор с кривой луной* (2008), Boris Khlebnikov’s *Сумасшедшая помощь* (2009), Aleksey Balabanov’s and Danila

⁵⁸ Medvedev quoted in Beumers, p. 169 (‘просто необходим для определенного рода фильмов. К таким фильмам относятся [...] социальные фильмы, формирующие положительный имидж страны для иностранных и российских граждан, призывающий вести активный образ жизни на примере героев с экрана’).

⁵⁹ Ministry of Culture of the RF, Prikaz no. 45, 3 February 2011, ‘О приоритетных темах национальных фильмов в 2011 году’, Ministerstvo kultury Rossiiskoi Federatsii [<https://pravo.roskultura.ru/documents/165056>]. The organisations implementing this decree include MiR- PAL (Migration and Remittance Peer Assisted Learning Network) and IFESCCO Education, Scientific and Cultural Cooperation (Mmezhgosudarstvennyi fond gumanitarnogo sotrudnichestva [MFGS] gosudarstvennykh uchastnikov SNG)

⁶⁰ A number of documentaries, such as Anna Moiseenko’s *Песни Абдула* (2018), Bakur Bakuradze and Dmitry Mamuliya’s *Москва* (2007) and Denis Shabaev’s *Чужая Работа* (2015) (winner of ‘best debut’ at Russian Kinotavr Festival, Sochi 2015) have also addressed the issue of the lack of acceptance of migrants from the Caucasus and Central Asia as Others.

Bagrov's *Брам* (1997) and Aleksandr Novykov-Yagynov's *Звезды* (2018). As well as *Айка* (2018), Larisa Sadilova's *Она* (2013) and Nurbek Egen's *Пустой дом* (2012) focus on a migrant experience from the perspective of a female protagonist. However, added to the favourable cultural context, the migration of filmmakers themselves from the former Soviet republics to Moscow has further promoted the proliferation of the theme of migration in post-Soviet films.⁶¹ Migrants have become similarly visible in literature, most notably in Eduard Bagirov's popular novel *Гастарбайтер* (2007).⁶²

In an important essay of 2014, Birgit Beumers observes that most of the works produced since Russian state incentives were set in place present migrants as victims at the hands of Russians and/or the Russian system.⁶³ Beumers argues that by foregrounding structural violence against the migrant worker on both sides of the interethnic divide, be it capitalist sex exploitation, ethnic mafia or official state institutions, these films subvert the image of individual Russians as racist villains and thus follow the state mission of the creation of a positive screen image of the country for foreign and Russian citizens.⁶⁴ The *gastarbeiter*, being 'different from a Russian national identity, yet part of the Soviet identity', Beumers suggests, becomes a new 'hero of our time' and fulfils the traditional Russian role of a victim asserting moral superiority through suffering.⁶⁵

⁶¹ Yusup Razykov, head of Uzbekfil'm since 1990, left Tashkent in 2006; Usmon Saparov and Khodjakuli Narliev emigrated from Turkmenistan in the early 1990s; Bakhtiyor Khudoinazarov left Dushanbe during the Civil War. Birgit Beumers, 'A "Hero of Our Time": The Gastarbeiter in Recent Russian Cinema', *Zeitschrift Für Slavische Philologie*, 70 (2014), 161-178 (p.165).

⁶² The roughly autobiographical *Gastarbaiter* focuses on a male migrant worker Yevgeny Aliev's dilemmas to be accepted either in post-Soviet Moscow or his home country, Turkmenistan, due to his mixed Russian-Azeri ethnic heritage. He introduces himself as follows: 'В Азии я – гонимый русский, в России же – не менее гонимый "чёрный", в просторечии "чурка". Неважно, что на азербайджанца, благодаря русской маме, я похож весьма условно, плевать, что говорю я порусски без акцента – я же родился в "чуркистане", да ещё и ношу такую неудобную фамилию! В современной России этого вполне хватает, чтобы нередко'. Eduard Bagirov, *Гастарбайтер* (Moscow: Populyarnaya literatura, 2007), p. 5.

⁶³ Beumers, 'A "Hero", passim.

⁶⁴ Ibid., passim.

⁶⁵ Ibid., p. 162.

While I agree with Beumer's astute observation on the emergence of a *gastarbeiter* as a new type of popular hero in Russian culture, I attribute the phenomenon to more than Russia's anxieties over its international image. In fact, it seems unlikely that the portrayal of a corrupt and hostile Russian world would contribute to the positive image of Russia among audiences abroad. Rather, this is material aimed at the home market. The sympathetic portrayals of the difficult plight of migrants portrayed as victims win popularity among the Russian public as they also respond to complex Russian imperial and decolonizing impulses. Above all, these films serve as a platform for reflecting on what it means to be post-Soviet/post-colonial, and as a mirror for the postcolonial processes in Russian society. Indeed, when commenting on her film on illegal Central Asian immigrants, *Побег из Москвабада* (2015), director Darya Poltoratskaya claims that she gives viewers a chance to look at themselves from a distance, suggesting that her film is about 'ourselves' (о нас самих).⁶⁶

Like readers in western metropolises, Russian readers may be entertained by discovering 'exotic' migrant stories, yet at the same time morally absolved by being made to confront neo-colonial problems expressed in migrant writing and films. At the same time, ex-colonial powers such as Russia cannot wholly present themselves as oppressors and thus compromise the legitimacy of their past imperial project, and by extension their neo-colonial approach to their ex-colonies, as embodied in, say, Vladimir Putin's 'Eurasian Union' project.⁶⁷ This combination of audience appeal and 'national PR' helps explain the tenacity of the discourse on Russia's civilising mission prevalent in the Soviet period, and still in wide circulation today.

⁶⁶ Sputnik, 'В России вышел фильм о таджикских трудовых мигрантах', 8 August, 2015, <<https://tj.sputniknews.ru/culture/20150818/1016443665.html>> [accessed 9 August, 2019]

⁶⁷ See for instance Sam Bhutia, 'Russia dominates Eurasian Union trade', EurasiaNet, 18 October 2019 <<https://eurasianet.org/russia-dominates-eurasian-union-trade-here-are-the-numbers>> [accessed 19 October 2019]; Bruno S. Sergi, 'Putin's and Russian-led Eurasian Economic Union: A Hybrid Half-Economics and Half-Political "Janus Bifrons"', *Journal of Eurasian Studies*, 9(2018), 52-60.

The careers of Bibish and Abgaryan are determined by Russian readers, especially those belonging to the literary establishment, and both have won various Russian literary prizes.⁶⁸ Consequently, in order to present their autobiographical works to Russian publishing houses, the authors had to accept the rules of a game that dictates fixed expectations on female immigrants from the Caucasus and Central Asia. In other words, they were prompted to orientalise and exoticise themselves, thus commodifying their cultural identity. The very titles of these authors' books evoke their authors' homelands and their status as immigrants, suggesting to Russian readers the opportunity of discovering the peculiarities of the Eastern woman. At times, authors have a more 'marketable' title imposed upon them. In one of her interviews, Bibish recounts her disagreement with her publishers over exactly this issue. She claims that her original and preferred title 'Крик души' was changed to *Танцовщица из Хивы, или история простодушной* to include the geographical determinant 'Khiva' as part of a publicity move to suggest her work's exotic appeal.⁶⁹

Yet, regardless of their degree of assimilation, both Bibish's and Abgaryan's accounts expose the rampant racism that they had to face in Russia as migrant women from the 'East'. The aim of this chapter then is to consider how, in the context of the persistently Orientalist Russian literary market, Bibish and Abgaryan attempt to establish their careers as writers and to what extent they manage to make their 'subaltern' voices to be heard. The set of questions leading my analysis are pertinently echoed by a study of the trickster trope in American literature which asks:

⁶⁸ Among other literary achievements in Russia, Abgaryan was nominated for 'Большая Книга' award in 2011 and won the Alexander Grin prize 'за выдающийся вклад в развитие отечественной литературы'. Bibish won the award 'Книга года' and 'National Bestseller' for her first novel (*Танцовщица из Хивы*, 2004) and was nominated for 'Большая Книга' for her second novel (*Ток шоу для простодушной*, 2005).

⁶⁹ Призыв ТВ, 'Напротив': Бибиш Сиддикова, 6:00-6:57 <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IJ-73D22vP4>> [accessed 19 April 2018].

What are the possibilities and strategies for self-assertion, self-definition, and voice for the writer who is a person of color in a racist, imperial context? How does a writer occupying a liminal position – as does trickster – survive? How does one negotiate the power relations between group and individual desires? How especially does a woman do this? Perhaps most urgent, how is it possible even to conceptualize multiculturalism and the preservation of vital, self-empowering cultural differences (as opposed to museumification) within a political environment committed, at the least, to racial and ethnic discrimination?⁷⁰

Russophone Tricksterism

No matter how hostile or Orientalist the host environment in Russia might be, migrants, whether elite or not, are subjects holding the power of interpretation and agents capable of acting around the obstacles in their path.⁷¹ Similarly, while migrant writers face pressures of colluding with dominant cultures, they can also, to some extent, manipulate their literary voice to achieve success in the metropolis. In this respect the trickster discourse is especially illuminative.

In the context of postcolonial literature, tricksterism was first theorised by native American, Anishinaabe, mixblood writer and theorist Gerald Vizenor who developed a notion of ‘trickster discourse’, a means of cultural survival through the interpretation of, and resistant response to stereotypical representations.⁷² As part of the trickster discourse, master narratives, plots identities, stereotypes, the status quo, and all dominant norms can be subverted, deconstructed, appropriated, manipulated, ironised, or undermined, most often through humour. For example, Vizenor suggests that ‘Indianness’, with all its associated stereotypes⁷³

⁷⁰ *Tricksterism in Turn-of-the-Century American Literature: A Multicultural Perspective*, ed. by Elizabeth Ammons and Annette White-Parks (Hanover; London: University Press of New England, 1994), p. x.

⁷¹ Gatt and others, ‘Migration’, pp. 3-4.

⁷² Gerald Vizenor, ‘Trickster Discourse’, *American Indian Quarterly*, 14.3 (1990), 277-287.

⁷³ These include narrow interpretations of the connection between Native Americans and their land, their inferior positioning in relation to white people, the association of these people with unemployment, alcoholism, violent behaviour and so on.

is a colonial construct, a simulation.⁷⁴ One way of subverting this simulation is by fighting it with another simulation, thus appropriating it through humour and theatrical performances. This is what Vizenor calls employing the ‘simulations of survivance’ to overcome the ‘simulations of dominance’.⁷⁵

As Vizenor and others have shown, humour is a crucial component of Native North American creative artists’ counter-discursive strategies.⁷⁶ Of course, humour more generally ‘affords opportunity for realising that an accepted ordering of experience may be arbitrary and subjective’ and jokes have a ‘subversive effect on the dominant structure of ideas’.⁷⁷ A common literary device within tricksterish humorous tactics is ironic overidentification. For example, as Mark Shackleton observes, in Monique Mojica’s play *Princess Pocahontas and the Blue Spots* (1991), ‘misrepresentations of Indianness, particularly the Pocahontas archetype, the myth of successful assimilation, are deconstructed through comic excess. The overabundance of clichéd Hollywood and explorer/pioneer depictions of “Indianness” demonstrates their emptiness as representations’.⁷⁸ Unsurprisingly, tricksterism is a fitting model to consider in this context since, as William J. Hynes remarks, trickster metaplay deconstructs and subverts the logic of a dominant system from within, it ‘ruptures the shared consciousness, the societal ethos and consensual validation – in short, the very order of order itself’.⁷⁹

⁷⁴ Gerald Vizenor, *Manifest Manners: Narratives on Postindian Survivance* (Lincoln, Nebraska: University of Nebraska Press, 1999), p. 11.

⁷⁵ Vizenor, *Manifest Manners*, p. 12.

⁷⁶ For a particularly useful study see Ryan, Allan J., *The Trickster Shift: Humour and Irony in Contemporary Native Art* (Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press, 1999).

⁷⁷ Mary Douglas, ‘The Social Control of Cognition: Some Factors in Joke Perception’, *Man*, 3.3 (1968), 361-376 (p. 365, p. 364).

⁷⁸ Mark Shackleton, ‘Native North American Writing and Postcolonialism’, *Hungarian Journal of English and American Studies (HJEAS)*, 7.2 (2001), 69-84 (p. 79).

⁷⁹ *Mythical Trickster Figures: Contours, Contexts, and Criticisms*, ed. by William J. Hynes (Tuscaloosa and London: University of Alabama Press: 1993), p. 215.

Beyond Vizenor's work, several other scholars have been concerned with postcolonial tricksterism. In *Tricksterism in Turn-of-the-Century American Literature*, editors Elizabeth Ammons and Annette White-Parks express the following idea about trickster writers, one which is transposable to the case of Russophone migrant writers in Moscow:

Finding a style in which to write and get published required accommodating the monolithic, racist views of White America. For writers committed to their own people, it also required breaking through them. Such a transaction could only be handled covertly, or by finding strategies to negotiate with a dual audience From these circumstances ... 'tricksterism' emerged.⁸⁰

Focusing on the question of gender, Jeanne Rosier Smith has argued that 'a cross-cultural feminist theory' which she terms the 'trickster aesthetic' offers appealing strategies, in particular to women writers of colour (Maxine Hong Kingston, Toni Morrison and others), to challenge 'an ethnocentric as well as phallogocentric tradition', and examine mixed cultural heritage.⁸¹ Madina Tlostanova has similarly explored the concept of 'decolonial gender tricksterism' in the context of the Caucasus and Central Asia. She argues that (de)colonial gendered tricksters construct their identities around the local(national), Russo-Soviet, and global gender discourses, 'all of which invariably retain a simplified set of social roles for these subjects, based on a stereotypical interpretation of the non-West through assimilation or negation'.⁸²

The character of a trickster takes different forms in the mythologies, cultures, literatures and folk tales in various countries of the world, 'the clever Afro-American trickster is rarely

⁸⁰ Ammons and White-Parks, *Tricksterism*, p.16 (ellipses as in the original source).

⁸¹ Jeanne-Rosier Smith, *Writing Tricksters: Mythic Gambols in American Ethnic Literature* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997), p. 11.

⁸² Tlostanova, *Gender*, p. 187. Tlostanova's interesting idea is not developed to its full potential as she only focuses on a biography of a Soviet woman whose tricksterism remains unconvincing. She develops the idea more fully with illustrations from visual and textual art forms in 'Tricksters, Jesters, Qalandars' in *Postcolonialism and Postsocialism in Fiction and Art. Resistance and Re-existence* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017), pp. 129-157.

portrayed as the clumsy, self-defeating clown of some of the Indian tales'.⁸³ Followingly, the definition of a trickster, 'no matter how flexibly deployed or surprisingly redefined' is always attached to specific cultures, or to 'specific, identified group realities and traditions'.⁸⁴ Nonetheless, some of the most commonly shared attributes of a trickster include : a fundamentally ambiguous and anomalous personality, liminality, a drive towards survival, proneness to playing tricks/deceiving, shape-shifting, bricolage and upsetting the status-quo through humour. As Shackleton remarks, 'the appeal of tricksters to ethnic minorities is clear: they are figures of resistance as well as figures of cultural survival'.⁸⁵

The type of trickster that this essay is concerned with is a comic, seemingly foolish and faux-naïf trickster. Trickery is inextricably bound up with folly and often associated with mock foolery.⁸⁶ As Carl Jung has observed in his study of the trickster archetype, tricksters are related to 'fool figures like Stupid Hans or Hanswurst who, despite their folly, manage to achieve through their stupidity what others cannot through their intelligence'.⁸⁷ In terms of folklore, he adds, 'the trickster is said to be related to Carnival practices'.⁸⁸ These connections are not surprising since, as Enid Welsford remarks in her classic study on foolery, the Fool possesses a unique 'power of melting the solidity of the world'.⁸⁹ Thus fools, tricksters and clowns are all prone to subversion. Indeed, on his essay 'The Functions of the Rogue, Clown and Fool in the Novel' (1981), Bakhtin argues that the mask of the rogue, the clown and the fool:

⁸³ David M. Abrams and Brian Sutton-Smith, 'The Development of the Trickster in Children's Narrative', *The Journal of American Folklore*, 90.355 (1977), 29-47 (p. 30).

⁸⁴ Ammons and White-Parks, *Tricksterism*, p. xii.

⁸⁵ Shackleton, 'Native North', p. 71.

⁸⁶ As Ellis Davidson has argued focusing on such mythical figures as Loki (fool and trickster) and Amleth (riddler, pretended madman and trickster) in 'Loki and Saxo's Hamlet', in *The Fool and the Trickster: Studies in Honour of Enid Welsford*, ed. by Paul V. A. Williams (Cambridge and Ipswich: D. S. Brewer Ltd., 1979).

⁸⁷ Carl Jung, 'On the Psychology of the Trickster-Figure', in *Collected Works*, trans. by RFC Hull, 9.1, pp. 225-272, p. 255.

⁸⁸ Jung, 'On the Psychology', p. 262.

⁸⁹ Enid Welsford, *The Fool: His Social and Literary History* (London: Faber and Faber, 1935), p. 221.

grant the right not to understand, the right to confuse, to tease, to hyperbolize life; the right to parody others while talking, the right to not be taken literally, not to 'be oneself'; [...] the right to rip off the masks. [...] the right to betray to the public a personal life, down to its most private and prudent little secrets.⁹⁰

We will see that in their performances of trickster-fool models, both Bibish and Abgaryan display a tendency to hyperbolise and parody their own personae and, in Abgaryan's case, people around her. Echoing Vizenor's and other 'ethnic' writers' strategies of ironic over-identification, the authors deliberately hyperbolise their similarity with the Fool prototype and portray themselves as funny, kind, innocent and naïve, responding to the expectations of the Russian market, and the Russian cultural codes. And yet, their works equally convey important concerns behind their joviality and deconstruct the very Orientalist tropes that they seemingly support. Here lies the crux of the two authors' literary personae. If they suggest their collusion with Orientalist conceptions of their identity, they do so while adopting and appropriating the mask of a fool that leads the readers into a false belief that they are following the journey of a new Russian cultural hero. Like trickster fools, they merely appear jovial and simple in nature.

It is no coincidence that Bibish and Abgaryan opt for precisely these roles, since both fools and tricksters are embedded in Russian folklore and culture, and identification with them most easily moulds their personae into heroes familiar in the apparently alien, hegemonic cultural milieu to which they have relocated. The authors are so at home with this tradition that it can be considered part of their mixed cultural background.⁹¹ This adds an important twist to Russophone tricksterism: unlike Native American authors who, besides adopting strategies of over-identification, often draw from specifically ethnic folkloric myths, Abgaryan and Bibish are manipulating archetypes with which they were familiarised as part of their

⁹⁰ Mikhail Bakhtin, 'The Functions of the Rogue, Clown and Fool in the Novel', in *The Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays*, ed. by Michael Holquist, transl. by Caryl Emerson and Michael Holquist (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1981) p. 163.

⁹¹ As mentioned previously, Abgaryan is a specialist in Russian literature. As for Bibish, she is not only familiar with Russian literature, but as a child, she has also performed Russian trickster personae such as Baba Yaga in her drama classes, as I will discuss later.

Sovietisation/russification. As a result, they can only subvert stereotypes from within dominant discourses, which arguably limits the subversive potential of their literary styles, or, at any rate, makes it more difficult to recognise.

The tradition of the trickster in Russian culture can be traced back at least to the seventeenth century, and appears in the works of Pushkin, Gogol, Dostoevsky and many of their successors, as well as in Russian traditional and urban folklore through such characters as Ivan the Fool. Similarly, the Fool has been one of the staple characters of Russian literature for centuries. In a recent large-scale survey, Oliver Ready has shown how, from Dostoevsky to Venedikt Erofeev, ‘Russian prose abounds in authors of profound cultural influence who have placed the idiotic and the foolish’, and characters such as *durak* (fool), *idiot*, and *yurodivyi* (holy fool) lie ‘at the centre of their art and philosophy’.⁹² As Ready argues, the late Soviet, predominantly male, use of first-person comic narrative represents a case in which various masks of folly are worn by narrators to assert their detachment from societal norms and from the scholarly and ‘objective’ discourse which Soviet culture sought to promote.⁹³ One could add that the two interlinked archetypes, the fool and the trickster, often appear simultaneously in the Russian context. According to Mark Lipovetsky’s seminal study on Russian tricksterism, in the context of Russian culture, the trickster is often a comic character who denotes not only a ‘deceiver’ or ‘rogue’, but also ‘creative fool’.⁹⁴

Ivan the Fool, a stock character of Russian folk tales – the simple-minded third brother whom nobody values, yet who ends up completing the magic quest and marrying the princess,

⁹² Oliver Ready, *Persisting in Folly: Russian Writers in Search of Wisdom, 1963–2013* (Oxford: Peter Lang, 2017), p. 1.

⁹³ Ready, *Persisting in Folly*, pp. 4–5. Ready devotes special attention to Erofeev’s *Москва-Пемушки* (1973) and Yuz Aleshkovsky’s *Николай Николаевич* (1970).

⁹⁴ Mark Lipovetsky, *Charms of the Cynical Reason: Tricksters in Soviet and Post-Soviet Culture* (Brighton, MA: Academic Studies Press, 2011), p. 11. Lipovetsky attributes the immense popularity of the trickster in Soviet Russia to ‘the cultural need to provide symbolic justification to the practices of the “shadow” economy and sociality—or, in a broader sense, to the mechanism of cynical survival and deception that existed behind the ideologically approved simulacra of the state-run economy and “classless” society’ (p. 17).

and so on – represents the quintessential example of a character that combines the qualities of naivety and foolery. It is this archetype that Bibish's and Abgaryan's literary personae echo most closely. Ivan the Fool appears in stories as a positive, naïve, kind, lucky, likeable, seemingly simple-minded, and daring hero whose kindness, simplicity, lack of guile and willingness to help others turn out to help him in his adventures and ultimately reward him. His older brothers are usually envious of and spiteful towards him. Often, the moral of his stories is that Ivan the Fool is rarely the fool, he is merely perceived as such by others owing to his simple nature and joviality.⁹⁵ One immediately thinks here of Lev Tolstoy's Ivan who, despite his reputation as a fool, turns out a wise hero who defeats the Devil and becomes a ruler.⁹⁶

Ivan the Fool's potential for tricksterism is most notably teased out by Yevgeny Yevtushenko in his poem *Ивановские Ситцы* (1976).⁹⁷ Assuming the role of an epic storyteller, Yevtushenko dramatically reconstructs Russian history, charting the reigns of Ivan the Terrible, Peter the Great, and Tsar Nicholas II, and centring on the founding in 1905 of one of the earliest soviets at the Ivanovo-Voznesensk textile centre. The poem is set against a background of the Russian folk epos, with its traditional character of Ivan the Fool, who symbolises the growing popular consciousness. The poem's underlying subject is the tension between the two Ivans – the autocrat Ivan the terrible and Ivan the Fool who is the embodiment of a 'limitless, rebellious, gentle, tender Russian soul',⁹⁸ of the conscience of the working class, and of the great Russian nation (великий государь-народ).⁹⁹ Yevtushenko's Ivan is a simple

⁹⁵ Andrey Sinyavsky, *Ivan the Fool: Russian Folk Belief. A Cultural History*, trans. by Joanne Turnbull and Nikolai Formozov (Moscow: Glas, 2007), pp. 46-49.

⁹⁶ Lev Tolstoy, 'Сказка об Иване-дураке и его двух братьях: Семене-воине и Тарасе-брюхане, и немой сестре Маланье, и о старом дьяволе и трех чертенятах', *Polnoe sobranie sochinenii*, Volume 10 (Moscow: Художественная литература, 1982), pp. 317-341.

⁹⁷ Yevgeny Yevtushenko, *Ивановские Ситцы* (1976) in *Окно выходит в белые деревья...* [collected works] (Moscow: Прогресс-Плеяда, 2007), pp. 274 - 315.

⁹⁸ Yevtushenko, *Ивановские*, verses 808-810 ('безбрежная, мятежная, России нежная душа').

⁹⁹ *Ibid.*, verse 836.

Russian worker or peasant who is abused by the autocracy and has to defeat the system by pretending to be the Fool. He is ‘canny – you’ll never buy him with lying tales’.¹⁰⁰ His eyes are ‘sly and lively, full of fun’.¹⁰¹ In order to fool the ruler, Ivan chooses to hide his intelligence:

Дураком быть не сумею. Дураком я притворюсь.
Ум не просится в огласку. Чтоб не влипнуть мне впросак
я создам такую сказку, где герой — Иван-дурак.
Но придурку с бубном, с пляской ты меня не уподобь.¹⁰²

If the Fool can be considered folktale’s ‘most popular and most colourful’¹⁰³ hero, Ivan the Fool holds an even more particular place in Russian culture which especially values the Fool’s qualities of near-divine simplicity.¹⁰⁴ Yevtushenko’s poem perfectly captures Ivan’s connection with the meek, humble and suffering Russian *narod*. Ivan is strong, as he claims: ‘Nothing’s going to get me down – I come of peasant stock’.¹⁰⁵ Suffering does not weaken, but rather empowers Ivan, his ‘orphaned’ back grows ‘wiser’ from the beatings.¹⁰⁶

In this regard, the persona of a fool certainly helps migrant writers to embody, but in a highly idiosyncratic way, the cultural phenomenon that Beumers refers to as Russia’s new ‘hero of our time’, a *gastarbeiter* who fulfils the traditional Russian role of a victim asserting moral superiority through suffering. Beumers argues that within this phenomenon, ‘what has changed are the attributes of Russian identity; what has remained is the value of suffering,

¹⁰⁰ Ibid., verses 786-789 (‘Иван-дурак умен, да так, что не купить его враньем’).

¹⁰¹ Ibid., verse 2.

¹⁰² Ibid., verses 35-39.

¹⁰³ Sinyavsky, *Ivan*, p. 36.

¹⁰⁴ Sinyavsky suggests that Ivanushko’s relation to the sacred is apparent in one particular story where he saves a beautiful girl from a fire. The girl turns into a snake and becomes the Fool’s magic helper and beloved wife. His apparent idiocy thus turns out as an indispensable condition of happiness – the ‘condition for the coming of divine or magic powers’ through the snake (*Ivan*, p. 36)

¹⁰⁵ Yevtushenko, *Ивановские*, verses 55-56 (‘Я от хворостей не слягу —я крестьянского ребра’).

¹⁰⁶ Ibid., verses 19-20.

meeekness and passivity that has been inherent in Russian and Soviet culture'.¹⁰⁷ Beumers summaries the attributes of a morally superior hero pervasive in Russian culture as follows:

In confrontations with the Other, or an enemy (as we can see in war/cold war films), the Russian character is often ill-equipped and makes the best of what he has, but achieves his aims triumphantly through determination and moral superiority. In other words: his heroism is defined by an ability to sustain suffering, with all the cultural and philosophical links to kenoticism and the Orthodox faith that follow.¹⁰⁸

Indeed, Soviet satirist Mikhail Mishin has suggested that Russian recognize themselves in the famous fairy-tale character Ivan the Fool.¹⁰⁹ Svetlana Boym has explained Ivan's appeal by the fact that while he undertakes major heroic tasks, he has no idea how to survive *byt* [everyday life], or 'Russia's cultural monster'.¹¹⁰ As Oliver Ready points out, post-Soviet authors have often been drawn to precisely this model of the folk fool because he represents 'the antithesis of the Soviet idea of the active hero'.¹¹¹ Zara Abdullaeva has further elaborated this opposition, suggesting that Ivan-the-Fool became a new underground culture hero of the Soviet period: 'the innocent jokester sentenced to correctional labor is Ivan-the-Fool who has worked his way up through endless ordeals to become a hero, even if only posthumously'.¹¹² As such, the Fool resonates with the identities of emigre authors who present themselves as passive heroes in their everyday struggles as immigrants, but retrospectively turn into active heroes through their literary tricksterism.

Another related quality that links tricksterism and foolery with Bibish's and Abgaryan's personae as seeming 'new heroes' of Russia is faux-naivete. As Kelly Cresap points out,

¹⁰⁷ Beumers, 'A "Hero"', p. 176.

¹⁰⁸ Ibid., p. 162.

¹⁰⁹ Mikhail Mishin quoted in Svetlana Boym, 'Soviet Everyday Culture: An Oxymoron?', in *Russian Culture at the Crossroads*, ed. by Dmitry N. Shalin (Colorado: Westview Press, 1996), pp. 157-184, p. 157. The precise reference to Mishin's work is absent from Boym's study.

¹¹⁰ Boym, 'Soviet Everyday', p. 157.

¹¹¹ Oliver Ready, *From Aleshkovsky to Galkovsky: The Praise of Folly in Russian Prose since the 1960s* (unpublished doctoral thesis, University of Oxford, 2006), p. 19.

¹¹² Zara Abdullaeva, 'Popular Culture', in *Russian Culture*, pp. 209-238, p. 224.

literally naifs have historically served the function of ‘unwittingly revealing the injustices of a system devised and perpetuated by those who embody the very qualities the naif lacks – urbane sophistication, adult maturity, normal cognitive development’.¹¹³ As Cresap adds:

The naif’s best ammunition against the system in which she or he is pitched is the sheer ability not to understand it. Thus William Blake’s hapless chimney sweeps argue eloquently (in spite of their speech impediments) against child labor laws, and Harriet Beecher Stowe’s Little Eva propounds her case against the institution of slavery.¹¹⁴

Many of these qualities are shared by Bibish’s and Abgaryan’s personae, with an added dimension of their playful tricksterism that is more characteristic of such versions of a fool as Yevtushenko’s, or Lev Tolstoy’s Ivan. It is this tricksterism that allows Bibish and Abgaryan not merely to assume the mask of a folktale fool that suggests their common cultural heritage with Russian readers, but rather to appropriate this persona through ironic self-identification, and thus ‘to conceptualize multiculturalism and the preservation of vital, self-empowering cultural differences’¹¹⁵ within a political environment committed to ethnic discrimination.

Bibish’s *Танцовщица из Хивы, или история простодушной* (2004)

Bibish [real name Hadjarbibi Siddikova] (born in 1965 in Khiva, Uzbekistan) is an Uzbek writer holding Russian citizenship. She grew up in a small village in Uzbekistan and moved to Turkmenistan after her marriage. In the late 1990s, she and her family – her husband and her two sons – emigrated to Moscow, where she published her first autobiographical novel *Танцовщица из Хивы, или история простодушной* (2004). In the novel, Bibish recounts her

¹¹³ Kelly M. Cresap, *Pop Trickster Fool. Warhol Performs Naivete* (Champaign, IL: University of Illinois Press, 2004), p. 45.

¹¹⁴ Cresap, *Pop Trickster*, p. 45.

¹¹⁵ Ammons and White-Parks, *Tricksterism*, p. x.

experiences growing up in a patriarchal and religious hamlet in Uzbekistan, her survival from two brutal gang rapes, one at the age of eight and one in her teenage years, her marriage and emigration, and the challenges she faces in Russia – housing problems, her husband’s drinking and gambling, and racism. Her second novel, *Токишоу для простодушной* (2005), a sequel to her autobiography, recounts Bibish’s experience in the Russian media after the spectacular success of her debut novel.

Bibish’s experience of integrating in Russia differs significantly from that of the Armenian author Abgaryan due to two main factors – the colour of her skin, and her broken Russian. While Russians generally accept Ukrainians and Moldovans as their potential neighbours, they, as well as all large ethnic groups populating Russia, are more hostile to immigrants from the Caucasus and Central Asia.¹¹⁶ Within the disadvantaged groups themselves, Armenians are more integrated in Russia than Central Asians.¹¹⁷ Madina Tlostanova argues that Central Asians are ‘universally seen in modern-day Russia as dirt poor, and are placed lowest on the scale of humanity’ to the point that their gender markers are erased’.¹¹⁸ ‘The so-called illegal women migrants’, Tlostanova adds, ‘have a status akin to that of the African-American slaves: these women are seen as biologically female, yet culturally and socially subhuman’.¹¹⁹ When Bibish’s protagonist arrives in Moscow, her hair immediately turns her into an exotic attraction, setting the scene for acts of racism that Bibish’s protagonist encounters throughout the course of the novel.¹²⁰

As a creative artist from the Central Asian ‘periphery’, Bibish faces the additional task of dealing with inherited Soviet perceptions of her culture as backwards and primitive. Again,

¹¹⁶ Bessudnov, ‘Ethnic’, p. 567.

¹¹⁷ Jeff Sahadeo points out the ‘high levels of Armenian integration into Moscow’. See Jeff Sahadeo, ‘*Druzhba Narodov* or second-class citizenship? Soviet Asian migrants in a post-colonial world’, *Central Asian Survey*, 26.4-5 (2007) 559-579 (p. 570).

¹¹⁸ Tlostanova, ‘Postcolonial’, p. 41.

¹¹⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 41.

¹²⁰ Bibish, *Танцовщица*, p. 59.

Abgaryan more easily escapes this pressure due to the prestige accorded to Armenian literature in the Soviet era.¹²¹ As the Soviet-era celebration of ‘natsional’nye’ [ethnic] cultures from the ‘periphery’ is revived within the post-colonial marketplace of the early twenty-first century, old Orientalist prejudices have resurfaced.

This may seem a surprising contention, given that Bibish’s work has had enormous success internationally: translations have been published in Great Britain, Italy, Poland, Japan, USA, Canada, Bulgaria, Thailand, as well as in Braille format. *Newsweek* named the work ‘book of the year’ and situated it alongside Dan Brown’s *The Da Vinci Code* and Victor Pelevin’s *DPP*.¹²² But in Russia, notice from the literary establishment has been rather ambiguous. The sole literary prize awarded to Bibish was ‘National Bestseller’, a recognition of popular success rather than literary merit. In similar vein, the Russian media has branded Bibish a ‘literary Cinderella’ and capitalised on her cultural background and rich life story. A quick scan of the titles of articles dedicated to her reveals the sensationalising and exoticising tendencies surrounding her person. These include: ‘Гастарбайтерша Бибиш: от предсмертной записки до бестселлера’¹²³, ‘Исповедь «чурки»’¹²⁴, ‘Бибиш – свободная женщина востока’¹²⁵, ‘Безграмотная узбечка из глухого кишлака’¹²⁶ and others.

Bibish received similar treatment on various popular Russian TV shows, an experience which she recounts in her second book. One example is Bibish’s guest appearance in a cooking

¹²¹ These differences in perceptions were discussed in Chapter One.

¹²² Petelin German, ‘Гастарбайтерша Бибиш: от предсмертной записки до бестселлера’, 2 June 2011 <<https://sobesednik.ru/kultura-i-tv/gastarbaitersha-bibish-ot-predsmertnoi-zapiski-do-bestsellera>> [accessed 13 April 2018]

¹²³ German, ‘Гастарбайтерша’.

¹²⁴ Natalya Radulova, ‘Исповедь «чурки»’, *Огонёк*, 22.4998, 3 June 2007 <<https://www.kommersant.ru/doc/2298992>> [accessed 3 September 2019]

¹²⁵ Tatyana Lapatina, ‘Бибиш — свободная женщина Востока’, *Призыв*, 10 June 2004 <<https://www.prizyv.ru/2004/06/bibish-svobodnaya-zhenshhina-vostoka/>> [accessed 3 September 2019]

¹²⁶ Galina Yuzefovich, ‘Бибиш «Ток-Шоу для простодушной»’, *Psychologies* <<http://www.psychologies.ru/archive/bibish-tok-shou-dlya-prostodushnoy/>> [accessed 13 April 2018].

show ‘На кухне у Отари’ (2011). At one point during the interview, melodramatic music swells up and the host begins to nudge Bibish towards recounting her tragic experiences. He tells Bibish that before meeting her, he believed her story to have been a fake, a story made up by publishers (a common allegation levelled against Bibish), and that he was shocked to discover that it was in fact originally meant to be a suicide note. Bibish sighs, exposing her discomfort when talking about the sensational subject of her suicide, and then interrupts the host, requesting if she can add something:

Дело в том, что у меня не я одна писательница, у меня брат поэт песенник и пять книг вышло, в Узбекистане он очень известный человек. Отец филолог у меня, его отец был репрессирован в Сталинские времена, тоже книгу написал. Его отец, прапрадед был секретарем и писарем Хивинского хана. [...] Так что хотела сказать, что я не дочка тракториста, чтобы меня откуда-то из глубины деревни вытаскивали и из меня делали какой-то коммерческий проект.¹²⁷

By stressing the fact that she comes from a long line of successful Uzbek intellectuals, Bibish is rejecting the label of a provincial Cinderella, a savage who found success in the metropole. She also explicitly rejects association with Soviet-era ‘civilisation of the wilderness’ narratives such as the legendary Stakhanovite cotton-picking heroine Mamlakat Nakhangova (1924-2003) from a Tajik village who became a central figure in Stalinist propaganda after she met the leader in December 1935.¹²⁸ Bibish’s vexation at being symbolically reincarnated as a new model of such a hero suggests the prevalence of the legacies of Soviet multinational policies. Bibish shows resistance to being belittled or commodified as well as a desire to reclaim her own agency, not to speak of radically confronting the obliteration of her home territory from maps of post-Soviet civilised space. After all, her lack of fluency in

¹²⁷ Otar Mujirishvili, Interview with Bibish, Призыв ТВ, ‘На Кухне у Отари’, в Гостях Бибиш Сиддикова, December 8, 2011, 11:14-12:29 <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YwvNhXLkRrI>> [accessed 13 April 2018] (emphasis added).

¹²⁸ I would like to thank Catriona Kelly for pointing out this parallel.

Russian notwithstanding, Bibish emigrated to Moscow with one degree already under her belt and managed to complete a second degree in medicine in her host country.

While Bibish found an expressive voice in her autobiographical story, she also drew detractors. Some members of the Union of Writers (like journalists) saw Bibish's work as a fabrication made up by her publisher,¹²⁹ others demanded that her book be taken out of circulation, arguing that Bibish's lack of fluency in Russian was an insult to great Russian literature.¹³⁰ Looking back on criticisms targeted at her, Bibish argues that her Russian language skills do not define the level of her intelligence: 'писали, что неграмотная. А у меня высшее образование было. Я Ташкентский государственный институт культуры закончила. Но если я владею чужим языком плохо, то это не значит, что я плохо мыслю'.¹³¹ Her comment once again suggests Bibish's resistance to being labelled a primitive émigrée.

In her autobiographies, Bibish subverts Orientalist labels by appropriating them through trickster-foolery. The mask of a performer, rogue and a clown acquires a particularly special element of transgression for the female trickster persona of Bibish due to the author's experience of growing up in a society that considered dancing and singing, i.e. performance, as 'shameful' activities for women.¹³² Because Bibish's stance is defiant or subversive within her own culture, she is able to shift and turn her apparent 'foolishness' into subversion in Russian culture also. As an independent spirited young girl who loves to express herself in public, most notably through dancing and acting, Bibish becomes a true outcast in her conservative, patriarchal hamlet in Uzbekistan. At home, she is 'совсем чужая' as she cannot tolerate the stifling rules of her family, unlike her obedient younger sister who suffers in silence

¹²⁹ See for instance a public speech against Bibish by a member of the Union of Writers Svetlana Baranova, September 23, 2014 <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=84EEFEyiKgQ>> [accessed January 2018]

¹³⁰ Radulova, 'Исповедь «чурки»'.

¹³¹ German, 'Гастарбайтерша'.

¹³² Bibish, *Танцовщица*, p. 41, p. 91.

and eventually commits suicide.¹³³ When Bibish defies societal norms by appearing on TV, first as part of a dance concert, and then as an extra in a film, she automatically acquires the tag of a ‘clown’. Upon seeing Bibish, people in the streets begin to shout, ‘Вот идет артистка! Какое бесстыдство, ты опозорила всех нас! В нашем селе еще не было клоунов, ты первая!’.¹³⁴ People in town gossip that Bibish is not a virgin, that she dares to dance. Neighbours forbid their daughters to befriend her. Male relatives invade her house to cause scenes about her.¹³⁵ Bibish is even deemed a deranged person who needs to be cured and put back into order, and her family takes her to a tomb known for curing mentally ill people.¹³⁶ And yet, despite her traumas (surviving two brutal gang rapes) and her recurring suicidal states, Bibish persists in her rebellion, ‘я, несмотря ни на что, продолжала жить так, как считала нужным’.¹³⁷

The very act of writing, which is itself also a type of performance, thus turns into an act of double rebellion on the part of the author as she appropriates the derogatory title of a clown and employs it to her advantage by moulding her fictional persona. Interestingly, in her second book, Bibish reveals that as a child, she used to adore her drama class where she played numerous roles, including the role of Baba-Yaga (one of the few Russian female tricksters),¹³⁸ and vicariously experienced the lives of her characters.¹³⁹ Her grandmother often told her

¹³³ Bibish, *Ток шоу*, p. 201.

¹³⁴ Ibid., p. 42.

¹³⁵ Ibid., p. 119.

¹³⁶ Bibish, *Танцовщица*, p. 44.

¹³⁷ Ibid., p. 42.

¹³⁸ According to Mark Lipovetsky, ‘the necessary presence of transgression in the trickster’s behavior can explain why there are so few female characters in the gallery of Soviet tricksters [...]. Since the trickster must remain attractive despite being a transgressor, the patriarchal nature of Soviet culture makes itself known in a moral double standard: the same transgressions that guarantee the appeal of a male trickster render impossible the positive reception of a woman-trickster who, if she appears at all, acquires a negative tint—Baba Yaga, as a rule played by a man [...], the fox Alisa from Aleksei Tolstoy’s *Zolotoi kliuchik*, or old Shapokliak from Roman Kachanov’s *Cherburashka* cartoon series’. Lipovetsky, *Charms*, pp.31-32. Among female tricksters of post-Soviet culture, one might identify Victor Pelevin’s А Хули (А Khuli), a fox-werewolf shapeshifter, in *Священная книга оборотня* (2004).

¹³⁹ Bibish, *Ток шоу*, p. 94.

stories and legends.¹⁴⁰ She loved fairy tales to such an extent that she dreamed of becoming a heroine of a story of her own.¹⁴¹ It therefore seems even more plausible that Bibish would deploy her artistic skills towards performing her literary persona.

Indeed, the title of Bibish's second book, *Ток шоу для простодушной*, suggests that Bibish is both playing up to her image as a sensational click-bait for the media, and ironically re-appropriating the limelight on her own terms, in her own 'show'. Within her performance, she appears as a new Russophone, or *gastarbeiter*, version of the Russian hero. It is significant in this regard that, at one point, Bibish explicitly identifies with a popular character from Soviet cinema. Bibish recounts her failed attempts at fulfilling her dream of appearing on Russian TV. Reflecting on her rejections, the author compares herself to the protagonist of *Приходите завтра* (1963), Frosya Burlakova, a girl from the Russian countryside who attempts to win an audition with the dean of a Moscow university. By making allusions to characters that would be familiar to Russian readers, Bibish suggests her common cultural code with Russians, and thus her suitability as a new Russian hero.

On a certain level, Bibish requires no effort in suggesting the similarities of her persona with a simple, innocent, happy-go-lucky fool. Though falling victim to life's injustices and racist detractors, she remains kind, and is ultimately rewarded with success, akin to the Fool. As Sinyavsky points out, '[e]veryone despises the Fool, everyone laughs at him, even thrashes him. In his own family, he is an outcast', and yet he succeeds against all odds.¹⁴² On the other hand, the fool sometimes plays the part of a conjurer, performing tricks of a sort to amuse and divert the crowd, and thus bringing to the folktale a playfulness that belongs to the

¹⁴⁰ Ibid., p. 101.

¹⁴¹ Ibid., p. 95.

¹⁴² Sinyavsky, *Ivan*, p. 36.

entertainment genre.¹⁴³ This is where the performative aspects of Bibish's persona are most evident. Her book is peppered with anecdotes that are self-depreciating for comic effect.

In her comic anecdotes, Bibish presents herself as a silly, clumsy country-bumpkin and usually directly addresses the reader - 'смешно, правда?'. For instance, she recounts how once, when looking for a friend in a hospital she misreads the sign 'траурный зал' as 'тротуарный' and has an unexpected encounter with dead bodies.¹⁴⁴ She faints and wakes up in a hospital wing where the nurse tells her off for being 'глупышка безграмотная'.¹⁴⁵ Similarly, the narrator describes how, upon her emigration to Moscow, little differences, such as buying her bus ticket in a ticket machine throw her off, or when, fascinated by such novelties as cash machines, she self-belittlingly comments: '[д]олго играла, интересно же для такого первобытного человека, как я!'.¹⁴⁶ In another example, Bibish recounts how she falls victims to pranks in Russia. In one particularly embarrassing and obscene prank, Bibish is misled into thinking that a lecturer is someone who checks the students' sex. Naïvely following the pranksters' instructions, she lies down on the lecture hall table, naked waist-down, her legs wide apart, awaiting to be examined by the lecturer!¹⁴⁷

The very subtitle of Bibish's book informs the readers that what they behold is 'a story of a simple soul' (история простодушной). Throughout the books, Bibish alludes to the subtitle through calling herself such epithets as a silly five year-old girl, a dummy [дундук], 'дурочка' and others.¹⁴⁸ All these self-belittling epithets would evoke to the Russian readers the childish, ridiculous, foolish, ambiguously meek or holy-foolish characters, such as Dostoevsky's Myshkin, Sonya, Alyosha and others, further reinforcing Bibish's connection to

¹⁴³ Ibid., p. 45.

¹⁴⁴ Bibish, *Ток шоу*, p. 20.

¹⁴⁵ Ibid., p. 21.

¹⁴⁶ Bibish, *Танцовщица*, p. 62.

¹⁴⁷ Ibid., p. 72.

¹⁴⁸ Bibish, *Ток шоу*, p. 45; p. 47; p. 139.

Russian heroes.¹⁴⁹

In her interviews too, Bibish has strategically over-identified with denigrating and racist stereotypes directed at Central Asian immigrants in Russia through such as claims as ‘как я, чурка, стала такой знаменитой, не понимаю’,¹⁵⁰ or ‘Я, чёрная женщина, из Чукчастана, прямо меня зарегистрировали [на работу], вот обалдеть.’¹⁵¹ In those instances, one is never sure whether Bibish is being ironic, sarcastic, or plainly self-deprecating. Her approach echoes a peculiar type of late socialist humour based on the aesthetics of the absurd, or *stiob*, most notably examined by Alexei Yurchak. Differing from sarcasm or derision, *stiob* involved ironic overidentification with the ideological symbols or dominant discourses that were being exposed within *stiob*'s performative discourse, ‘often to the point that it was almost impossible to tell whether the symbols were supported or subverted by subtle ridicule’.¹⁵² As Slavoj Žižek has argued, over-identification with the system, rather than its ironic imitation, frustrates it by bringing to light its ‘obscene superego underside’, thus suspending its efficiency.¹⁵³ By invoking the aesthetics of *stiob* Bibish is also subverting the logic of the Russian Orientalist discourse in her interviews. In her fiction, however, Bibish’s espousal of *stiob* breaks the mould of her tricksterism, as the features of *stiob* go beyond privileging one exclusive mode of ironisation, in this case, mere over-identification.

As part of her clownish foolery, Bibish appears to be ‘betray[ing] to the public a personal life, down to its most private and prudent little secrets’,¹⁵⁴ especially in her first book. But she

¹⁴⁹ Colonel Rostanev in Dostoevsky’s ‘Село Степанчиково и его обитатели’ (1859) is comparable to Ivan the Fool, and, by extension, Bibish’s persona. The eponymous hero in Dostoevsky’s ‘Ползунков’ (1848) also resembles Bibish in his proneness to self-belittlement and self-ridicule.

¹⁵⁰ Radulova, ‘Исповедь «чурки»’.

¹⁵¹ Bibish, interview, ‘Главный Герой’, НТВ, 2009, 3:10-3:18

<<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DaAGfWTkCK8&t=55s>> [accessed 2 September, 2019].

¹⁵² Alexei Yurchak, ‘Gagarin and the Rave Kids: Transforming Power, Identity, and Aesthetics in the Post-Soviet Night Life’, in *Consuming Russia: Popular Culture, Sex, and Society Since Gorbachev*, ed. by Adele Barker (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1999), pp.76-109 (p.84).

¹⁵³ Slavoj Žižek, ‘Why are Laibach and NSK Not Fascists?’, in *The Universal Exception: Selected Writings, Volume Two* (London: Continuum, [1993] 2006), pp. 63-66.

¹⁵⁴ Bakhtin, ‘The Functions’, p. 163.

also appears to be making a conscious choice ‘to confuse, to tease, to hyperbolise’.¹⁵⁵ In her second biographical novel, Bibish teases the readers, suggesting that they might have been misled into a false sense of security in terms of her persona, which they think they can grasp, but which eludes them: ‘И вы не думайте, что я открыла вам все свои тайны. Нет, мои дорогие’.¹⁵⁶ Her playful persona often directly addresses the reader to emphasise that we may never see the real face behind the mask of a seemingly naïve, and sometimes even racially primitive, hero. The readers thus begin to wonder whether the striking frankness of her first autobiographical account is merely an illusion formed by an unreliable narrator. In the second book, Bibish also reveals details of her life that were misconstrued, or hidden in the first part, most notably the episode where her husband left her for another woman for ten years. This element of professed unreliability acquires a special significance for Bibish’s trickster persona as it directly touches upon its foundational facet – a seeming naivety characteristic of such heroes as Ivan the Fool.

Indeed, when Bibish’s mask of a happy-go-luck Ivan slips, the narrator becomes a subversive, rebellious character similar to Yevtushenko’s trickster Ivan. In these moments, Bibish shakes the readers from the illusion of a common cultural code and suggests her texts’ postcolonial dynamics. After all, as Yevtushenko’s Ivan warns, without political subtext, his performance would be no more than mere clownery:

Это тяжело - притворятся мужичком да простачком,
и опасно придуряться: вдруг да станешь дурачком,
но зато потом заставишь горько каяться в веках
всех, кого ты сам обставишь и оставишь в дураках...¹⁵⁷

¹⁵⁵ Ibid., p. 163.

¹⁵⁶ Bibish, *Ток шоу*, p. 181.

¹⁵⁷ Yevtushenko, *Ивановские*, verses 56-60.

To some extent, it can be said that Bibish challenges the authorities, and the State, as Yevtushenko's Ivan does. Most notably, she emphasises that she has personally suffered from Soviet exploitation. Bibish exposes the destructive effects of the communist system on Uzbek people, and women in particular, as part of the forced monoculture across Soviet Central Asia, in a chapter dedicated to cotton farming. The author recounts how she and her mother worked long hours in extreme conditions under bullying supervisors in reward of dismal or no payment in order to fulfil the unrealistically high demands of agricultural plans set by Moscow. Ironically, Bibish compares agricultural work under collectivisation to serfdom, implying that the exploitation under the tsarist regime persisted in the guise of the civilising rhetoric under the communists:

В брежневские времена в Узбекистане был свой план – пять миллионов тон! Попробуй выполни!

За сбор хлопка платили копейки или вообще не платили. Наш труд совсем не ценился. Но план всегда требовали . [...] все молча работали. Как при крепостном праве! [...]

Иногда до начала декабря задерживали нас на хлопке. Поля уже пустые, а уйти нам не разрешали, пока 'сверху' приказ не поступит. А потом узнала я, что уже в России на больших складах этот хлопок гнил. Наш адский труд пропадал. Тогда кому это было нужно? Чтобы начальники Узбекистана могли отрапортовать начальникам в Москве, так, что ли?¹⁵⁸

While offering frank accounts of her difficult experiences, Bibish's literary persona eschews any type of self-victimisation whether in relation to the Soviet, post-Soviet or indeed her local ('national') systems. In maintaining her integrity, she resists joining the cultural establishment that propagates stereotypes of the oppressed migrant. The persona of a trickster, quintessentially liminal by nature, becomes especially useful in this regard as it emphasises Bibish's refusal to label her national belonging in clear terms within the schema of the Russian coloniser/ Central Asian colonised, or the local male oppressor/ local female oppressed binary.

¹⁵⁸ Bibish, *Танцовщица*, p. 51.

Bibish stresses the fact that her cultural belonging is steeped in liminality and ambivalence. Despite her challenges in Russia, Bibish, who now lives in Turkey, claims that she will always remain faithful to her Russian friends and remain a Russian citizen until her death, ‘это дело принципа’.¹⁵⁹ Her friend, Russian journalist Irina Dubyneva, has even suggested her supranational identity: ‘Она мне все время говорит, я не люблю узбеков, я не хочу быть узбечкой, я не узбечка, я, говорит, вот в душе русская. ... Вообще мне кажется она живет вне всяких религий, вне всяких условностей, вне всяких национальностей’.¹⁶⁰ And yet, Bibish’s autobiographical account does manifest her pride in her nation. She notes all the famous people from her province, and the fact that the only medal that Lenin ever received in his life was given to him by her compatriots in Khiva.¹⁶¹

Bibish resists paying lip-service to Orientalist stereotypes of her country and associating Uzbekistan simply with repressive sexual mores and Russia with a liberating narrative. Her summary of her life in Uzbekistan, ‘в одном очень религиозном местечке со своими беспощадными, суровыми законами, обычаями, дурными и чудными взглядами на жизнь’, shows both resentment and admiration of the Eastern, Khivan way of life, both wondrous and oppressive.¹⁶² Certainly, once in Moscow, Bibish finds partial personal fulfilment as a woman. She realises her dream of dancing without being policed, even if the location is a club which underpays her and commodifies her culture. If before, she felt that her life was being wasted, that she lived ‘мимо жизни’,¹⁶³ in Russia she can finally become

¹⁵⁹ Boris Voitsekhovskiy, “‘Мой Прадед Был Писарем Хивинского Хана!’”, *МОСЛЕНТА*, 14 March, 2018 <<https://moslenta.ru/city/moi-praded-by1-pisarem-khivinskogo-khana.htm>> [accessed 15 April 2018].

¹⁶⁰ Yevgeny Blagodaryashev, programme on Bibish, ‘На языке сердца: Бибиш. Лекарство от ксенофобии’, 1:39-2:01 <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rUpvJJiO_Ao> [accessed 5 September 2019]

¹⁶¹ Bibish, *Танцовщица*, p. 8; Bibish, *Ток шоу для простодушной* (Saint-Petersburg: Azbuka-Klassika, 2005), p.60.

¹⁶² Bibish, *Танцовщица*, p. 7.

¹⁶³ Abgaryan, *Понаехавшая.*, p. 91.

independent – not just sexually, but in terms of enjoying cultural activities such as dance and cinema:

я раньше подчинялась братьям, родственникам, которые запрещали мне танцевать, петь, встречаться с парнями, ходить в кино У меня раньше своей жизни не было. Братья все время указывали, что надо делать, а что не надо. Они страшно боялись сплетен. А я была просто девочкой, которая очень хотела танцевать. И никто меня не понимал.¹⁶⁴

And yet, Bibish's account of her rebellious youth emphasises the fact she is an agent of her own fate and is not awaiting liberation by others. Not much changes in terms of gender hierarchy in Bibish's domestic sphere after her emigration. In this respect, it is significant that the author includes a life story of her mother-in-law in her own autobiography. In many ways, the mother-in-law fits the stereotype of a downtrodden, submissive Eastern woman. When she tells Bibish her life story, she recalls her visit to a sanatorium in Sochi where she is diagnosed with breast cancer. The doctor who examines her is not surprised by the bad state of her health, explaining that 'только из Средней Азии едут такие запущенные женщины'.¹⁶⁵ After her illness, her husband begins cheating on her, but she continues placing herself in the background and calmly tolerates her husband's infidelities. After hearing her mother-in-law's story, and presumably finding parallels with her own biography, Bibish muses 'сколько же приходится женщинам терпеть!'.¹⁶⁶ What is important here is that Bibish's comment generalises her mother-in-law's troubles into the global fate of women more generally, not limiting oppression to the 'Orient'.

Similarly, when a female relative comes to Bibish to complain about her husband's violence, she is outraged when she is not met with the degree of sympathy that she expected from a supposedly downtrodden Oriental woman such as Bibish. When Bibish explains that she too is beaten, but that she tolerates her husband's behaviour, the relative scolds her: '—

¹⁶⁴ Bibish. *Танцовщица*, p. 90.

¹⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 133.

¹⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 137.

Как это можно терпеть! Только этого не хватало! Это у вас на Востоке терпят, а здесь Россия!'.¹⁶⁷ To her exclamation, Bibish calmly replies that a father figure is irreplaceable – 'я не могу из-за какой-то ругани развестись и детей сиротами сделать. Детям отец нужен. Родного отца никто не может заменить'.¹⁶⁸ She again distances herself from the East/West binary and rationalises her conscious choice as a product of pragmatism, rather than inherent weakness in the face of male oppression. But of course, by any standards, this is an extremely problematic decision.

In both instances, Bibish deliberately rejects the label of an oppressed female immigrant who becomes civilised in the metropolis and consciously rejects gender assimilation on Russian terms. She thus escapes straightforward categorisation and disturbs what Tlostanova describes as the binary of assimilation and negation prevalent in post-Soviet Russian discourses on women migrants.¹⁶⁹ Moreover, she does this by consistently employing an ironic, self-parodying stance akin to *stio*b in the receiving culture, so that her interlocutors are left in constant doubt about what she really means.

Narine Abgaryan's *Понаехавшая* (2011)

Narine Abgaryan was born on 14 January 1971 in the Armenian town Berd, on the border with Azerbaijan. She graduated from Yerevan Bryusov State University of Languages and Social Sciences with a degree in Russian language and literature education. In the 1990s, at the height of Nagorno-Karabakh conflict, her native town repeatedly came under attack and she was forced to move to Moscow. After arriving in Moscow in 1994, she worked in various secretarial

¹⁶⁷ Ibid., p. 213.

¹⁶⁸ Ibid., p. 213.

¹⁶⁹ Tlostanova, *Gender*, p. 187.

jobs before becoming a writer.¹⁷⁰ Currently, she lives in Russia but holds Armenian citizenship. Unlike Bibish, whose home-country showed no interest in publishing her works, Abgaryan is a popular author in both Armenia and Russia.

Like most post-Soviet/colonial writers, Abgaryan struggles to define her national identity in straightforward terms, but she also deliberately situates her cultural belonging in the realm of ambivalence characteristic of migrant writing. She defines herself as a ‘Russophone writer of Armenian descent’ and interestingly, despite her Armenian origin, claims to find it more comfortable to write in Russian: ‘Удивительное дело, я окончила армянскую школу, но я не могу писать на армянском, к сожалению. Кому-то дано написать по русский, кому-то по армянский. Мне не получается, я пыталась. Поэтому я армянский писатель, такой засланный казачок в Россию’.¹⁷¹ At the same time, while expressing regret about her inability to write in Armenian, Abgaryan also highlights that her bilingualism leads to the linguistic hybridity of her thought-process, a ‘wonderful quality’ [удивительное качество]¹⁷² which adds a distinguishing cultural flair to her work. She describes this quality as follows:

Есть у меня одна странная фишка. Обо мне часто говорят, что я пишу на самом деле не русский текст, я пишу армянский текст просто русскими словами. Так как я билингв, это видимо дает как-то о себе знать, и потом у меня странная штука, когда я пишу русский текст, у меня может подстрочником звучит армянский. Иногда такое бывает, что я не могу построить фразу на русском, я ее додумываю на армянском, а и потом перевожу. Видимо это предает некоторый национальный колорит. Я думаю, что в этом секрет.¹⁷³

Abgaryan thus evades a clear definition of her literary language and very consciously plays up the linguistic specificities of her native language for commercial advantage. In addition, she is seemingly opting for an exotic-sounding Russian, an equivalent to ‘Indian English’ or even the sort of Ukrainian English in Jonathan Safran Foer’s writings. Through

¹⁷⁰ Narine Abgaryan, biography on Bookmix, ‘Наринэ Абгарян - Биография, Библиография, Экранизации, Награды’ <<https://bookmix.ru/authors/index.phtml?id=350>> [accessed 15 June 2018].

¹⁷¹ Narine Abgaryan interviewed on Rau TV, 23:58-24:19.

¹⁷² Abgaryan on Rau TV, 9:14 - 9:16.

¹⁷³ Narine Abgaryan, interview, Читай-город, 24:27 – 24:44.

such textual strategies as inter-language and appropriation, postcolonial writers can subvert imperial cultural formations, such as the imposition of the language of the coloniser at the expense of rendering the native language unprivileged.¹⁷⁴ However, one cannot say that Abgaryan is employing such linguistic strategies for political reasons in her autobiography. Perhaps this is not only due to her commercial priorities, or the level of her assimilation, or ‘russification’, but also to her ambiguous perception of Russia as a coloniser.

Понаехавшая describes the period of Abgaryan’s life that she is extremely fond of, a ‘совершенно золотое время’ – the period when she first came to Moscow and worked in a currency exchange bureau in the hotel *Intourist*.¹⁷⁵ The twenty-three-year-old narrator tells her own story by interweaving it with those of her female colleagues in the bureau. She claims that she considers herself lucky for having met people who made her acculturation in Russia a smooth process, in particular her colleagues – ‘замечательный, смешной, невероятный задорный коллектив’.¹⁷⁶ It is unlikely, however, that Abgaryan's positive experiences of emigration can be exclusively attributed to luck. Indeed, when asked whether she found it difficult to integrate in Russian society, since ‘все-таки армяне и русские это разный менталитет, разные традиции?’, Abgaryan admits that emigrants in Russia used to be more accepted in the nineties when Russia still preserved some of its Soviet spirit of *druzhba narodov*.¹⁷⁷ She recalls that when she arrived in Moscow, the post-Soviet space was still once of a common culture where everyone spoke the same language, read the same books and had

¹⁷⁴ Bill Ashcroft, Helen Tiffin and Gareth Griffiths, *The Empire Writes Back: Theory and Practice In Post-Colonial Literatures*, 2nd edn (New York: Routledge, 2002) p. 203.

¹⁷⁵ Narine Abgaryan, interview, uploaded by Valery Myalo, 'Нарине Абгарян - Лауреат Премии 'Рукопись Года' April 5, 2011, 9:15-9:17 <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PxWg3M88eFA>> [accessed 11 April 2018].

¹⁷⁶ Abgaryan, interview, Valery Myalo, April 5, 2011, 9:03-9:07.

¹⁷⁷ Abgaryan’s response fits with Jeff Sahadeo’s findings on how ‘[t]he Soviet experience of common citizenship produced numerous migrants in interviews who saw no borders separating them from ‘their’ capital, with Leningrad and Moscow serving as the realization of *druzhba narodov*, offering complete equality to all citizens of the USSR’. Although Sahadeo also notes that ‘a perception of being privileged in Moscow did not always equal personal satisfaction’. Sahadeo, ‘*Druzhba Narodov*’, p. 570.

more or less the same social background, which made her feel that she was merely coming to the capital of her hometown [столицу пока еще родины], rather than a foreign country.¹⁷⁸ Abgaryan thus indicates her national affiliation to the wider Soviet world, even after its dissolution, by seeing Russia as her ‘родина’.¹⁷⁹ Although she bears in mind the differences in class and education, she still expresses her belief that the experiences of post-Soviet emigrants were uniformly positive: ‘я уверена, что если ты приезжаешь в город с любовью и принимаешь таким какой он есть, не стараешься подладить под себя, понимаешь его правила, с уважением относишься к его традициям, то он тебя принимает, по-другому не может быть’.¹⁸⁰

However, it is doubtful that Abgaryan and other post-Soviet emigrants had ‘more or less’ similar backgrounds, as she suggests. Abgaryan is from a middle-class family where she was immersed in Russian culture and gained impeccable knowledge of the dominant language of her future host country. Her emigration was not prompted by dire economic conditions back home, but rather by a promise of better employment opportunities.¹⁸¹ Abgaryan can therefore be considered a highly skilled migrant whose chances of successful integration were advantaged by predetermination. Furthermore, it seems rather naïve to suggest that one’s positive approach to emigration, accepting the city with love and respect etc., can guarantee successful integration. Indeed, that Abgaryan’s optimistic version of the migrant experience is optimistic to plain erroneous is clearly demonstrated by the case of Bibish.

The title of Abgaryan’s novel invokes a commonly used disparaging verbal noun used to stigmatise immigrants. By referring to herself as ‘понаехавшая’, one of the people who have ‘flooded in’, the author is ironically distancing herself from Russian culture’s values and is

¹⁷⁸ Narine Abgaryan, interview, Читай-город, January 14, 2017, 36:41-37:34 <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=so1V66fFV-4>> [accessed 11 April 2018]

¹⁷⁹ Narine Abgaryan, interview, Читай-город, 37:31 - 37:35.

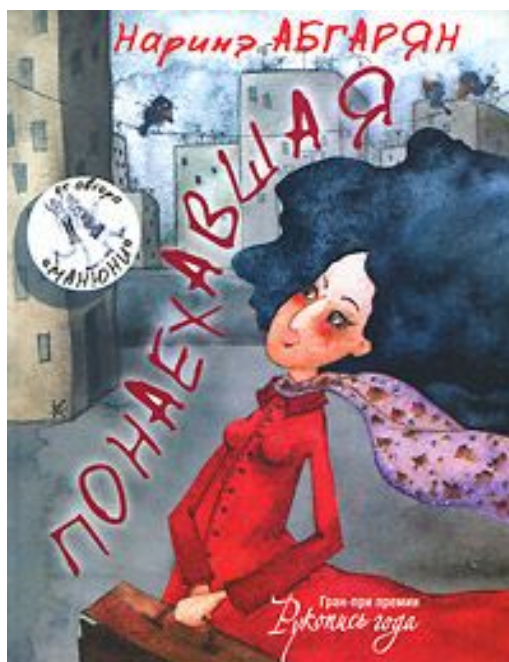
¹⁸⁰ Ibid., 38:02 - 38:15.

¹⁸¹ Ibid., 36:35 - 36: 42.

ironising stereotyping. She also challenges the term's assumptions by turning its negative connotations into a positive trait of her persona through her appropriation of it. A similar self-positioning is suggested by the cover of her book (Figure 7). The protagonist, looking rather childlike, is depicted with exaggerated features, in particular a prominent nose, and with a suitcase in hand, to suggest her ironic over-identification with a stereotypical image of a naive Armenian immigrant. Yet both the title and the cover suggest the limits of positioning oneself as an emigre author. In fact, later (2015) editions of the novel by the same publisher, АСТ, describe the work as 'трагикомическая история о покорении Москвы', suggesting the work's positioning within a tradition of light-hearted and bittersweet, Orientalist Soviet narratives on migration, most notably exemplified by Georgy Danelia's film *Mimino* (1977). Likely due to these pressures of navigating the literary demands of a specifically prescribed genre, Abgaryan describes the novel as her least favourite work, and one that she probably would not publish in hindsight.¹⁸²

¹⁸² 'Сейчас, я бы не стала ее издавать, потому что это всё-таки сборник баек, это самая на самом деле биографическая моя книжка, потому что там вот все документально. Я бы не сказала, что прямо ей довольна' – Abgaryan declares. Narine Abgaryan, interview, Читай-город, 12:00 – 12:15. In her subsequent novels, *Люди, которые всегда со мной* [People Who Are Always with Me] (Moscow: АСТ, 2014) and *С неба упали три яблока* [Three Apples Fell from the Sky] (Moscow: АСТ, 2015), Abgaryan paints striking portraits of Armenian pastoral life with elements of magic realism reminiscent of such postcolonial works as Gabriel García Márquez's *One Hundred Years of Solitude* (1967), one of Abgaryan's favourite books (as she notes in Читай-город, 5:13-5:15). In these works, Abgaryan experiences much more boldly with postcolonial linguistic strategies such as glossing, and interlanguage.

Figure 7. Cover of Narine Abgaryan's *Понаехавшая* (Moscow: АСТ, 2011)



And yet, while less explicitly political, Abgaryan's postcolonial tricksterism is often as subversive as Bibish's. Abgaryan deconstructs her identity as an inferior Other by first seemingly exoticising herself within the role of a naive fool, and then highlighting how Soviet culture itself is subjected to Orientalist discourse in relation to the West. The setting of the novel, a hotel, is a cultural melting pot which heightens the protagonist's and indeed other characters' consideration of questions related to both national and gender identity. The employees encounter people of various nationalities and walks of life whom they might not have otherwise encountered in a country so recently opened to the Western world. In this new world, not only emigrants, but Russians themselves are questioning their status as 'Others' to the West.

Initially, Abgaryan seemingly internalises Russian Orientalism by exoticising both herself and her compatriots in her novel. Emigrating to Moscow and working at *Intourist* turns the protagonist into a Z-list celebrity in the eyes of her compatriots and she becomes inundated by visits of other emigrants from her town. The epigraph of a story where she describes her visitors is fittingly taken from Georgian director Georgy Danelia's film *Mimino* (1977), a quintessential example of light-hearted fictional self-exoticisation and self-parody, and a hugely popular film right across the USSR.¹⁸³ While explaining that the protagonist's countrymen stand out from the crowd, the narrator also exaggerates their apparent exoticism through comic excess:

Гости с гор не оставляли равнодушными никого — ни охрану, ни работников обменника, ни иностранных туристов. Потому что если для Понаехавшей две огромные волосатые ноздри под кепкой — это дядя Размик, отец одноклассника Гарика, то для неискушенных северных жителей это троглодит и «боже ж ты мой, что это было?!». Опять же, если на фоне извилистой горной дороги сухонький мужчина в кургузом пинжачке [sic] поверх вязаной жилетки и в брюках, заправленных в шерстяные носки, смотрелся вполне органично, то в фойе гостиницы «Интурист» он вызывал самые противоречивые чувства. От стремления спровадить незамедлительно восвояси до желания подойти поближе и рассмотреть чуть ли не в лупу.¹⁸⁴

The protagonist feels embarrassed for her compatriots not only for their apparel, but also their behaviour. 'Понаехавшая бесконечно переживала за своих земляков. Вести себя как столичные штучки они категорически не умели: разговаривали только криком, активно жестикулировали, стояли руки в боки и отчаянно страдали от того количества одежды, которую приходилось носить в русские морозы.'¹⁸⁵ When one of them approaches her, feeling embarrassed, she immediately takes him away into a faraway corner of the hotel, 'подальше от любопытных глаз'.¹⁸⁶ She justifies this action as being necessarily for sparing

¹⁸³ ' — Таня, кто такая тетя Нина из Тбилиси, ты не знаешь?

— Не знаю.

— И я не знаю.' (Abgaryan, *Понаехавшая*, p. 107)

¹⁸⁴ Abgaryan, *Понаехавшая*. p. 107.

¹⁸⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 107.

¹⁸⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 108.

her employees, since, ‘обменник каждый раз вздрагивал, завидев в окошке очередную усато-носатую, расплывшуюся в счастливой улыбке деревенскую физиономию’.¹⁸⁷ The protagonist is clearly apprehensive about her Armenian identity and of the image of Armenians in Russia.

And yet, while the author humorously plays up her status as a wide-eyed, innocent, provincial immigrant who is seemingly inferior to Russians, she never casts doubt on her core self-worth. She reminds the readers that she in fact superior to her Russian colleagues in terms of her qualifications, and that she is overqualified for her job. She recalls how, in one of her classes, she was one of the only two people who raised a hand when a lecturer asked if anyone had read James Joyce’s *Ulysses*. In a letter to a friend, she swaps her humorous tone for a regretful outlook and bemoans that she is wasting her training as a philologist:

Я иногда думаю, стоило ли столько лет убиваться на учебе, чтобы потом устроиться обычной кассиршей в обменный пункт? Стыдно и обидно, что моя профессия в новой жизни никак не пригодилась [...] Мы ведь были лучшими — всегда. Самые начитанные, самые старательные, самые умненькие. Нас часто ставили в пример.¹⁸⁸

In this instance, Abgaryan’s deliberate assumption of a mask of an innocent trickster becomes apparent. Like Bibish, she alludes to her intellectually favourable background to challenge her reduction to an uncivilised immigrant. Her remarks about her superior intellect, one of the very few instances in the novel where Abgaryan’s tone is serious and appears earnest, suggests that her deployment of Orientalist imagery and rhetoric as a representational practice is strategic and allows her to claim her share of the Russian diversity market.

More importantly, while Abgaryan strategically exoticises her culture, she simultaneously undermines her naivety and seeming internalisation of Orientalist stereotypes by highlighting how Russian culture itself is subjected to Western Orientalism. From her

¹⁸⁷ Ibid., p. 108.

¹⁸⁸ Ibid., p. 41.

liminal position, and under the guise of a trickster, Abgaryan's narrator undermines the logic of Russo-Soviet Orientalism from within, subverting the 'shared consciousness' of Russian superiority. She does this by examining the post-Soviet struggle to measure up to and meet Western standards. Such is the struggle in the 'оглушенный постсоветским сервисом Интурист'¹⁸⁹ whose workers are forced to confront their status as backward. For instance, one episode where Finnish tourists look down on the employees of the exchange point is illuminative. Unable to entertain the thought that phones in Russia could have loudspeakers, Finnish tourists decide that the employers do not know how to use a telephone when they see them speaking without picking up a phone head: 'трубку не подняла, несчастная русшиш фантастиш, в аппарат надрывается' – they muse.¹⁹⁰ The annoyed protagonist asks her colleague to intervene and explain that Russians are not behind western civilisation and that on the contrary, ahead of it: '[о]бъясни этим дикарям, что у нас давно уже существует громкая связь и можно спокойно переговариваться по телефону, не поднимая трубки'.¹⁹¹ But the colleague, while transmitting this message to the Finns 'чеканным советским голосом', is herself self-conscious of their image and asks the protagonist to stop shaking her keys: 'ты бы хоть этой позорной связкой амбарных ключей не трясла, чудо в перьях'.¹⁹² Other tourists observe the workers as if they were zoo animals:

Некоторые туристы имели весьма обидную привычку — заглядывали в окошко обменника и откровенно смеялись над неутешительной постсоветской обстановкой. В целом девочки к такому поведению приезжих относились индифферентно, но иногда беспардонность заезжих туристов зашкаливала, и тогда то одна, то другая кассирша срывалась.¹⁹³

¹⁸⁹ Ibid., p. 98.

¹⁹⁰ Ibid., p. 114.

¹⁹¹ Ibid., p. 114.

¹⁹² Ibid., p. 116.

¹⁹³ Ibid., pp. 115-116.

Abgaryan thus suggests that together, the post-Soviet people are all ‘others’ of the West. Her tactics hint at the gender tricksterism evoked by Tlostanova – ‘an ironic play on and a conscious deconstruction of Orientalist stereotypes’¹⁹⁴ as well as the playful tactics of subversion from within evoked by Vizenor.

At the same time, however, by constructing the Western tourists as no less, if not more, threatening and invasive than her fellow Armenians and other non-Russian Soviet incomers, Abgaryan is doing more than merely exposing Russia’s secondary Orientalism. By identifying a common enemy whose disdain makes Russians and Armenians similar in their role as targets of condescension, she again emphasises to her readers her common cultural code with Russians. Again, the persona of culturally hybrid ‘country-bumpkin’ trickster is highly useful here. As political and cultural theorists have suggested, the archetype of a peasant trickster is an essential constituent of constructing a defiant subaltern identity vis-à-vis the West. Viatcheslav Morozov describes this phenomenon as follows:

When facing the hegemonic West, Russia often behaves, to use an analogy, like a trickster peasant trying to deceive a powerful landlord. Identification with the peasant is an important component of Soviet cultural legacy. It can be mobilized as a source of foreign policy legitimacy in as much as there is a perception of inequality and unfairness inherent in the existing U.S.-centric international order.¹⁹⁵

We see exactly this depicted in Abgaryan’s portrayal of her experiences working with Western tourists, but in a Russian context.

Abgaryan further deconstructs her image as a backward oriental woman by highlighting how, much like in the case of negotiating their national identity, Russian women also have to evaluate their own gender norms and learn new aspects of women’s lives, like the protagonist.

¹⁹⁴ Tlostanova, *Gender*, p. 66.

¹⁹⁵ Viatcheslav Morozov, Xymena Kurowska and Anatoly Reshetnikov, ‘Why Russia’s Strategic Deception Is Popular: The Cultural Appeal of the Trickster’, PonarsEurasia Policy Memo No.554, December 2018, <<http://www.ponarseurasia.org/memo/why-russias-strategic-deception-popular-cultural-appeal-trickster>> [accessed 20 October 2019].

Here, she again initially adopts the persona of a naïve, innocent immigrant. Having grown up in a patriarchal order, the protagonist receives a cultural shock when she is faced with the Russian reality. She is terrified after her first encounter with a group of sex workers, led by their madame, Vera, who are stationed around the hotel and often visit the exchange point. Once, one of them asks if the protagonist could break down a hundred-dollar bill to give her exact change for her client's payment for a blowjob: 'она этими руками делала минет, а теперь ими же передала мне купюру. Я не заболею сифилисом?' – the protagonist wonders apprehensively.¹⁹⁶

The female character who encapsulates the cultural peculiarities that catch the protagonist unawares in Russia is her female boss O.F., a dominant character in the novel. She is a vivacious, sexually forward woman of quirky appearance, plump and short, with multi-coloured close-cropped hair, and at ease with her sexuality. When she is first introduced in the novel, she is wearing a transparent guipure blouse which accentuates her breasts. O.F. is a straight talker who often transgresses accepted social norms of interaction and can be overly direct and crude. When the protagonist is first introduced to her by an elderly man, her future boss asks him 'Егорыч, а ты чего ее сам привел, она тебе дала, что ли?' jokingly implying that the protagonist earned her job through granting sexual favours.¹⁹⁷ Her directness shocks both the readers and the innocent protagonist, and fittingly sets up the pattern for her future behaviour. O.F. shatters the protagonist's image of acceptable behaviour for women. She insists that the protagonist's initiation into the group of her colleagues should consist of drinking vodka. The protagonist protests that she does not drink, but eventually succumbs and passes out after her first vodka shot. O.F. herself gets very drunk and starts an argument with the bodyguards of a famous singer visiting the hotel whom she punches. 'Выросшей в

¹⁹⁶ Abgaryan, *Понаехавшая*, p. 34.

¹⁹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 16.

маленькой патриархальной республике Понаехавшей было в диковину наблюдать пьяную женщину.¹⁹⁸

And yet, while admitting to the patriarchal nature of her hometown's gender order, like Bibish, Abgaryan never falls in the trap of painting herself as a victim of sexist oppression. On the one hand, she devotes considerable attention to patriarchal misrule in her Armenian hometown. For instance, the senior male in the neighbours' family, 'uncle Seryozha', terrorises his wife, especially in the mornings before work, when he refuses to get up at the sound of the alarm. He crushes the alarm clock every day, forcing his wife to constantly replace the device. When she tries to gently wake him, he swears at her.¹⁹⁹ However, Abgaryan also remarks that people in her village and people in Moscow do not differ a great deal, 'поэтому, обнаружив в соседнем подъезде Тетиполиного дома славянского Сабака Серожа — Степана Дмитриевича, она не особо удивилась. Наоборот — обрадовалась как родному'²⁰⁰. In fact, she notes that her female neighbour in Moscow has to suffer the same fate as Uncle Seryozha's wife. 'Татьяна Петровна до боли напоминала ей бедную жену Сабака Серожа тетю Анаит'.²⁰¹

In the next anecdote, she exposes the abuse that her own colleague Galya suffers at the hands of her jealous husband: 'Галин муж Петя с какой-то радости решил, что его супруга, этот лысый мешок костей (цитата), эта фригидная кобыла (цитата), эта мандрена вошь (цитата), только и делает, что изменяет ему с каждым заезжим интуристом'.²⁰² Galya's husband stalks her at her job, shouting abuse at her.²⁰³ In order to escape her husband's wrath, Galya leaves her job. Later, in the story 'Немного о сексуал харасменте', the protagonist recalls how she is harassed by her superior. Despite knowing that she has a boyfriend, her

¹⁹⁸ Ibid., p. 35.

¹⁹⁹ Ibid., p. 77.

²⁰⁰ Ibid., p. 78.

²⁰¹ Ibid., p. 79.

²⁰² Ibid., p. 79.

²⁰³ Ibid., p. 80.

superior threatens to fire her if she does not succumb to his advances.²⁰⁴ When she shares her concern with her boss O.F., O.F. tells her a story of a similar precedent where an employer harassed two friends and threatened to fire them if they did not engage in a threesome with him. This is sufficient illustration for Abgaryan to undermine the notion that Russian women are more liberated than Armenian women.

As in the case of her national identity, Abgaryan once again suggests that Russians themselves are also innocent in sexual matters in relation to westerners. Being stationed at a hotel, she and her colleagues are often prompted to reflect on gender and sexuality through their comic interactions with foreigners. Their lack of initiation in matters of gender and sexuality is well illustrated by their sensationalist and trivialising approach to queer sexuality and feminism. For instance, Lyuda, an employee who is a magnet for trouble, is terrified when she gets accosted by a group of American lesbians who express their attraction to her, one of them claiming ‘I wanna fuck her! [sic]’.²⁰⁵ In another episode, the boss O.F. unexpectedly runs into a Dutch delegation of transsexuals visiting Moscow for an international meeting and receives a shock at her first, rather tactile, encounter with a transsexual individual: ‘я пошарила рукой, чтобы за что-то зацепиться, ну и нашарила чьи-то яйца [...] — Не, ну ваще охуели, бляди, сверху — сиськи, а внизу — елда!’.²⁰⁶ Similarly, the hotel’s cleaner ‘aunt Maiya’ associates foreigners with sexual perversion and threat. She deters the guests of the hotel with a strong-smelling detergent of her own making, to protect ‘[о]т всяко-разной инфекции’: ‘Нанесут своих микробов, а потом отдувайся. СПИД окаянный в Москву откуда пришел? Мы, что ли, его придумали?’.²⁰⁷

²⁰⁴ Ibid., p.134.

²⁰⁵ Ibid., p.43.

²⁰⁶ Ibid., p.44.

²⁰⁷ Ibid., p.226.

Abgaryan's attitude to Western women and Western feminism is also quite malicious and to a significant extent trivialising. Once, when the protagonist mistakes a Finnish woman for a man, and addresses her by 'mister', she muses, 'язвительно': 'вот ведь до чего людей феминизм доводит! Нет чтобы усы сбрить. Ну или на худой конец замаскировать бородой!'.²⁰⁸ Abgaryan is thus parodying both the Soviet and Western norms of womanhood and suggesting that she is not one of those women who are 'invariably rejecting their culture to become New Women according to the standards of Soviet or Western modernism'.²⁰⁹ Her derision is equally aimed at different practices and moral standards from the culture in which she is now living, and at those obtaining in the countries in which foreign tourists reside.

Conclusion:

In their navigation of dual cultural allegiances, Abgaryan and Bibish cannot be regarded as simple victims of orientalism and cultural exploitation, as their self-Orientalisation is often tactical and strategic. Both of their personae respond to official drives to produce a new positive Russian hero, on the one hand, and to come to terms with the effects of Soviet colonial practices in the post-Soviet, post-colonial context, on the other. Within their performance, they emphasise their common cultural code with Russia and mould literary personae that resonate with popular trickster fools, as well as characters from Soviet cinema. And yet, their personae never fully adopt their masks which they let slip to subvert Russian civilising discourse through the specific tricksterism of Russophone 'marginal' authors.

Bibish refuses to be victimised and presented merely as a 'Russian Cinderella'. She might claim to feel happy and free in Russia, but she never idealises the prospects of her assimilation

²⁰⁸ Ibid., p.114.

²⁰⁹ Tlostanova, *Gender*, p. 41.

in the country and consciously rejects assimilation on Russian terms. When her mask of a jovial, happy-go-lucky fool slips, Bibish adopts a serious tone and critiques Soviet colonialism, most notably, the exploitative cotton industry in Uzbekistan. If Bibish's liminality is more intense than Abgaryan's, who is less targeted by xenophobia, the stakes of her transgressions are correspondingly higher than those of the Armenian author.

On her part, Abgaryan never doubts her self-worth and subverts her association with a backward colonial woman by suggesting that both Armenians and Russians are 'Others' to the West, as she suggests through comical critiques of Intourist hotel, a microcosmic allegory of Russian modernity. Abgaryan also destabilises the stereotypical colonial gender dynamics inherent in the Russian civilising mission by highlighting how, due to the uniqueness of the Russian orientalist discourse, Russian women themselves are subject of (self-)Orientalising in regard to the West.

In many ways, then, Bibish and Abgaryan do succeed in creating culturally hybrid, fluid identities. They are able to construct their identities as female diaspora writers by adopting an openly ironic attitude to the limiting Orientalising models offered to them in the post-Soviet Russophone market. At times, though (such as when Abgaryan reflects on Western sexual practices), these writers seem to have internalised the values that surround them, and their self-parody is frequently uncomfortable to experience – and ambiguous in its import. Ultimately, these authors' understandable preoccupation with reworking and creatively enhancing stereotypes comes at the cost of dulling the resonance and creative potential of their subaltern voices.²¹⁰

²¹⁰ Ibid., p. 187.

Chapter Four

NGOs and Neo-Colonialism in Russophone Women's Writing

Introduction

This chapter focuses on the political dimension of the post-Soviet decolonisation and examines fictional narratives by Russophone women that represent humanitarian aid and its impact on ‘developing’ societies – Kazakhstani author Lilya Kalaus’s *Фонд последней надежды: (Пост)колониальный роман* (2013),¹ Azeri author Rena Yuzbashi’s *From Vorobyshek with love* (2007)² and Tajik author Eleonora Kasymova’s *Таджик* (2007).³ While NGOs and neo-colonialism are among the key concerns of postcolonial theorists, ‘no critic has yet thoroughly addressed the existence of a narrative genre produced by and organised around the activities of NGOs’, ‘nor has there been any sustained attention to the participation in or appropriation of such a genre by postcolonial writers’.⁴ Unsurprisingly, the same applies to post-Soviet fictional

¹ Lilya Kalaus, *Фонд последней надежды: (Пост)колониальный роман* [The Fund of Last Hope: A Post-Colonial Novel] (Almaty: Litres, 2013) <<https://www.litres.ru/lilya-kalaus/fond-posledney-nadezhdy/>> [accessed 7 February 2019].

² Rena Yuzbashi, *From Vorobyshek with love* [From Vorobyshek With Love] (Baku: Sada, 2007) <<https://www.livelib.ru/book/1000700773-from-vorobyshek-with-love-rena-yuzbashi>> [accessed 10 April 2019].

³ Eleonora Kasymova, *Таджик* [Tajik] (2008) <<https://www.proza.ru/2016/02/22/278>> [accessed 25 August 2019].

⁴ Liam O’Loughlin, ‘Negotiating Solidarity: Indra Sinha’s *Animal’s People* and the “NGO-ization” of Postcolonial Narrative’, *Comparative American Studies an International Journal*, 12.1-2 (2014), 101-113 (p. 102). To my knowledge, this contention remains valid. O’Loughlin’s is the only study that closely examines a fictional NGO narrative, and the set of question that guides his analysis are very different from my own.

narratives on NGOs – a genre peculiarly dominated by women authors.⁵ Furthermore, while several studies have approached the topic of gender and aid in the post-Soviet sphere,⁶ the connection between post-Soviet and postcolonial experiences remains to be established. My analysis aims to fill these voids; it hopes to bridge research in human and social sciences by complementing studies ‘from above’ of the post-Soviet transition, and is intended to reveal how women adopt, adapt, or resist the norms promoted by their countries’ NGOs.

Post-Soviet nations find themselves at the crossroads of local, Western and Russian political and cultural dynamics. They are thus prone to a triple fracturing as they negotiate their identity in relation to not only the ‘ex-coloniser’ – Russia and their countries of origin, but also Europe and the United States. The multiple Orientalising (foreign) and self-Orientalising (local) influences from these parties inform the specificity of the post-Soviet postcolonial condition. At the forefront of the issue are NGOs such as charities and aid agencies, both Russian and Western, that vie over influence in the region.

Since the early 1990s, the post-Soviet space has witnessed a remarkable mushrooming of NGOs supported by foreign funders. In the Soviet period itself, ‘voluntaristic’ activity (with certain exceptions such as the ‘women’s soviets’ and the Red Cross) was severely constrained, but now many thousands of organisations are engaged in philanthropic and educational activity.⁷ In particular, USAID, OSCE and EU have launched numerous development projects

⁵ My research has not yet led me to any fictional accounts of NGOs by male post-Soviet authors in the Caucasus and Central Asia. The likely reasons for this gender disbalance are discussed later in this introduction.

⁶ Joanna Pares Hoare, ‘Doing Gender Activism in a Donor-Organized Framework: Constraints and Opportunities in Kyrgyzstan’, *Nationalities Papers*, 44.2 (2016), 281-298; Kristen Ghodsee, ‘Nongovernmental Ogres? How Feminist NGOs Undermine Women in Post-socialist Eastern Europe’, *The International Journal of Not-for-Profit Law*, 8.3 (2006), 44-59; Meghan Simpson, ‘Local Strategies in Globalizing Gender Politics: Women’s Organizing in Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan’, *Journal of Muslim Minority Affairs*, 26.1 (2006), 9-31; Amanda Sloat, ‘The Rebirth of Civil Society: The Growth of Women’s NGOs in Central and Eastern Europe’, *European Journal of Women’s Studies* 12.4 (2005), 437-452.

⁷ According to one estimate, in 2002 Kyrgyzstan had the most NGOs (1,001), with Kazakhstan and Tajikistan coming next (699 and 595, respectively), followed by Uzbekistan (465) and Turkmenistan

aiming to play a central role in democracy promotion and civil society development in the region, especially in Central Asia and the Caucasus.⁸ At the same time, these organisations have often been the target of criticism. Sarah Mendelson and John Glenn contend that, in most cases, the new institutions that these organisations helped to create ‘function poorly and have but weak links to their own societies’.⁹ In addition, many critics perceive the activities of these NGOs as forms of neo-colonialism and, in case of gender projects, feminist imperialism.¹⁰ The foreign-funded NGOs’ controversial encouragement of the so-called ‘transition’ (economic, political, cultural) across post-Soviet space¹¹ has been further complicated by Russia’s interests in the region, as well as the legacies of Russo-Soviet Orientalism.

(138) (Abdulsalyamova). In Georgia, between 3,000 and 6,000 NGOs were estimated in 2012 (Ritvo and Nazibrola, p.273). In Armenia, there were over 2500 NGOs registered with the Ministry of Justice by 1999 (Ishkanian, p.17). In Azerbaijan, there were 2935 NGOs in 2005 (1769 registered, 962 non-registered) (Human Rights House Foundation). Lola Abdusalyamova, ‘NGOs in Central Asia’, *Alliance*, 1 March 2002, <<https://www.alliancemagazine.org/feature/ngos-in-central-asia/>> [accessed 16 June 2018]; Armine Ishkanian, ‘Gender and NGOs in Post-Soviet Armenia’, *Anthropology of East Europe Review*, 18 (2000), 17-21 (p. 17); Roger A. Ritvo and Nazibrola Janezashvili, ‘Transforming NGOs in Post-Soviet Georgia’, *Journal of Enterprise Transformation*, 2.4 (2012), 272-282; Human Rights House, ‘Azerbaijan: Lack of Registration Hinders NGOs’ Activities’, 12 May 2005, <<https://humanrightshouse.org/articles/azerbaijan-lack-of-registration-hinders-ngos-activities/>> [accessed 18 June 2018].

⁸ According to OSCE, Central Asian NGOs depend almost entirely on external donor organisations. Also according to OSCE, ‘[a]ssisting the countries of the Caucasus and Central Asia in particular continues to be a priority for the Organization’, see OSCE Report ‘NGOs in the Caucasus and Central Asia: Development and Co-operation with the OSCE’, October 2000, <<https://www.osce.org/odihr/16686?download=true>> [accessed 10 April 2019].

⁹ *The Power and Limits of NGOs: A Critical Look at Building Democracy in Eastern Europe and Eurasia*, ed. by Sarah Elizabeth Mendelson and John K. Glenn (New York: Columbia University Press, 2002), p. 3.

¹⁰ Mendelson and Glenn eds, *The Power and Limits of NGOs*; Kristen Ghodsee, ‘Feminism-by-Design: Emerging Capitalisms, Cultural Feminism and Women’s Nongovernmental Organizations in Post-socialist Eastern Europe’, *Signs: Journal of Women in Society*, 29.3(2004), 729-755; Amanda Sloat, ‘The Rebirth of Civil Society: The Growth of Women’s NGOs in Central and Eastern Europe’, *European Journal of Women’s Studies* 12.4(2005), 437-452; Jude Howell and Jenny Pearce, *Civil Society and Development: A Critical Exploration* (Boulder, CO Lynne Rienner Publishers, 2001); David A. Abramson, ‘Critical Look at NGOs and Civil Society as a Means to an End in Uzbekistan’, *Human Organization*, 58.3(1999), 240-250.

¹¹ For studies critiquing the post-socialist ‘transition’ see, among others, *Uncertain Transition: Ethnographies of Change in the Postsocialist World* ed. by Michael Burawoy and Katherine Verdery (New York: Rowman and Littlefield Michael 1999); Chris Hann, Caroline Humphrey and Katherine Verdery, ‘Introduction: Postsocialism as a Topic of Anthropological Investigation’, in *Postsocialism: Ideals, Ideologies and Practices in Eurasia* ed. by Chris Hann (London: Routledge, 2002), pp.1-28. Alternatively, for the defence of the concept see Sarah Brandtstädter, ‘Transitional Spaces: Postsocialism as a Cultural Process’, *Critique of Anthropology*, 27.2 (2007), 131-145.

Over the last few years Russian political opinion has generally viewed NGOs as fifth columns for US political influence that manipulate human rights discourse to prey on vulnerable non-Western countries.¹² Echoing Russia's political stance, the authoritarian regimes of the former Soviet republics often display resistance towards NGOs, denouncing them as agents of the West, and attempting to undermine dissident opinion.¹³ The Azeri government, for instance, has long been criticised for its crackdown on civil society.¹⁴ According to OSCE, NGOs in Tajikistan 'showed great promise when they first emerged in 1992', but the civil war, coupled with a crippling drought and the establishment of huge humanitarian aid programmes, stifled that early development, however, the sector is picking up again.¹⁵ In Uzbekistan, there are many registered NGOs (especially women's NGOs), but the regime is authoritarian and difficult to work with.¹⁶ The situation in Turkmenistan is shaped by the authoritarian administrative system, numerous instances of human rights abuse, alongside an information vacuum.¹⁷ Very little NGO activity is possible in this country as there is no NGO law and it is very difficult to register an organisation.¹⁸ Governments in Kyrgyzstan and Kazakhstan have promoted a much more 'enabling environment' and NGOs are gradually moving from providing social services for their target groups to engaging in a dialogue with the state to discuss new legislation.¹⁹ However, even these countries, public opinion tends to

¹² Eka Iakobashvili, 'How Countries and Institutions in the Former Soviet Union Help Create Legal Tools of Repression', *The Foreign Policy Centre*, 2016 <<https://fpc.org.uk/countries-institutions-former-soviet-union-help-create-legal-tools-repression/>> [accessed 17 May 2019]

¹³ Iakobashvili, 'How'.

¹⁴ Durna Safarova, 'Azerbaijan: Suffocation of NGOs Raises Questions About Donor Strategy', *Eurasianet*, October 10, 2017, <<https://eurasianet.org/azerbaijan-suffocation-of-ngos-raises-questions-about-donor-strategy>> [accessed 15 September, 2018].

¹⁵ OSCE report, p. 6.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 6.

¹⁷ INTRAC report, 'NGOs as Part of Civil Society in Central Asia', 24 May 2003, p.11. <<https://www.intrac.org/wpcms/wp-content/uploads/2003/05/ONTRAC-24-NGOs-as-Part-of-CS-in-Central-Asia-2003.pdf>> [accessed 10 September 2019].

¹⁸ OSCE report, p. 6.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 6.

deem NGOs, especially women's organisations, as 'foreign agents'.²⁰ The head of a cultural NGO PEN Central Asia, Dalmira Tilebergenova, attributes the roots of such suspicions to Soviet and patriarchal ideologies:

Я не знаю, как это сейчас в других странах, но в Кыргызстане безусловно существует негласная марка, клеймо, что мы [НПО] западные шпионы. Другие союзные организации относятся к нам с осторожностью. Я всегда говорю: «Мы не ваши конкуренты, мы не ваши противники - все мы делаем общее дело. Почему бы нам не объединиться? [...] Может быть это из-за патриархальной идеологии, или того, что остаётся как следствие советской идеологии. Запад для них означает, что они будут глушить их идеологию вниз наши горла.»²¹

Women aid workers' targeting in anti-NGO discourses is unsurprising as they make up the majority of post-Soviet aid workers. After the removal of the Soviet quota system, the number of women in official positions declined sharply, turning NGOs into a popular alternative for public participation for women who were excluded from these positions.²² Western donors' preference in supporting women's initiatives and organisations further contributed to women's predominance in the NGO sector.²³

The significance of NGOs in gender terms is an important reason why women writers who have themselves worked for non-governmental organisations often explore the theme of NGOs in their works, unlike their male counterparts. Since most of these authors belong to liberal cultural elites, their stance within the debates on NGOs becomes especially intriguing.

²⁰ See for instance the following discussion thread on a Kyrgyz online forum, 'НПО Кыргызстана как «грантоеды и шпионы», 18 January 2011, <<http://diesel.elcat.kg/index.php?showtopic=6101098&page=19>> [accessed 10 October 2019]; See also a similar public discussion around the following article, Aleksandr Danilov, 'Большинство НПО в Казахстане – грантоеды и любители фуршетов', RadioLiberty, 4 August 2010, <https://rus.azattyq.org/a/NGO_Kazakhstan/2117369.html> [accessed 10 October 2019].

²¹ 'Pen Центральная Азия: не просто клуб, а сеть региональных пен-центров', interview with Dalmira Tilebergenova and Marat Akhmedjanov, PEN America, 15 February 2007, <<https://pen.org/pen-central-asia-not-just-club-network-regional-pen-centers/>> [accessed 24 July 2018].

²² Armine Ishkanian, 'Gender and NGOs in Post-Soviet Armenia', *Anthropology of East Europe Review*, 18 (2000), 17-2 (p. 17); Amanda Sloat, 'The Rebirth of Civil Society: The Growth of Women's NGOs in Central and Eastern Europe', *European Journal of Women's Studies* 12.4 (2005), 437-452.

²³ Ishkanian, 'Gender', p. 17.

The works analysed in this chapter suggest that rather than taking a side within the post-Soviet power struggles, women writers build on their personal insights into the workings of NGOs in order to expose the post/neo-colonial tendencies in the agendas of each political player involved. Kalas's *Фонд последней надежды*, Yuzbashi's *From Воробышек with love* and Kasymova's *Таджик* inscribe 'the dominant and the dominated within the same episteme', and problematise the stereotypical critiques of NGOs in their countries.²⁴ Echoing Achille Mbembe's notion of mockery from within, the authors satirise how NGOs' dependency on the West and their inability to divorce themselves from Russo-Soviet influences lead to the self-Orientalising, contradictory and inefficient practices. They reveal the complicity between foreign neo-colonial forces on the one hand, and local corrupt elites and their subjects on the other. In addition, the authors explore how NGOs remain similarly trapped in the confusing and Orientalising politico-cultural whirlpool of Russo-Soviet and Western dictates on gender. They also suggest that the multiplicity of influences on the region exacerbates the divide within women's communities and limits the positive impact of gender activism. More broadly, the writing on NGOs points to the specificities of the Soviet colonial project and how its legacies are played out in the post-Soviet context.

Gregory Gleason argues that while the fall of communism opened promising challenges for the development of democratic and liberal political systems in the post-Soviet region, 'Central Asian countries did not fight for their independence' and passively perpetuated the Soviet political culture, unlike Central and Eastern European states where the NGO sector played a key role in regime change movements.²⁵ According to Madina Tlostanova, the dissolution of the Soviet Union promised the revival of indigenous epistemologies, alternative

²⁴ Mbembe, *On the Postcolony*, p. 110.

²⁵ Gregory Gleason, *The Central Asian States: Discovering Independence* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press: 1997), p. 32. Quoted in Kainazarov, 'The EU Engagement', p. 34.

models of being and different gender discourses in post-Soviet Central Asia and Caucasus.²⁶ Instead, however, ‘secondary Eurocentrism’ inherited from Soviet Orientalism prevailed: ‘[t]he ethnic elites of the newly independent states continued the economic, social and cultural discrimination of their own people, hiding behind the neo-liberal or ethnic-nationalist values and continuing to practice self-deprecating intellectual dependency on Western modernity’.²⁷ Olga Zubkovskaya similarly points out that the disintegration of the Soviet Union changed the content, but not the mechanism for the functioning of the development discourse.²⁸ If previously the method of solving the problem of ‘underdevelopment’ was understood to lie in forced economic modernisation, which should have led to the formation of democratic societies, from the beginning of the 1990s, the priority shifted to the formation of a civil society which would contribute to economic modernization.²⁹ However, the concept of ‘civil society’ remained understood according to western standards and was reduced to ‘the opposition mechanism of control over the market and the state, resulting in the support of NGOs of a particular type’.³⁰ It is to this trend of direct transplantation of western ideologies to the post-Soviet context that Zubkovskaya attributes the proliferation of local elite NGOs which are weakly connected to the societies whose interests they are meant to represent. Neither can foreign funding escape its share of criticism for its role in sabotaging ambitious projects of democracy-building. As OSCE itself points out in its report on NGOs in Central Asia and the Caucasus:

²⁶ Tlostanova, ‘The Janus-Faced’, p. 8

²⁷ Ibid., p. 8.

²⁸ Olga Zubkovskaya, ‘Применима ли и как западная постколониальная теория для анализа постсоветского феминизма’, *Гендерные исследования*, 18(2008), 177-199 (p.181) <<http://genderis.ru/primenima-li-i-kak-zapadnaya-postkolonialenaya-teoriya-dlya-an.html?page=5>> [accessed 10 April 2019],

²⁹ Zubkovskaya, ‘Применима ли’, p. 181.

³⁰ Ibid., p. 181. See also Chris Hann, Caroline Humphrey and Katherine Verdery, ‘Introduction: Postsocialism as a Topic of Anthropological Investigation’, in *Postsocialism: Ideals, Ideologies and Practices in Eurasia* ed. by Chris Hann (London: Routledge, 2002), pp. 1-28.

The influx of international aid [...] has also had some unfortunate results. The new-found possibilities for funding have in a few cases led to the establishment of NGOs solely to seek donor funding. Furthermore, international attention has in some cases also resulted in a divisive competition for funds within the NGO community.³¹

As a result, post-Soviet nations in the Caucasus and Central Asia find themselves dependent not only on Russian, but also Western models of modernity, and correspondingly prompted to self-Orientalise in relation to both. This dependency, with its ‘specific self-Orientalizing inferiority complex’³² is particularly well demonstrated by foreign-funded post-Soviet NGOs.³³

The self-Orientalising tendencies in the workings of NGOs become especially apparent in their approaches to gender, notably the role of women. As Tlostanova points out, foreign-funded NGOs often negate or ignore some of the achievements of the Soviet gender project, preferring to see the post-Soviet locales as a ‘tabula rasa which remained outside of history and modernity waiting for the (correct) Western liberation to come’.³⁴ Western donors’ approach, she adds, ignored not only the Soviet past, but the local epistemologies, especially the tradition of Islam.³⁵ Indeed, the majority of funding for political activism in the region is allocated in relation to the economic and legal status of women.³⁶ In contrast, organisations formed around cultural, especially religious, identity receive almost no funding.³⁷ USAID, the largest donor

³¹ OSCE report, 2000, p. 9.

³² Tlostanova, *Gender*, p. 140.

³³ It goes without saying that Russia and China also have high interests in the region, however, Russian and Chinese-funded NGOs rarely feature in these works since, as Baktybek Kainazarov points out, neither of the regional players is interested in civil society development and democracy promotion in the region. See Baktybek Kainazarov, ‘The EU Engagement in Democracy Promotion in Post-Soviet Central Asia: The Case Study of the Kyrgyz Republic – Prospects and Challenges’, *Przegląd Politologiczny* (2018), 27-40 (p. 32).

³⁴ Tlostanova, ‘The Janus-Faced’, p. 8.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 8.

³⁶ Zubkovskaya, ‘Применима ли’, p. 193.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 193.

in the region, emphasises that religious, primarily Muslim, organisations have almost no chance of financial backing.³⁸ Kristen Ghodsee similarly highlights that Western donors unproblematically transplant ‘feminism-by-design’, much like ‘capitalism-by-design’ to post-socialist Eastern Europe.³⁹ ‘Just like the communists who tried to abolish private property by administrative decree, the international community tried to create a new “gendered” subjectivity virtually overnight by importing the “best practices” from the West’ – Ghodsee argues.⁴⁰

Further complicating the picture is the controversial nature, in global perspective, of Western aid practices themselves, as demonstrated by the abuses of women within aid projects carried out in parts of the world beyond the post-socialist sphere. A notable recent case is the British-based charity Oxfam, which has for over 70 years been a leading agent in the developing world. While claiming to posit women’s empowerment as one of its priorities, Oxfam was embroiled in a sex scandal whereby the charity’s senior aid workers in Haiti were accused of sexual harassment of their staff as well as asking women for sexual favours in exchange for aid.⁴¹ Aid workers have told *The Independent* that sexual misconduct is ‘common knowledge’ within the industry, and affects female staff as well as the vulnerable women and children agencies are supposed to help.⁴² Further revelations led to the resignation of Save the Children’s former chief executive, Justin Forsyth, from his role at UNICEF and Brendan Cox’s departure from charities set up in his wife’s name (More in Common, and Jo

³⁸ Ibid, p. 193.

³⁹ Kristen Ghodsee, ‘Nongovernmental Ogres? How Feminist NGOs Undermine Women in Post-socialist Eastern Europe’, *The International Journal of Not-for-Profit Law*, 8.3 (2006), 44-59 (p. 50).

⁴⁰ Ghodsee, ‘Nongovernmental’, p. 50.

⁴¹ Izzy Lyons, ‘Oxfam Faces Fresh Accusation of Sexual Harassment Cover up in Haiti’, *The Independent*, 2018 <<https://www.independent.co.uk/news/uk/home-news/oxfam-sexual-harassment-cover-up-haiti-accusation-a8260356.html>> [accessed 3 April 2019]

⁴² Lizzie Dearden, ‘Aid Agencies to Promise to Combat Sexual Exploitation at Dfid Summit after Oxfam Scandal’, *The Independent*, 2018 <<http://www.independent.co.uk/news/uk/home-news/oxfam-scandal-sexual-exploitation-prostitutes-summit-dfid-charities-aid-workers-latest-a8238976.html>> [accessed 3 April 2019]

Cox Foundation).⁴³ In response to the scandal, Penny Mordaunt, the International Development Secretary, made a statement combining a call for reform with imperialist overtones as she spoke of the need to ensure that ‘the British aid sector sets the standard for the rest of the world to follow’.⁴⁴

Ironically, due to the close connection between racism and sexism in colonial and neo-colonial context, issues of sexism in the aid industry are fed by the very imperialist dynamics fostering a top-down approach in developmentalist projects. Indeed, in contrast to Mordant, the Green Party claimed that the abuse row highlighted a problematic power imbalance between Western aid workers and the people they are attempting to help. They called for the need to end the ‘old, centralised “we know best” charity-based models of aid’ and thus the ‘colonial construct of givers and takers’.⁴⁵ Instead, they proposed that money be directly transferred to women in need.⁴⁶

While recognising the ongoing effects of colonialism, Achille Mbembe highlights the importance of refocusing analytical attention on the daily rituals by which the postcolonial people negotiate these effects in their everyday lives. Refusing ‘to interpret postcolonial relations in terms of absolute resistance or absolute domination’, Mbembe contends that instead ‘the emphasis should be on the logic of “conviviality”’.⁴⁷ Blurring the oppressor/oppressed binaries, Mbembe focuses on the potential complicity between the neo-colonial forces, the corrupt élites and their subjects. He adds that in this context, the main, if not only, means of resistance to the forces of oppressive power is to expose them from within through laughter

⁴³ Dearden, ‘Aid Agencies’.

⁴⁴ Ibid.

⁴⁵ Benjamin Kentish, ‘Give Aid Money Directly to Women in Developing World Instead of Charities, Green Party Says’, *The Independent*, 2018 <<http://www.independent.co.uk/news/uk/politics/green-party-aid-spending-women-charities-oxfam-save-the-children-givedirectly-amelia-womack-a8239096.html>> [accessed 3 April 2019]

⁴⁶ Kentish, ‘Give Aid’.

⁴⁷ Achille Mbembe, *On the Postcolony*, Studies on the History of Society and Culture (Oakland: University of California Press, 2001), p. 105; p. 110.

and mockery, even while ironically embracing them. Thus, one may ironically embrace the fetishized ritual imposed by the power (such as hanging portraits of the ruler in one's home), whereby 'the fetish, seen for the sham it is, is made to lose its might and become a mere artefact'.⁴⁸ Mbembe thus stresses that the postcolony is no 'single permanently stable system', but rather a plural network of overlapping domains 'each having its own logic yet liable to be entangled with other logics'.⁴⁹

Perhaps nowhere is this plural, 'convivial' and complicit entanglement, as well as its ironic exposition, more pronounced than in the 'secondarily Orientalised' fictional NGOs satirised by post-Soviet women writers from the Caucasus and Central Asia. The ideological irreverence of these narratives is striking not only within Russophone, but also wider postcolonial literature which has been witnessing 'an increasing 'NGO-ization''.⁵⁰ Depictions of aid workers as well as humanitarian-authored narratives have become prominent in world literature since the 1990s expansion of humanitarian organisations. Liam O'Loughlin, one of the few scholars who have examined this trend argues that 'while these texts contain a capacity for self-critique typically lacking in transnational NGO campaign materials, they remain mired in a "bureaucratic imagination", sequestered from supposed beneficiaries', and often 'align with narrowly defined NGO missions'.⁵¹

Beyond the postcolonial context, the ironically handled character of what we would now call an aid worker appears throughout various genres of writing and is 'routinely gendered female'.⁵² Stretching from Charles Dickens' philanthropist Mrs Jellyby (*Bleak House*, 1853)

⁴⁸ Mbembe, *On the Postcolony*, p. 108.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 108; p. 104.

⁵⁰ According to Liam O'Loughlin, 'as an increasingly pervasive genre of 'writing the disaster', the NGO narrative traffics in the spectacle of suffering (with varying degrees of self-awareness) and draws notions of transnational responsibility and implication from that spectacle'. O'Loughlin, 'Negotiating Solidarity', p. 102.

⁵¹ For example, John le Carré's *The Constant Gardener* (2001) and Shashi Tharoor's *Riot: A Love Story* (2001). O'Loughlin, 'Negotiating Solidarity', p. 102.

⁵² O'Loughlin, 'Negotiating', p. 112.

to John le Carré's aid worker Tessa (*The Constant Gardener*, 2001), this female character, with her obsessive and often reckless humanitarianism, threatens to destroy herself and her family.⁵³ The narratives on these characters have been invoked in critiques of 'white saviour fantasies of conquest and heroism'⁵⁴ and compared to parodic reworkings of *Don Quixote* in depicting aid workers 'whose well-intentioned idealism, often coupled with a misunderstanding of local social relations and cultural traditions, exacerbates the problems they intend to rectify'.⁵⁵

Russophone women writers' NGO narratives caricature precisely this cultural divide between NGO workers and aid recipients that propagates 'colonial notions of valorous heroes on the one hand, and passive victims on the other'.⁵⁶ Echoing Mbembe's critique, these writers mock from within the post-Soviet 'secondary Orientalism' and the complicity between neo-colonial forces, corrupt élites and their subjects.

Lilya Kalaus's *Фонд последней надежды: (Пост)колониальный роман (2013)*

The melting pot of political influences in its effects on the development of post-Soviet countries finds its microcosmic reflection in the fictional NGO in Kazakhstani author Lilya Kalaus's novel *Фонд последней надежды: (Пост)колониальный роман*. 'Last Hope' is the name Kalaus gives to the fictional foreign-funded NGO inspired by Soros Foundation-Kazakhstan (SFK), an Almaty-based NGO where Kalaus used to work from 2002 to 2003 as a coordinator of its culture division.⁵⁷ Through 'Last Hope', Kalaus satirises how NGOs in Kazakhstan are

⁵³ Ibid., p. 112.

⁵⁴ Teju Cole, 'The White Savior Industrial Complex', *The Atlantic*, 21 March 2012 <<http://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2012/03/the-white-savior-industrial-complex/254843/>> [accessed 10 December 2018], quoted in O'Loughlin, p.104.

⁵⁵ Joseph R.Slaughter, *Human Rights, Inc.* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2007), p. 41, quoted in O'Loughlin, p. 104.

⁵⁶ O'Loughlin, 'Negotiating', p. 104.

⁵⁷ My interview with Lilya Kalaus, Almaty, June 6, 2017.

operating within the power-play of three major pressure forces – local government, Russia and the West, and highlights that these organisations are heavily influenced and limited by the legacies of Russo-Soviet ‘secondary Eurocentrism’, especially internalised Orientalism. ‘Мне хотелось в романе показать, как старые комплексы, вековые стереотипы воздействуют на современную жизнь – к каким это приводит результатам, в общем, не очень приятным’ – Kalaus explains.⁵⁸

Kalaus (b.1969), grew up in Almaty, Kazakhstan. She graduated from Al-Farabi Kazakh National University (КазГУ) with a degree in philology. Since then, she has been active in the Kazakhstani cultural scene, writing prose fiction and plays, leading her own radio programme⁵⁹, and serving as editor-in-chief of literary journal Книголюб (2001-2014).⁶⁰ The author is of Crimean and Estonian descent. Both of her parents were victims of Soviet deportations. Her mother, a Crimean Tatar, was exiled from her country in 1944, first to Uzbekistan and then to Almaty. Her father’s Estonian family was similarly exiled from Estonia in the 1930s.⁶¹ Kalaus writes in Russian as she cannot speak Kazakh. Like many in Almaty’s cultural *beau monde*, the author does not believe that language determines one’s national identity, especially in Kazakhstan, a true melting pot of cultures.⁶² Rather, Kalaus places emphasis on the importance of understanding a country’s makeup and boasts extensive knowledge of Kazakhstani history and mythology.⁶³

Фонд последней надежды (2013) is written in Russian, however the author denies the symbolic dominance of this language, echoing postcolonial writers’ subversion of imperial cultural formations, such as the imposition of the language of the ‘coloniser’ at the expense of

⁵⁸ Ibid.

⁵⁹ The programme ‘Классикомания’ on Радио классика-Казakhstan (2014-2016).

⁶⁰ My interview with Kalaus.

⁶¹ Ibid.

⁶² A similar belief was espoused by Kazakhstani poet Mariya Vil’kovisky during our interview (June 14, 2018).

⁶³ My interview with Kalaus.

rendering the native language unprivileged. As Bill Ashcroft and others have argued, postcolonial literatures ‘demonstrate most clearly the political and cultural agency achieved by writers who appropriate the dominant language, transform it, and use it to reveal a cultural reality to a world audience’.⁶⁴ In Kalaus’s text, the reader continuously comes across, and is disorientated by, untranslated words and sentences in the fictional Burkut language. Significantly, these words are not glossed, i.e. the author does not insert explanations of these terms either within the text or in the form of a footnote. In one example, the Russian protagonist Oleg, who visits Burkutstan, is dumbfounded when an elderly lady addresses him at work in Burkut with ‘манда Пулитцер премия барымтач?’.⁶⁵ Together with the protagonist, the reader becomes disorientated and is prompted to reflect that

although the post-colonial text can operate as ethnography, its use of language incorporates the warning that the site of the shared discourse – the literary text – is not the site of a shared mental experience, and should not be seen as such.⁶⁶

While one can roughly make sense of the lady’s comment, an enquiry about the Pulitzer Prize, it is impossible to grasp the exact meaning of her words. The phrase is potentially obscene as *manda* means ‘cunt’ in Russian. Kalaus’s refusal to gloss the lady’s words, as well as numerous other random Burkut words throughout the text, ‘not only registers a sense of cultural distinctiveness but forces the reader into an active engagement with the horizons of the culture in which these terms have meaning’.⁶⁷ As Ashcroft et al point out, ‘ultimately, the choice of leaving words untranslated in post-colonial texts is a political act, because while translation is not inadmissible in itself, glossing gives the translated word, and thus the

⁶⁴ Ashcroft et al., *The Empire*, p. 203.

⁶⁵ Kalaus, *Фонд*, p. 11.

⁶⁶ Ashcroft et al., *The Empire*, pp. 57-58.

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 64.

‘receptor’ culture, the higher status’.⁶⁸ For Kalaus, the ‘receptor’ culture is the Kazakhstani culture uniting the traditions of various ethnicities inhabiting in the Kazakh territory.⁶⁹

Although Kalaus writes in Russian, she does not identify herself as a Russian intellectual and associates herself with Russian culture and literature ‘только косвенным образом, благодаря языку’. However, neither can she call herself a Kazakh author. Rather, Kalaus defines herself as someone who dwells in the margins:

Я нахожусь в разломе, в разрыве, на границе. Здесь в Алматы у нас сейсмическая активность и так называемые линии разлома [...]. Иногда разрыв расширяется, а временами сужает, но он не исчезает, а хочется, чтобы он исчез, чтобы перестали все всё делить, упрекать друг друга и пинать [...]⁷⁰

Here Kalaus’s self-definition turns into a geographical metaphor of a fault line which suggests her and her compatriots’ uneasy cultural positioning. Kalaus is denouncing the nationalistic rhetoric which shames Kazakhs who do not properly know Kazakh.⁷¹ And yet, Kalaus associates her cultural ambivalence not only with uncertainty, but also strength: ‘с одной стороны пугает, а с другой, ты чувствуешь легкость потому что никому ничем не обязан – тебя никто не может упрекнуть’- she remarks.⁷² As a Kazakhstani author who writes in Russian, Kalaus can more easily escape the nationalist snobbery, one evoked in her fault line allegory, than writers who write in Kazakh. Since Kazakh is considered a national tongue, writing in this language is bound up by social censorship and creates obstacles for creative self-

⁶⁸ Ibid., p. 65.

⁶⁹ As the narrator remarks in *Фонд*: ‘Буркутстан всегда был маргинальным русскоязычным городом. Кого только не нанесло сюда за двести лет его существования: и мятежных поляков, и терских казаков, и ссыльных разночинцев, и вездесущих, как моль, европейских коммерсантов, и бывших офицеров царской армии, и разоблачённых меньшевиков, и битых коллективизацией кулаков, и каторжных интеллигентов, и выселенных татар-чеченцев-поволжских немцев, и удравших от антисемитизма евреев, и даже взятых в плен во время Великой Отечественной японцев’. Kalaus, *Фонд*, p. 32.

⁷⁰ My interview with Kalaus.

⁷¹ Ibid.

⁷² Ibid.

expression.⁷³ In view of such increasingly nationalistic trends, Kalas subtly expresses her concern on the danger of the eventual disappearance of Almaty's multicultural spirit embodied by her generation:

Таких людей как я достаточно много в Алматы. Возможно, мы уходящее поколение и следующее поколение они как-то себя идентифицируют, либо к России примкнут, либо здесь останутся и будут учить язык, но пока, мы не вымерли как динозавры, мы все еще что-то представляем.⁷⁴

Kalass's doubt that the new generations 'к России примкнут' is rooted in what she identifies as Kazakhstan's strong cultural and political neo-colonial dependence on Russia.⁷⁵ Pointing a finger at her society's Ostrich Syndrome tendencies, Kalas argues that despite the political debates on Kazakhstan's status as postcolonial, everyday life in her country is deeply informed by its colonial past:

Русских политиков я думаю мы знаем лучше, чем своих собственных – это тоже следствие пост-колониального синдрома. То есть не важно принимаешь ли ты эту колониальность – радуешься ей или отрицаешь и как бы выбрасываешь из своей жизни – ты продолжаешь оставаться в этом поле.⁷⁶

One of Kalass's main concerns as a writer is to come to terms with this post-coloniality in her fiction, especially as it is expressed in internalised Orientalism: 'эпоха пост-колониальности, есть ли ей конец? И как с ней можно поступить, как бороться с этими комплексами неполноценности, или нужно ли вообще с ними бороться, и что с этим вообще

⁷³ According to Kalas, 'большая трагедия в нашей стране - это судьба национальных авторов, тех, кто пишет на казахском языке. Их вообще не берутся публиковать, если они хоть на шаг отходят от традиционных классических рамок, ни о какой современности здесь речь не идет'. Extract from Kalas's interview in *Литер*, August 2008, <<http://www.litkarta.ru/world/kazakhstan/persons/kalass-1/>> [accessed 20 March 2018].

⁷⁴ My interview with Kalas.

⁷⁵ 'Россия имеет колоссальное культурное воздействие на Казахстан в силу того, что книги, телеканалы, сериалы, фильмы – все это по большей части идет через Русский язык, через русскую культуру'. Kalas, my interview.

⁷⁶ My interview with Kalas.

сделать?'.⁷⁷ Much like Achille Mbembe, Kalaus refocuses analytical attention on the daily rituals by which the postcolonial people negotiate effects of neo-colonialism in their everyday lives. Rather than condemning the politics of neo-colonialism, her work examines how Burkut society engages in acts of 'conviviality' – a careful navigation in, and complicity with neo-colonial settings through irony and mockery.

The events of Kalaus's novel take place in the year 2011 in the imaginary country Burkutstan, an allegory for Kazakhstan, and focus on the employees of 'Last Hope', in particular the centre's newly appointed Russian crisis manager Oleg Korshunov, and a local Burkut employee Asya. Kalaus describes this encounter, a clash between mentalities, as central to the work.⁷⁸ The author explains that her decision to turn to allegory was mainly determined by her artistic preference, although, perhaps slightly by fear of policing as well.⁷⁹ The novel can in part be located within a particular literary genre of comic adventures overseas, predominantly determined by a colonial and postcolonial context, comprising such works as Evelyn Waugh's *Scoop* (1938) and *Black Mischief* (1932), David Lodge's *Changing Places* (1975), Malcolm Bradbury's *Rates of Exchange* (1983) and William Boyd's *A Good Man in Africa* (1981), as well as Boyd's *Stars and Bars* (1984).⁸⁰

As mentioned previously, it was Soros Foundation-Kazakhstan (SFK) that served as the inspiration for Kalaus's NGO. Established by George Soros and the Open Society Foundations in 1995, SFK claims that its mission is to encourage an open society in Kazakhstan, thus to 'promote public policies to safeguard fundamental human rights; ensure budget transparency and accountability; and increase social activism and tolerance within society'.⁸¹ In the novel, George Soros finds its prototype in the character of Vertigo Vertoletti, the fund's benefactor

⁷⁷ Ibid.

⁷⁸ Ibid.

⁷⁹ Ibid.

⁸⁰ I would like to thank Catriona Kelly for pointing out this parallel.

⁸¹ Soros Foundation-Kazakhstan, official website

<http://en.soros.kz/about_us/soros_foundation_kazakhstan> [accessed 25 October 2017].

idealised by certain employees of the fund as a ‘supreme god of the Greek pantheon’.⁸² Ironically, Vertoletti, ‘the legendary king of the stock market’, plans to close the fund, without warning its employees.⁸³ To oversee the smooth running of the closure, Vertoletti sends Russian professional Oleg Korshunov to the fund, officially as a ‘crisis manager’, and unofficially as his eyes and ears. Oleg is tasked with observing the fund for a few months to give Vertoletti recommendations. Once, in a private conversation, as Vertoletti mysteriously smokes a cigar, perhaps akin to the *James Bond* series’ wealthy antiheroes such as Auric Goldfinger, he reveals to Oleg the reasoning behind the fund’s closure and conveys alarmingly unsympathetic views on Burkutstan: ‘Буркутстан – балласт, привязанный к седлу сильного наездника. Кто будет этим наездником, сеньор Коршунофф, Россия или Китай, мне не интересно. [...] Я хочу, чтобы все прошло аккуратно. Мне не нужна плохая пресса’ – he tells Oleg.⁸⁴ Vertoletti considers Burkutstan forever doomed to depend on bigger political players. His comments expose the potentially self-serving motives of western funding bodies who might have no real sympathy for the countries they claim to be helping, nor any true interest in their development.

According to Vertoletti’s official explanation for the fund’s closure, Burkutstan is a rich, self-sufficient country.⁸⁵ However, Oleg’s friend Ripley discloses the political reasons behind Vertoletti’s decision, the looming ‘apple revolution’ – an engineered and supposedly democratic revolution in Burkutstan.⁸⁶ Ripley’s revelation hints at the politically manipulative nature of Western puppeteer-style involvement in the region. The name Ripley itself evokes the eponymous character of Patricia Highsmith’s *The Talented Mr Ripley* (1955), an international con artist, and fortifies the NGO’s association with the realm of fraud. The name

⁸² Kalaus, *Фонд*, p. 25.

⁸³ *Ibid.*, p. 48.

⁸⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 48.

⁸⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 154.

⁸⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 154.

of the fund, 'Last Hope', also indicates that foreign investors posit themselves as saviours and the only remaining hope for their target country. The multinational pun of Vertoletti, Italian in form and Russian in meaning (*vertoljot* means helicopter in Russian), similarly suggests the multiplicity of influences on the region, and how foreign donors monitor and helicopter-parent the developing world. A helicopter, an instrument of military aggression that hovers and only briefly lands on the ground serves as an apt metaphor for Vertoletti's fleeting motifs in monitoring or, as NGO detractors would put it, spying on Burkutstan.⁸⁷ In addition, the word helicopter in 'Vertoletti' opposes the word eagle in 'Burkutstan' (*berkut* means golden eagle in Russian) both on a literal level (eagles are often trained to take down hostile drones)⁸⁸ and on a symbolic plane. Western technology symbolising foreign spies is opposing a beloved Central Asian creature, an eagle, symbolising Burkutstan's growing nationalism. Ironically, however, a golden eagle is also the state emblem of Russia, meaning that Kalas's wordplay is suggesting Burkutstan's struggle to achieve sovereignty not only vis-à-vis the West, but also Russia.

Oleg's exploitative approach to the fund mimics that of Vertoletti. He regards his new position as a steppingstone to a 'real job and real money'.⁸⁹ A Russian professional who has worked in the West, Oleg exemplifies a foreign 'expert' who is sent to a country of which s/he has little understanding. It has been argued that western aid groups often rely on practitioners, including political activists from U.S. communities or British civic organisers, with even less knowledge of the post-Soviet region, to implement strategies for building democratic

⁸⁷ Kalas confirmed this interpretation with the following comment: 'Вертолетти - эта фамилия как бы спорит с названием страны и с буркутами в целом, она созвучна полету и наблюдению с неба (теория шпионажа вообще популярна в странах СНГ в связи с деятельностью благотворительных западных организаций типа Фонда Сороса). Кстати, описаны случаи, когда беркуты в небе играют и соревнуются с дронами'. Personal communication.

⁸⁸ See for instance 'Eagles Trained to Take Down Drones', *BBC*, 8 March 2016 <<https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/av/world-europe-35750816/eagles-trained-to-take-down-drones>> [accessed 10 April 2019]

⁸⁹ Kalas, *Фонд*, p. 48.

institutions developed in Western capitals, without taking into account how local activists, given local historical legacies, will receive their recommendations.⁹⁰ Svetlana Shakirova points out the commonality of this problem in post-Soviet countries:

The symbolic association of Western knowledge/education/English language with capital is still taken for granted [by Western organisations]. [...] Having arrived for a week, the expert first asks naive questions about the local situation, demonstrating the lack of basic knowledge about the country's history, geography and culture, and then gives recommendations to local political and administrative structures.⁹¹

Indeed, as part of his mission, Oleg undertakes superficial research on the country. He casts an orientalist and demeaning view at the organisation, and by extension Burkutstan, evaluating it as ‘настоящая дырища. Провинция в кубе’.⁹² He looks down on the employees, comparing them to ‘monkeys’.⁹³ In his politically extreme, racist reflections, he considers non-Russian ‘marginal’, nations of the ex-Soviet republics as dirty, flawed and infinitely inferior to Russians, and justifies eugenics.⁹⁴ He thus echoes characteristic colonial discourses justifying imperial civilising missions by the necessity of helping out the nations with supposedly inferior traditions, cultures and religions. In line with traditional Orientalist approaches, Oleg’s aversion is accompanied with a degree of exoticisation of, and fascination with the country. He admires Burkutstan’s nature, feels at peace in his surroundings, and enjoys the local humdrum.

⁹⁵ Of all the foreign places he has visited ‘только здесь, в этой [...] жопе мира, азиатском

⁹⁰ Mendelson and Glenn, *The Power*, p. 3.

⁹¹ Svetlana Shakirova, ‘От Неутешительного Диагноза к Эффективным Стратегиям’ (2006) <http://caucasia.at.ua/publ/iz_zhurnala_quotdialog_zhenshhinquot/stati/ot_diagnoza_k_strategijam_2006/8-1-0-11> [accessed 10 April 2019].

⁹² Kalas, *Фонд*, p. 10.

⁹³ *Ibid.*, p. 21.

⁹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 43. ‘Что за идиотские помеси разгуливают в этом Зорком? Не город, а лаборатория евгеники, причём, с загаженными ретортами. Не то, чтобы Олег сознательно придерживался каких-то там особых взглядов на национальный или расовый вопрос, но маргиналы – «дети разных народов» – всегда казались ему весьма нежизнеспособными и, прямо скажем, ущербными с точки зрения и физиологической, и, особенно, интеллектуальной. Олег предпочитал отделять «чистых» от «нечистых», полагая, что незыблемые принципы вырастают из традиций, традиции – из культуры, культура – из религии, религия же неотделима от души народной, а душа, в свою очередь...’.

⁹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 44; p. 48.

провинциальном болотце, почувствовал он вдруг какое-то странное умиротворение и даже – покой . . . Хорошо. Как в уютных стареньких тапочках'.⁹⁶ He similarly evidences Orientalist preconceptions on the 'striking' beauty of Burkut women.⁹⁷ Oleg's approach to the Burkut NGO offers a case-study of what Tlostanova calls Russia's 'external imperial difference with its secondary Eurocentrism as the constitutive element that spreads over the colonized as well as the colonizers'.⁹⁸ Oleg Orientalises Burkuts, identifying himself as European and reinforcing his own insecure identity by Othering Burkuts as 'Asiatics'. But the 'secondary Eurocentrism' equally affects Burkut employees who in turn self-Orientalise. The female protagonist Asya idealises Russian culture, considering it superior to Burkut culture. Once, when recalling her wonderful trip to Moscow, she muses on how monuments of old Russia, old street names and cobblestones evoke agedness and tradition, qualities which Asya identifies as markers of civilisation. The odour of Oleg's perfume and the smells of Moscow metro all merge into one in Asya's imagination, hinting at her fascination with Oleg's Russianness.⁹⁹ Asya argues that her colleagues should be grateful for enjoying Oleg's company, the 'classy' Oleg will show the fund's simpletons how it's really done: 'пора уже нашим фондовским простакам показать класс'.¹⁰⁰ She also considers 'pure' Russian spoken by the metropolitans like Oleg far superior to the 'fat, lazy, provincial' *koine* version of Russian spoken by her and her fellow provincial simpletons at the fund.¹⁰¹ Asya's internalised Orientalism thus reveals the persistence of 'cultural cringe' attitudes to Russian language and culture in post-Soviet Burkutstan (Kazakhstan).

Other employees similarly denigrate their country. One of them, Taras, considers Burkutstan 'the lowest of the low', perhaps with the only exception of Mongolia, and thus a

⁹⁶ Ibid., p. 48.

⁹⁷ Ibid., p.11.

⁹⁸ Tlostanova, 'The Janus-Faced', p. 8.

⁹⁹ Kalaus, *Фонд*, p. 111.

¹⁰⁰ Ibid., p. 111.

¹⁰¹ Ibid., p. 112.

perfect location for Oleg to earn brownie points on his way to future employment in Europe.¹⁰² Other employees criticise Burkut modernity, arguing that the undemocratic Burkutstan lags behind other post-Soviet countries that have overthrown authoritarian regimes through peaceful protests, or even Russia, where, they point out, Putin showed the decency not to run for presidency for a third time in 2008, in contravention of the constitution.¹⁰³ ‘Всюду – цветные революции, народ на площадях!! А у нас тут – болото!!’ – Gul’ka, one of the employees, moans.¹⁰⁴

Listening to Gul’ka’s rhetoric, Asya wonders whether the political changes which Gul’ka evokes are sweeping over the post-Soviet nations in one uniform wave, ‘что все эти «они», наверное, и впрямь – одни и те же лица’.¹⁰⁵ The implication here is that despite their independence, the countries that Gul’ka mentions (Ukraine, Georgia, Moldova, Kyrgyzstan) are steered by the same political actors who are following the same agenda, one of quickly fabricating democracies, or at least democratic facades. Ironically, unbeknownst to Gul’ka, a similar watershed, an ‘apple revolution’, is set to transform the political scene in Burkutstan, as mentioned earlier. In this context, Kalas seems to be suggesting that Burkutstan’s reliance on Western aid for its democracy promotion will only sustain the country’s self-Orientalising stance.

The projects conducted by ‘Last Hope’ also reflect the self-Orientalising tendencies of its employees and suggest that despite Western pressures, they are equally determined by the influence of the Soviet past and Russian neo-colonial interests in the region. In fact, while the fund’s name is English, its setting, ‘a square Soviet yard’ where a children’s playground has been usurped by cars, is typically post-Soviet, hinting at a rocky road of Westernisation in a

¹⁰² Ibid., p. 7.

¹⁰³ This comment is ironic in view of the *rokirovka* (swapping of power between Vladimir Putin and Dmitry Medvedev) of 2012, a year after the fictional time setting of the novel.

¹⁰⁴ Ibid., p. 120 (‘Всюду – цветные революции, народ на площадях!! А у нас тут – болото!!’).

¹⁰⁵ Ibid., p. 120.

country where relative poverty has fostered a culture of negligence and survival of the fittest.¹⁰⁶ It is as if time has frozen in the organisation, and Oleg cannot tell whether the interior of the lobby has deliberately been decorated in the vintage style of socialist art, or whether nothing has changed there since Soviet times.¹⁰⁷ In the director's room, several busts 'то ли основоположников марксизма-ленинизма, то ли бывших директоров Фонда «Ласт Хоуп»' also signal the blurry location of the NGO at Soviet and Western crossroads.¹⁰⁸

Last Hope's dependency on the ex-imperial centre becomes evident when the fund invites Aleksey Davidovich Ivanov, a special guest from Moscow, to lead a training at the fund. In his speech, Ivanov proclaims that in line with the Soviet rhetoric, he views Russia as Burkutstan's older brother which will guide and protect it from 'Western puppeteers' and 'Judaising heretics':

Триста лет Великая Россия и Буркутия жили вместе. И дружно жили! И хотя сегодня мы с вами граждане разных государств, я не побоюсь во всеуслышание заявить: несмотря ни на какую эту вашу независимость, несмотря ни на какие происки заокеанских кукловодов, несмотря ни на какую ересь жидовствующих, мы, русские люди, всегда готовы протянуть руку помощи братьям нашим меньшим.¹⁰⁹

Conspiracies against Hungarian Jewish billionaire George Soros and his philanthropy have commonly used 'well-worn antisemitic tropes' right across the post-Socialist world and beyond.¹¹⁰ The investor has often been scapegoated by the political discourses of authoritarian regimes. Here it could be said that post-Soviet states are once again taking the lead from Moscow. For example, in trying to evade responsibility for the email hacking of the Democratic

¹⁰⁶ Ibid., p. 8.

¹⁰⁷ Ibid., p. 10.

¹⁰⁸ Ibid., p. 12.

¹⁰⁹ Kalas, *Фонд*, p. 121.

¹¹⁰ Jason Wilson, "'Dripping with Poison of Antisemitism': The Demonization Of George Soros", *The Guardian*, 25 October 2018 <<https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2018/oct/24/george-soros-antisemitism-bomb-attacks>>; ADL, 'The Anti-Semitism Lurking Behind George Soros Conspiracy Theories', 11 October 2018 <<https://www.adl.org/blog/the-anti-semitism-lurking-behind-george-soros-conspiracy-theories>> [both accessed 15 July 2019]

National Committee, Vladimir Putin compared the company that allegedly gave cover to the Russian intelligence agents to Soros. He argued that an individual company doesn't represent Russia, just like how Soros, who 'intervenes in things all over the world', doesn't represent America.¹¹¹ The comments made by Kalas's fictional speaker Ivanov similarly invoke the lingering resentment for Soros's influence in the region – an ironic stance considering Ivanov's own declaration of Russia's ambitions to dominate Burkutstan.

Paradoxically, despite its susceptibility to Russian influence, the fund also makes attempts to raise the question of sovereignty among Burkut society. Thus, it commissions a gruesome circus performance which satirises Burkut society's dependency on Russia. As part of the show, the artist feeds chickens while singing mantras, draws a five-pointed star on the floor and proceeds to cut the chickens' throats. Using the dead chickens, the performer then recreates Russia's emblem, a two-headed eagle, and reverently bows to it.¹¹² The grotesque act of sacrificing chickens at the altar of a five-pointed star, which happens to be the symbol of communism, parodies Burkut subservience to its former master, while the distortion of Russia's emblem lampoons Russian power. The title of the piece 'Земля, бля, поклонись!' is also significant. It echoes Russophone Kazakh writer Olzhas Suleimenov's poem 'Земля, поклонись Человеку!' (1961), in praise of the cosmonaut Yuri Gagarin, which brought Suleimenov national fame.¹¹³ The evocation of the poem in this context, complete with obscenity *blya* [*blyad'*, whore], suggests Kalas's critical approach to Kazakhstan's cultural subservience to the political ideology of the Soviet State. It provocatively brings into relief the evolution of non-Russian Russophone writing's subversive potential since Soviet times.

¹¹¹ Jane Coats, 'Putin's Reference to George Soros was a Dog Whistle to Far-Right Anti-Semites', *Vox*, 16 July 2018 <<https://www.vox.com/2018/7/16/17576760/george-soros-putin-trump-helsinki>>; Ilya Arkhipov, Boris Groendahl, 'Putin Teases That His Troll-Factory Ally Is Just Like Soros', *Bloomberg*, 4 June 2018, <<https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2018-06-04/putin-teases-that-his-troll-factory-ally-is-just-like-soros>> [both accessed 15 July 2019]

¹¹² Kalas, *Фонд*, p. 27.

¹¹³ In 1966 the poem was awarded the Komsomol Prize for Kazakhstan.

Suleimenov's work, while not devoid of some rebelliousness, was bound by the necessity of paying lip-service to Soviet achievements, including in space. Kalaus's post-Soviet satire and mockery refuses all allegiances and targets both local and Russian post-Soviet politics, even though as a member of the Kazakh Union of Writers with work experience in the aid sector, Kalaus is connected to the cultural, and to some extent political state establishments, and risks being policed.

Last Hope's confusing and contradictory messages are also evident in the ambitiously titled project 'The Renaissance of the Golden Horde, aimed at building a patriotic youth camp that would foster patriotism among young people and help them in their 'quest for the roots'.¹¹⁴ In real life, a similar youth project, a two-day youth camp *Zhas*, has been supported for the last decade by SFK, sometimes with the added support of the OSCE.¹¹⁵ In post-Soviet Georgia, ex-president Mikhail Saakashvili similarly introduced youth summer camps to promote patriotic feelings. At the time, some observers saw these camps as essential to forging a single Georgian identity and state nationalism after decades of Soviet rule.¹¹⁶ However, the camps, like the fictional youth camp in Kalaus's novel, were ironically reminiscent of Soviet youth organisations.

Indeed, Kalaus's fictional camp would be explicitly inspired by Soviet *shabashkas* (seasonal work) and the principles of *druzhba narodov*.¹¹⁷ The design of the camp site included a fountain which symbolically linked the activities of the NGO with Russia and the Soviet Union. With its traditional Russian folk dance (*khorovod*) of naiads and nymphs, the fountain would resemble the famous Soviet fountain 'Druzhba narodov' (1951-54) celebrating the unity of the sixteen Soviet republics in the VDNKh ('Exhibition of Economic Achievements') park

¹¹⁴ Ibid., pp. 28-29.

¹¹⁵ OSCE, 'OSCE Programme Office Supports Annual Youth Camp in Kazakhstan', 17 October 2015 <<http://www.osce.org/astana/192761>> [accessed 11 April 2019].

¹¹⁶ OSCE report, 17 October 2015.

¹¹⁷ Kalaus, *ФОНД*, pp. 28-29.

in Moscow (Figure 8).¹¹⁸ The instructions of the design explaining that the fountain's mermaids would lean down to the water 'akin to cute Russian willows' similarly signal the lingering fascination with, and fondness for Russian culture, and the desire of emulating it. In its ambiguous and often contradictory political orientation, the fund reflects Burkutstan's postcolonial identity and resonates with Mbembe's description of a postcolony as a plural network of overlapping domains 'each having its own logic yet liable to be entangled with other logics'.¹¹⁹

Figure 8. Fountain Druzhba narodov in the VDNKh park, Moscow.



While critical of (neo)colonial influences, Kalaus also directs our attention to the potential complicity between neo-colonial forces, corrupt elites and their subjects. Echoing Mbembe's blurring of the oppressor/oppressed binaries, Kalaus thus mocks her country's postcolonial intellectual elites from within. The author reveals how the colossal budget is abused by young people who spend it on fancy notebooks, elite call girls and ski holidays in the Alps, before

¹¹⁸ Kalaus, *Фонд*, p. 31.

¹¹⁹ Mbembe, *On the Postcolony*, p. 104.

they move on to management schools abroad.¹²⁰ The management of the camp is then handed over to a bogus native intellectual Savva Yurodtsev who appropriates the remainder of the grants, hands over organisational duties to his friends and heads off on a tour in the Dead Sea. As the icing on the cake, Yurodtsev then hypocritically turns to a local *Burkut* tabloid where he denounces ‘гнилые либеральные конторы типа пресловутого Фонда «Ласт хоуп», во-первых, открытого на кровавые деньги биржевого спекулянта В. Вертолетти, а во-вторых, нарочно сеющего раздор в сплоченном буркутском обществе’.¹²¹

Through the disastrous failure of Last Hope’s youth camp, Kalas suggests that local elites and intellectuals are also responsible for the country's problems and cannot be victimised as unsuspecting targets of foreign funders. At the same time, since the culture of corruption and exploitation of public sectors is in large part inherited from the Soviet system, the camp’s failure also demonstrates that ‘[h]istorical legacies of the decades of communist rule account in part for the poor functioning of fragile new institutions’, rather than solely the strategies of international NGOs.¹²² Kalas likewise suggests that Kazakh NGOs are at the mercy of various neo-colonial forces, as Western demands for democracy, Soviet legacies and Kazakhstan’s desire to gain political sovereignty both determine and complicate their efficiency.

This multiplicity of influences on post-Soviet NGOs most vividly translate into the eclectic gender discourses voiced and embodied by the diverse female collective of Kalas’s fictional fund. One employee, Camilla Djakovna, is a typical Soviet working woman, ‘выдающая трудоголика со стажем’, dressed, as the narrator sarcastically puts it, ‘в лапидарном стиле жён первых большевиков’.¹²³ Another, Maira, epitomises *Burkut* women’s cultural confusion as she wears her hair ‘не то неряшливыми узбекскими косичками, не то чересчур

¹²⁰ Kalas, *Фонд*, p. 29.

¹²¹ *Ibid.*, p. 29.

¹²² Mendelson and Glenn, *The Power*, p. 3.

¹²³ Kalas, *Фонд*, p. 5.

аккуратными дредами'.¹²⁴ The fact that her hair is too underdone to fit the criteria of a typical Central Asian hairstyle and, in contrast, too perfectly done-up to qualify as dreadlocks, serves as a metaphor for women who, by not trying hard enough, or by trying too hard, cannot accurately reproduce either Western or Eurasian cultural markers and end up in a confusing in-between cultural realm which caricatures both.

The female employees of Last Hope thus find themselves at identity crossroads and are subjected to multiple gender re-Orientalising. Their anxieties and identity crisis manifest itself in their struggle to determine the exact meaning of a free woman in independent Burkutstan. Burdened by the necessity to correspond to Western gender theories and assumptions, they subscribe to hiddenly Orientalist stereotypes and re-Orientalise themselves by playing the role of 'the eternal Other (a native informant or a native instrument of feminist imperialism)'.¹²⁵ Their anxieties become evident in the exchange between Asya's female colleagues which arises after Asya turns down their offer to join in the social activities due to her household chores. As one of the colleagues Gul'ka tells Asya off for being backward, another colleague Zhorka joins the conversation. In a dialogue that ensues, Zhorka and Gul'ka reveal their internalised Orientalist views on womanhood, as well as a distorted vision of feminism:

– Ну ты посмотри! Ни фига себе? Мать-Тереза, блин. И не стыдно тебе? – Гулька гневно топнула ножкой. – Мы – типа освобождённые женщины Востока, а ты нас вечно позоришь, подкаблучница!
 – То же мне, освобождённая... – хмыкнул Жорка Непомнящий [...] – Вали тогда к Алле Львовне, у неё как раз грантёры новые – Феминистская мусульманская лига.
 – [...] Жорка, брешешь! Какой баян! Афигеть, дайте две! Феминистки-мусульманки, что ль?!¹²⁶

That reconciling Islam with feminism appears inconceivable to these women suggests that they have a thwarted understanding of both the religion and the social movement in question.

¹²⁴ Ibid., p. 6.

¹²⁵ Tlostanova, 'The Janus-Faced', p. 8.

¹²⁶ Kalas, *Фонд*, p. 15.

Their reactions echo Tlostanova's argument that 'having gotten rid of the hijab as a result of Soviet feminism', women in Central Asia find themselves 'in the clasp of much more hierarchical regime – not of veiling, but of silencing and levelling of their opinions and selves, promoted by Western epistemology and Western mainstream feminism as its integral part'.¹²⁷ In addition, the fund's female employees' dismissive attitude towards Islam serves as a reminder that 'Soviet modernity destroyed the complex and nuanced models of interaction between the indigenous thinking and Islam which had been refined in these locales in the centuries of Muslim influence'.¹²⁸ The adjective that the women use when talking of 'the freed women of the East' is also telling. These women do not consider themselves as free, or having been free, but rather as having been liberated. They thus posit themselves in an object position, steered by their liberators, either the Soviets, or Western NGOs. Having received superficial training on western dictates of modernity and gender equality, these women are struggling to reconcile their acquired knowledge with the discourses of Soviet and post-Soviet dictates on gender.

Eleonora Kasymova's *Таджик* (2007)

Women working in post-Soviet NGOs mostly belong to cultural elites, hold university degrees, and enjoy access to western organisations thanks to their English language skills and previous experience of working with foreigners. As such, they often fail to grasp the needs of working-class women.¹²⁹ Tajik author Eleonora Kasymova's novel *Таджик* examines this issue in the Tajik context and handles gender elements in the aid sector much more thoroughly than the two other novels examined in this chapter. Kasymova satirises from 'within' the Women's

¹²⁷ Tlostanova, 'The Janus-Faced', p. 9.

¹²⁸ Tlostanova, *Gender*, p. 200.

¹²⁹ Zubkovskaya, 'Применима ли', p. 182.

Committee of Tajikistan (Республиканский Комитет Женщин) where she used to work as a secretary. The novel explores the issues that arise when women belonging to elites attempt to transfer their Western training to their female compatriots, as they do in Kalaus's 'Last Hope', thus unknowingly becoming instruments of native feminist (neo)imperialism. Furthermore, Kasymova suggests that despite women's organisations' genuine intentions, corrupt post-Soviet bureaucracy severely limits their potential for positive change.

Kasymova (b. 1951) holds a degree in Russian language and literature from Tajik Pedagogical Institute. She began her career as a journalist writing for *Вечерний Душанбе*. In the nineties, she became the founder and editor of a women's newspaper *Между нами, женщинами*.¹³⁰ Although she writes in Russian, Kasymova is one the most prominent Tajik women writers, suggesting the privileged position of Russian in post-Soviet Tajik culture. The author has been publishing her fictional works since the seventies and is a member of both the Russian and the Tajik Union of writers. Like other Russophone authors, Kasymova has won Russian literary prizes, among them the 2016 'writer of the year' award and has also worked extensively as a journalist. She has held various state positions, including in the Frunze district Committee (райком партии) in Soviet Tajikistan. She is also a wife of an ambassador. As such, like Kalaus, Kasymova belongs to the very elites she criticises from within.

Kasymova's critical approach to both the Soviet and post-Soviet political and aid systems is even more striking considering her family's close association with state institutions. Kasymova's mother was an ardent communist and deputy minister of culture in Soviet Tajikistan. Kasymova recalls that her mother could fully recite Karl Marx's *Capital* (1867) from memory and was so fond of the communist thinker that she named her daughter Eleonora in honour of Marx's daughter. When recalling this story, Kasymova self-identifies as a product

¹³⁰ Eleonora Kasymova, personal page, <<https://www.proza.ru/avtor/eleonora2>> [accessed 10 August 2019].

of the Soviet system, which she assesses with the same playfulness that characterises the literary tone of Russophone women authors like Kalas and Yuzbashi:

Я человек Советский, из Советских времен. А Советский Союз, Советское время было немножко фантастический период и поэтому и вещи некоторые тоже были фантастические, например имена давали очень странные, если вы помните это было и Октябрина, это был и Тракториванович это был и Сульфамидизин.¹³¹

Kasymova employs a similarly humorous tone in her novel *Таджик* (2007). Even though the work deals with harrowing themes such as sexual abuses in the aid sector, sex-trafficking in Central Asia and the difficult plight of *gastarbeiters* in Moscow, Kalas eschews depicting her characters as victims, and moves away from capitalising on emotional narratives on the struggles of postcolonial societies. These are particularly salient in Tajikistan, since the country is among the thirty poorest nations on earth. The five-year civil conflict which erupted in Tajikistan in 1991 left 50,000 casualties, over one million IDPs, 560,000 refugees, 55,000 orphaned and 20,000 widows.¹³² Recovery has been at least partial.¹³³ Compounding this, Tajikistan has suffered successive natural disasters since 1998: major floods, landslides and drought.¹³⁴ Rather than drawing inspiration from these traumas, Kasymova, like Kalas, focuses on the neo-colonial conviviality of the everyday life in her postcolonial society – she mocks local businessmen and caricatures the misguided attempts of aid workers. The work explores three storylines, a Tajik *gastarbaiter* Er's misadventures in Moscow, his wife Kumri's life back in Tajikistan, and their oldest daughter's misfortunes at the hands of sex traffickers. This chapter focuses on Kumri's storyline where Kasymova explores the ideological divide

¹³¹ Eleonora Kasymova interviewed by Nargis Kasymova, *Карьера*, 27 April 2019, 1:25-1:50 <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1UDPNJLWuYc>> [accessed 10 August 2019]

¹³² INTRAC report, p. 6.

¹³³ Tajikistan GDP data, World Bank, <<https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/NY.GDP.MKTP.KD.ZG?locations=TJ>> [accessed 10 October 2019]

¹³⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 6.

between women in the aid sector and the rest of Tajik women through Kumri's encounter with Tajik Women's Committee.

Kumri, a woman from a Tajik village, has to provide for her seven children after her husband Er goes missing in Moscow, where he emigrates in search of employment. In order to find him, Kumri turns for help to an NGO in the Tajik capital, Dushanbe, one inspired by the women's organisation where Kasymova herself used to work. There she meets the leaders of the women's committee, Sabokhat and Zulfiya. The leaders take interest in Kumri's story and decide to visit her village to learn about the lives of local women. Through Sabokhat's and Zulfiya's encounter with Kumri and her friends in the village, the author suggests that NGO workers often lack accurate understanding of women's role in Tajik society, as well as the ability and willingness to tailor feminism to local needs.

When Sabokhat and Zulfiya meet local women, the deep separation between them becomes immediately apparent. When asked about their lives, the women explain sarcastically that theirs is not a life, but a 'mere existence'.¹³⁵ Sabokhat is surprised by this complaint. 'With a clever face', she instructs women that every person is a master of her fate, and if one wants to be happy, one has to create happiness.¹³⁶ Sabokhat's comment echoes Meghan Simpson's suggestion that when women in Tajikistan show little inclination to join in public activism, their passivity is taken as a mark of Easternness, whereas in fact, as Shirin Akiner contends, 'passivity' could be interpreted as a sophisticated coping strategy to protect central values of society in a time of fluctuation and stress caused by political, economic and social upheavals — and thus a crucial contribution to community life which is fundamental to maintaining

¹³⁵ Kasymova, *Таджик*, p. 25.

¹³⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 25.

continuity and identity.¹³⁷ Simpson adds that, in any case, this ‘passivity’ is in fact ‘essentially legitimized by Western aid and assistance organizations’.¹³⁸

Indeed, Sabokhat’s patronising approach is similarly reinforcing the stereotype of a passive Eastern woman. Unsurprisingly, her stance creates friction among the group. ‘You live in the city and know nothing about our lives’ – Kumri explains to Sabokhat. She informs her that women in the village face a double burden as there are no men left, since most of them have gone to earn money in Russia.¹³⁹ However, Sabokhat remains unable to shake off her scepticism. Economic migration is not the exclusive problem of Tajikistan, besides, ‘men surely send their earnings back to their families? And surely not everyone has emigrated? – she responds.¹⁴⁰ When Sabokhat is informed that indeed all men have left, Sabokhat’s tone becomes less sceptical and more sympathetic. As women tell Sabokhat about their own experiences, how some of their husbands remarried in Russia, or disappeared without a trace, Sabokhat is overwhelmed and taken aback. She realises that she has come to these women with preconceived ideas and misconceptions, and that her training might not be adequate for dealing with problems which have roots in serious and large-scale economic and political problems:

Она устремила взгляд в угол комнаты и нервно сглотнула слюну. Ей стало стыдно. Отправляясь в кишлак для агитации местных женщин на борьбу с нищетой и ленью, она не знала, что столкнется с далеко не женскими проблемами.¹⁴¹

As local women apologise for their brutal honesty and show empathy for Sabokhat’s misguided position, their humble stance further exacerbates Sabokhat’s feelings of guilt. ‘Ashamed of her

¹³⁷ Meghan Simpson, ‘Local Strategies in Globalizing Gender Politics: Women’s Organizing in Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan’, *Journal of Muslim Minority Affairs*, 26.1 (2006), 9-3, p. 21; Shirin Akiner, ‘Between Tradition and Modernity: the Dilemma Facing Contemporary Central Asian Women’, in Mary Buckley ed., *Post-Soviet Women: From the Baltic to Central Asia* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), p. 294.

¹³⁸ Simpson, ‘Local’, p. 21.

¹³⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 25.

¹⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 25.

¹⁴¹ *Ibid.*, p. 26.

didactic speech', she meekly replies that she is the one who should apologise.¹⁴² Through Sabokhat's mistakes, Kasymova suggests the dangers of a top-down approach to local women, and an aggressive or didactic imposition of western feminist dogmas.

Through Sabokhat's and her colleague Zulfiya's encounter with Kumri and her friends, the author suggests that an accurate understanding of women's role in Tajik society, as well as the ability and willingness to tailor feminism to local needs are essential for NGO workers. Kasymova thus points to the wider post-Soviet problem: the distance between women's movements – the newly created cadre of professional activists involved in their own networks, norms, and practices – and the rest of society. According to Mendelson and Glenn, international assistance is in large part responsible for this widening gap:

As civic associations have become more institutionalized and professionalized, they have frequently been transformed into more hierarchical, centralized corporate entities that value their own survival more than their social mission. Their dependence on international assistance has often forced them to be more responsive to outside donors than to their internal constituencies.¹⁴³

The portrayal of fictional Sabokhat points to the fact that many educated Tajiks see the situation in much the same way.

Sabokhat's colleague Zulfiya appears more attuned to the intricacies of her mission. She opts for more a gentle approach and appeases women by claiming that 'women are the keepers of the family hearth'.¹⁴⁴ Not only does her statement recognise that, contrary to Sabokhat's misconception, women are hardworking, but it also implies that their dedication is paying homage to local village traditions which should not necessarily be dismissed as 'patriarchal' and oppressive. At first, her encouragement appears counter-intuitive in terms of those feminist

¹⁴² Ibid., p. 26.

¹⁴³ Ibid., p.14. Kristen Ghodsee discusses the prevalence of the same problem in post-socialist Bulgaria, highlighting 'the disconnect between the lives of women in Bulgaria and the kinds of advocacy projects being pursued by the women's NGOs in Sofia', see Ghodsee, 'Nongovernmental Ogres?', p. 47; See also Sangeeta Kamat, 'NGOs and the New Democracy', *Harvard International Review*, 25.1(2003), 65-69, p. 65.

¹⁴⁴ Kasymova, *Таджик*, p. 25.

perspectives that want to see women empowered beyond their household realm. Nonetheless, Zulfiya's strategy of appeasement proves a wise move as women become willing to listen to what she has to say. They evidence particular eagerness to learn about their rights, 'ведь до сих пор считалось, что женщина только «должна»...'.¹⁴⁵ In fact, 'разговор настолько заинтриговал собравшихся, что многие стали строить планы борьбы с несправедливостью, которые учиняют недобросовестные мужчины. Потом беседа плавно переросла на тему о роли женщины в семье, воспитании детей и жизни в целом'.¹⁴⁶ Rather than feeling intimidation, or hostility, reactions often induced by the activities of western NGOs in post-Soviet Central Asia, women become actively engaged in the negotiation of their role in their families and societies, contrary to Sabokhat's misconception.

In general, women in these societies, especially rural settings, tend to suspect feminism more broadly as an expression of cultural imperialism and Orientalism, since, as Olga Zubkovskaya points out, 'in the process of knowledge transfer the 'West' is often presented as norm, whereas the 'East' – as a deviation from it'.¹⁴⁷ In Kasymova's novel, Kumri's mother-in-law biting comments that women activists from the city are useless, selfish and misguided: 'вон, приехали твои городские, народ собрали, обозвали бездельниками и укатали. А дальше что? Им не до нас, они там, наверху, о себе думают. Как ярче губки покрасить, да краше приодеться'.¹⁴⁸ In fact, despite her kind intentions, Zulfiya also fails to grasp the sheer magnitude of women's problems, as she herself realises from bitter personal experience.

After her conversation with the women, Zulfiya volunteers to work with them and is assigned to clean the house of a local cotton industry magnate, Rustam. Once at his lavish and

¹⁴⁵ Ibid., p. 26.

¹⁴⁶ Ibid., p. 25.

¹⁴⁷ Zubkovskaya, 'Применима ли', p. 182.

¹⁴⁸ Kasymova, *Таджик*, p. 50.

vulgar mansion, the sleazy oligarch attempts to rape her – leading to an oddly comic scuffle and verbal sparring between the two. Zulfiya reveals her true identity as a prosecutor and finally cuts short the oligarch’s advances with a threat of a lawsuit. The conversation that ensues after the averted attack takes an unexpected turn and morphs into a debate on the legacies of the Soviet past – an episode where Kasymova caricatures the supposedly nationalistic postcolonial elites’ practices of ‘conviviality’ as well as the internalised ‘secondary Orientalism’ of aid workers like Zulfiya.

The debate is sparked when Rustam, having asked the name of her prey, instructs Zulfiya that she should not be including the Slavonic ‘ov’ in her surname since the president has made such an inclusion illegal. He is soon made aware that he is barking up the wrong tree, since Zulfiya is well versed in her country’s legal realities and quickly corrects him by pointing out that the president merely ‘рекомендовал вернуться к историческим корням’.¹⁴⁹ Her opponent claims wholehearted support for the president’s nationalistic decree and compares his country with other post-Soviet countries outside of Central Asia. He thus suggests that out of all post-Soviet regions, Central Asia is the one that it still overwhelmingly in the throes of the Soviet past:

Почему в Грузии, например, написание фамилий сохранились? Многие народы вообще их не меняли. Грузин же не стал Гогошвилиов? Или армянин не стал же Капраянов? Или украинец – Кириенков? Прибалт – Саливячусов? Все правильно! Когда-то же надо возвращаться туда, откуда начали.¹⁵⁰

Ironically, when Zulfiya asks the oligarch his name, he answers by including a Russian patronymic: ‘Рустам Ганиевич. – Мужчина закашлялся. – Рустамом зовут’.¹⁵¹ It is clear that Rustam adopts a protean approach to life and adapts to changing political situations for his own benefit. While he is presently criticising the Soviet regime, he himself is its product and

¹⁴⁹ Ibid., p. 30.

¹⁵⁰ Ibid., p. 30.

¹⁵¹ Ibid., p. 30.

beneficiary. Being an economist of a ‘Soviet School’, he works in the cotton business, an industry with problematic colonial history. Through Rustam’s character, the readers are reminded that in Central Asian republics, independence has become ‘a cover for preservation of the old ruling elites’, the Soviet *apparatchiki* covered with the mantle of nationalism and thus at least covertly subservient to Russo-Soviet state ideologies.¹⁵²

Zulfiya takes the opposite, equally caricatured side of the argument: ‘Я бы не спешила возвращаться назад. Позади осталась паранджа, сплошная безграмотность, дикость и сопутствующие страсти’ – she warns.¹⁵³ Her argument echoes the Soviet Orientalist rhetoric on Russia’s civilising mission to liberate Central Asian women from the supposed wilderness, patriarchy and perversion, in short, of their ‘Eastern’ ways. She unproblematically embraces *hujum* and associates her compatriots with wildness and backwardness. In so doing, she echoes the stance of the NGO workers in Kalaus’s fictional fund ‘Last Hope’ who similarly consider themselves as ‘the liberated women of the East’.¹⁵⁴ The lack of nuance in Zulfiya’s claim is brought into even sharper relief by Rustam’s rebuttal which resonates with the patriarchal trends in post-Soviet nationalistic discourses. Unconvinced by Zulfiya’s arguments, Rustam claims that without the veil, women have become perverse: ‘А сейчас? А что сейчас-то? Та же безграмотность, дикость, а вместо паранджи – разврат! Что изменилось-то?’¹⁵⁵ Evidencing his disrespect for women regardless of their rank, he keeps addressing Zulfiya on the informal you, despite her request to be addressed on a formal you. Zulfiya reddens with anger and reminds Rustam of his failed rape attempt. The comic tone maintained by the author in this confrontation emphasises the caricatural positions of both Zulfiya and Rustam.

¹⁵² Suny, *The Revenge*, p. xiv.

¹⁵³ Касимова, *Таджик*, p. 30.

¹⁵⁴ Kalaus, *Фонд*, p. 15.

¹⁵⁵ Касимова, *Таджик*, p. 30.

Zulfiya learns by bitter experience that one can never understand and empathise with the fate of oppressed women from a safe bubble of the office. ‘Работая в прокуратуре, она расследовала немало дел по изнасилованию. Но никогда, признаться, не пропускала несчастье женщин через себя. Жизнь, казалось, теперь ей мстила.’¹⁵⁶ She receives a further shock as Rustam reveals that he habitually exploits unsuspecting women who come to clean his house. He justifies his actions by suggesting that he is heroically stepping in to fill the void left behind by emigrant men, and that he gives women both the much-needed physical attention and financial assistance. He advises Zulfiya to ‘come down from the clouds’ and hypocritically reveals to her the ugly underbelly of provincial life hidden from city dwellers. He tells her how ‘кругом – нищета и безысходность’, how women sell themselves in order to survive, how all of Zulfiya’s ‘моральные штучки серьезно расходятся с жизнью’.¹⁵⁷

When Zulfiya asks Rustam about his wife, his response confirms that his current arrangement with women is far from altruistic. The oligarch tells Zulfiya that he will leave his wife as soon as she complains and that he can no longer bear the hassle and financial burden of keeping lovers: ‘Я нагулялся. Сейчас мне нужен покой, и чтобы не было претензий. Меня устраивает мой вариант’.¹⁵⁸ Rustam justifies his behaviour with the support of double patriarchal clichés, first he is a man, and therefore has stronger sexual appetites than women, secondly, he is not just any man, he is an Oriental man supposedly inherently prone to polygamy: ‘Я - восточный мужик. Я не могу только с одной женщиной! Не могу!’ – he declares.¹⁵⁹

Zulfiya’s sorrow grows further when she learns that Rustam is not alone in preying on vulnerable women in the village. It turns out that Batyr, a man in charge of bringing aid from

¹⁵⁶ Ibid., p. 29.

¹⁵⁷ Ibid., p. 31.

¹⁵⁸ Ibid., p. 32.

¹⁵⁹ Ibid., p. 32.

the city in the form of second-hand clothes for women, acts as an under-cover pimp. When financially struggling and unsuspecting women come to collect the clothes, he personally handpicks and delivers them to clients like Rustam who then set the terms for their subsequent exploitation. Like Sabokhat before her, Zulfiya becomes deeply ashamed and overwhelmed to discover her ignorance of women's problems in the regions, and of the immense barrier between cities and villages that cannot be solved by throwing humanitarian aid 'из одного бедного кишлака в другой'.¹⁶⁰ Like Sabokhat, Zulfiya realises that the activities of the NGO are also closely tied to and limited by the economic realities of the country. She wonders whether her fund's initiative to redistribute funds from wealthier provinces to poorer villages merely leads them to turn in circles, rather than effect fundamental changes. She comes to the sombre conclusion that no NGO can help the country as long as it remains in a dire economic state, that the activities of the NGO are severely jeopardised by corrupt elites – 'мошенники, воры и прочая нечистоплотная братия. Такие, как Рустам'.¹⁶¹ Through revealing the abuses of aid in the Tajik context, Kasymova appears to be concurring with the idea that transferring money directly to women can help solve the abuses of women within global aid projects.

Zulfiya and Sabokhat come to another important realisation – their work is far removed from political activism, meaning that the potential for positive impact is severely limited in their NGO. Western feminists can similarly be overwhelmed and discouraged by their encounters with their own fallibility.¹⁶² Denise Handlarski evokes one such case in relation to Samantha Sack's essay 'Why are you a Feminist?'¹⁶³ where Sacks 'describes her shock and sadness at learning that her feminist ideas are not well received everywhere':

¹⁶⁰ Ibid., p. 54.

¹⁶¹ Ibid., p. 54.

¹⁶² Denise Handlarski, 'Pro-Creation—Haraway's "Regeneration" and the Postcolonial Cyborg Body, *Women's Studies: An interdisciplinary journal*, 39.2 (2010), 73-99, p. 94.

¹⁶³ Samantha Sacks, 'Why are You a Feminist?', *Canadian Women's Studies. Les cahiers de la femme*, 17.2 (1997), pp. 143-144.

A woman in Latin America asks her [Sacks] why she's a feminist, and after hearing her reply, says "I don't care what you call it, I just want to feed my babies and maybe someday shit in a toilet". This led Sacks to realize that her white, liberal-feminism was not necessary translatable, understood, or relevant in all contexts.¹⁶⁴

Despite her good intentions, and her abrupt awakening after her encounter with Rustam, when Zulfiya returns to the city, she reverts to her mode of depoliticised activism. One significant factor in her decision to remain passive is local corruption which permeates her own NGO. Zulfiya decides to keep silent on Rustam's abuses, fearing that, as the cotton magnate Rustam has warned her, she would fail to prove anything and only create problems for herself. Above all, she is concerned for her own reputation, and is relieved that at least Rustam 'did not kick her out with a scandal' and thus 'forever slander' her.¹⁶⁵ By refusing to speak out, she becomes part of a system which she considers a leftover of the Soviet past, where every man looks out for his/herself, and thus feeds the system of oppression. When she asks her colleagues if they know Rustam, they all reply that he is a 'good', 'decent' man.¹⁶⁶ Their response suggests that either her colleagues are guilty of fateful ignorance of the abuses that they should be aware of, or that they are holding silence over them, like Zulfiya.

Critics of NGOs have pointed out that donor-politics foster the de-politicisation of women's activism.¹⁶⁷ Kasymova's fictional NGO confirms this connection. Zulfiya does show genuine concern for women and loathes herself for feeling so helpless against those who hold power, of entertaining the doomed possibility of 'strangling the powerful with her bare hands' [Голыми руками задушить властимущих].¹⁶⁸ Her colleagues' actions, however, confirm

¹⁶⁴ Handlarski, 'Pro-Creation', p. 94.

¹⁶⁵ Kasymova, *Таджик*, p. 54.

¹⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 54.

¹⁶⁷ Zubkovskaya, 'Применима ли', p. 182.

¹⁶⁸ Kasymova, *Таджик*, p. 54.

the criticism that the donor-structure of NGOs leads to unhealthy competition for resources between elite groups who often do little or nothing to help their target groups.¹⁶⁹ They also justify Kumri's mother-in-law's suspicions on the selfish motives of NGO workers in the city.¹⁷⁰

The mother-in-law's view on the insurmountable class differences and NGO workers' approach to their charitable projects as pastimes are also proven correct when the women's committee meets after Zulfiya's visit to the village. Through this episode, Kasymova reveals that not all aid workers are driven by altruistic goals and that some of them are more concerned about travelling abroad. When the leader Sonya declares that she needs to choose a delegate for a seminar abroad and selects Zulfiya as the most qualified candidate, one of her colleagues complains that Zulfiya went to Belgium, and that she, an employee with an MA degree [kandidat nauk] and an extensive experience of working on women's issues, has to be picked instead. After the meeting, the vice-chair tells the leader that there is one more contender for the trip, 'жена кого-то из приближенных Президента' and that it was futile to discuss the issue in the first place since 'это решено в верхах'.¹⁷¹ The incident demonstrates the susceptibility of women's organisations to nepotism and the pressures of the wider political system where oligarchs such as Rustam perpetuate in-group behaviour and what Kasymova identifies as corrupt practices inherited from the Soviet era.¹⁷²

¹⁶⁹ Sloat, 'The Rebirth'; Zubkovskaya, 'Применима ли', p. 182.

¹⁷⁰ Kasymova, *Таджик*, p. 50.

¹⁷¹ *Ibid.*, p. 55.

¹⁷² It has to be noted that Caroline Humphrey has problematised the exaggerated stereotype of social practices in the post-Soviet sphere as being heavily 'corrupt'. She writes, for instance: 'The torrent of analyses of "corruption" in the Western press, mirrored often in the Russian press, does not correspond to the differentiated practice and discourse of the people themselves. Journalistic harangues about generalized corruption cannot be helpful when they assume that all extra-legal transactions are equally condemned and condemnable'. Caroline Humphrey, *The Unmaking of Soviet Life: Everyday Economies After Socialism* (Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press, 2002), p. 128.

Rena Yuzbashi's *From Воробышек with love* (2007)

Azeri author Rena Yuzbashi's novel *From Vorobyshek With Love* suggests that Azerbaijan is facing similar pressures to Burkutstan (Kazakhstan) and Tajikistan when attempting to define a sovereign political path. Yuzbashi currently lives and works in Moscow, where she moved after receiving higher education in Baku and Europe. Her mother is a teacher of Russian language and literature, and like Kalaus and Kasymova, she can boast close familiarity with Russian culture.¹⁷³ The author even claims better knowledge of Russian language than most average Russians.¹⁷⁴ Unlike Kalaus, however, Yuzbashi believes that language defines a writer, and since she writes in Russian, she considers herself an Azeri writer who is making a contribution to Russian culture.¹⁷⁵ Although, Yuzbashi holds Russian literature in such high regard, that she does not consider herself worthy of the title 'писатель', opting instead for 'автор': 'Я пишу на русском, а русская литература установила такую планку для слова писатель, что мне до нее расти, но я очень надеюсь, что я до нее дорасту' – Yuzbashi declares.¹⁷⁶ Also unlike Kalaus, Yuzbashi ascribes great importance to the status of Russian language in Azerbaijan. In one of her interviews, she identifies the decline of the Russian language in her country as one of her biggest concerns. She claims that Azeris have acquired much through this language and draws a parallel between Azerbaijan and India:

¹⁷³ Rena Yuzbashi's personal page, <<https://yuzbashi.livejournal.com/profile>> [accessed 11 April 2019]

¹⁷⁴ Rena Yuzbashi, interview, 'Five o'clock с Азером Гарибом', 26 April 2015, 28:20-29:30 <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=t2qRLJTrH4w>> [accessed 2 August 2019].

¹⁷⁵ Yuzbashi, interview, 'Five o'clock', 26:28-26:51.

¹⁷⁶ Ibid., 2:26 -2:36. It is hard to say whether one title is considered more prestigious than the other in the post-Soviet world, although forum discussions seem to concur with Yuzbashi's view. For instance, according to one contributor, 'автор - это принадлежность персоны к определённом тексту. Писатель — это призвание'. 'Автор или писатель?', discussion thread opened by Elena Ershova, 8 September 2016, <<https://litnet.com/ru/blogs/post/10140>> [accessed 20 September 2019]

Я знаю, что сегодня каждый день нам говорят, что у нас есть родной язык, я с этим согласна. Конечно, Азербайджанский язык должен существовать, конечно, он должен развиваться, без языка немислим и этнос. Но я хочу сказать, что и Русский язык очень многое дал Азербайджанцам. Очень позитивный пример Индии. [...] Английский язык там никто ниоткуда не убирал [...]. Русский язык один из шести языков ООН и ничего плохого не будет, Азербайджан большая страна, здесь могут ужиться два языка.¹⁷⁷

Despite her fondness for Russian language and culture, Yuzbashi adopts the same ruthless approach to identifying flaws in the post-Soviet neo-colonial condition as one favoured by Kalas and Kasymova. For instance, while Yuzbashi claims that she has not personally experienced racism in beloved city, Moscow, her bestseller novel *Скинхед* (2010)¹⁷⁸ explores fatal prejudice against ethnic Caucasians and Central Asians in Moscow by following a young Russian boy who joins skinheads. She is equally impartial in *From Vorobyshek With Love* which draws a humorous, tongue-in-cheek portrait of post-Soviet Azeri modernity.

From Vorobyshek With Love centres on the protagonist affectionately referred to as Vorobyshek [Little Sparrow], a woman in her thirties who works in an NGO in Baku. The novel is written in the form of Vorobyshek's emails sent to her friends and colleagues. Like Kalas and Kasymova, Yuzbashi evokes the pressures faced by post-Soviet countries in terms of catching-up with western standards of democracy, and questions the readiness of her country's politico-economic systems to correspond to Europeans modernity, whether concerning important political phenomena, such as elections, or other issues such as the state of the arts, or public services. She recurrently deplors the condition of the public sector and mocks the incompetence of her superiors who are as selfish as the employees and benefactor of 'Last Hope'.

As we saw, in Kalas's novel, Burkuts' criticism of their modernity tends to escalate into self-Orientalism as they identify themselves as inferior to Russia. That one of the leading positions in the fund is taken up by a Russian man who considers Burkuts worthless savages

¹⁷⁷ Ibid., 22:16 - 23:40.

¹⁷⁸ Rena Yuzbashi, *Скинхед* [Skinhead] (Moscow: Eksmo, 2010)

hints at Burkutstan's subservient position vis-à-vis its former master. By contrast, even though Vorobyshek is constantly measuring up her country against Europe, she never suggests that Azerbaijan is inferior to Russia. Her suspicion that Azerbaijan might be better off pursuing its own independent course and taking an active role in world politics and diplomacy, for instance through its willingness to help developing countries, pre-empts Azerbaijan's current position as more politically self-sufficient than that of Kazakhstan. Yuzbashi's writing suggests that while both countries hold much weight in regional politics due to being major oil producers, nations of Transcaucasia are arguably less susceptible to the effects of secondary Orientalism due to the internal hierarchy of republics of the Soviet period which placed Central Asian republics at the bottom of the civilisation scale.

Like Asya, Vorobyshek shows a soft spot for Moscow, but manages to assess Russia, and especially its foreign policy, with a degree of caution and suspicion. She cannot hide her affection for the ex-imperial centre with all its quirks and shortcomings, its bookstores, streets and coffee shops where coffee is never hot, or its cafes where 'кусочек пирога стоит столько же, сколько в Баку обед из шести блюд на восемь человек'.¹⁷⁹ And yet, she realises that her country has to tread lightly not to antagonise Russia, especially after witnessing the experiences of neighbouring countries such as Georgia.¹⁸⁰ The narrator recalls the 2006 crisis in Russo-Georgian relations when Russia reacted to Georgia's pro-Western orientation through punitive actions – the placement of a ban on imports of Georgian wine in Russia, breaking of financial links, increased gas prices, as well as deportations of Georgians from Russia – actions which the European Court declared as having been in violation of the European Court of Human Rights.¹⁸¹ Her spirit is politically independent, as evidenced by her sadness over the

¹⁷⁹ Since page numbers are unavailable in the electronic edition, I am indicating the dates assigned to the emails which contain the quotes. The current one is 6/01/2007.

¹⁸⁰ Yuzbashi, From Воробышек, 2/10/2006.

¹⁸¹ RadioFreeEurope, 'European Court Condemns Russia For 2006 Expulsion Of Georgians', *RadioFreeEurope/RadioLiberty* <<https://www.rferl.org/a/georgia-russia-expulsions-human-rights/25444207.html>> [accessed 16 May 2019]. See also, Human Rights Watch, 'Singled Out |

fact Russia recalled Russian diplomats from Georgia instead of calling off Russian troops.¹⁸² Her sentiment signals a critical approach to Russia's foreign policies and her solidarity with the neighbouring country rather than blind allegiance to Russia. Later, when she visits Moscow, she again alludes to Russia's anti-Georgian policies, mocking how Russians banned Georgian wines or changed the names of Georgian dishes to strip them of their national context.¹⁸³ She also criticises Russia for absurdly homogenising Transcaucasia and recalls how she is detained and extensively questioned at a Russian airport just because she is a citizen of a country which borders with Georgia.¹⁸⁴

Vorobyshek recognises that Russian interests in the region complicate the country's EU ambitions, and that Azerbaijan has to engage in a tricky power balance game, especially due to its resources of oil which 'для иностранцев всегда была актуальной темой'.¹⁸⁵ As Murad Ismayilov points out, the country's foreign policy must balance itself between the West and Russia on one hand, and the Moslem world and Israel on the other.¹⁸⁶ At the same time, Vorobyshek considers Azerbaijan's European path problematic. She doubts that Azerbaijan is ready to correspond to European standards. Implying that the parliament lags behind EU standards and meets them only superficially, she jokes that 'зал для заседаний в парламенте отремонтировали. Он теперь соответствует европейским стандартам. Я имею в виду зал для заседаний'.¹⁸⁷ Thus, Vorobyshek is constantly measuring up Azerbaijan against Europe. In one email, she implies that Azerbaijan is not as politically relaxed as other Western European

Russia's Detention and Expulsion of Georgians', *Human Rights Watch*, 2007
<<https://www.hrw.org/report/2007/09/30/singled-out/russias-detention-and-expulsion-georgians>>
[accessed 16 May 2019]

¹⁸² Yuzbashi, *From Воробышек*, 10/10/2006.

¹⁸³ *Ibid.*, 30/11/2006.

¹⁸⁴ *Ibid.*, 6/01/2007.

¹⁸⁵ *Ibid.*, 29/08/2006.

¹⁸⁶ Murad Ismayilov, 'Postcolonial Hybridity, Contingency, and the Mutual Embeddedness of Identity and Politics in Post-Soviet Azerbaijan: Some Initial Thoughts', *Caucasus Analytical Digest*, 77.14(2015) 7-14 (p. 12).

¹⁸⁷ Yuzbashi, *From Воробышек*, 04/10/2006.

countries.¹⁸⁸ In another, she criticizes European food.¹⁸⁹ But in general, she is more critical of Azerbaijan. She criticizes poor food on Azeri airlines and the way that ‘Oriental’ transport etiquette contributes to hellish traffic jams.¹⁹⁰ She also points out the lack of progress in technological developments and questions her employer when he proposes technology training sessions in the regions. She jokes that these trainings on ‘modern communications’ would only be relevant if one considers landlines as belonging to modern communications.¹⁹¹ She also criticises the corruption in state institutions such as the sanitary epidemiological reconnaissance service (*sanepidemstancia*) which attempts to financially exploit her.¹⁹² Culture does not escape her reproaches either: for instance she ridicules the visitors of a contemporary art exhibition:

Сложно было представить себе людей более далеких от модерна, чем наши функционеры от искусства. А наши бизнесмены? Более уморительного зрелища, чем мужчина пятидесяти лет с последней моделью коммуникатора в руках, с золотыми запонками, часами и зубами, разглядывающего статую Аполлона из пластиковых бутылок, я еще не видела.¹⁹³

Much to the annoyance of the artist, she plays a trick on the visitors by intently gazing at a fire extinguisher as if it were part of the exhibition, and thus attracts them to the ‘piece’.¹⁹⁴ She disapproves of the local elites in general, noting that they are less well read than traders in bazaars, suggesting that the country's economic problems force well educated people to turn to employment that does not match their skills. She notes how she discovers Turkish poetry through none other than a local potato trader who read her Yusuf Nabi’s qasida.¹⁹⁵

¹⁸⁸ Ibid., 11/09/2006.

¹⁸⁹ Ibid., 08/02/2007.

¹⁹⁰ Ibid., 6/09/2006; 07/02/2007.

¹⁹¹ Ibid., 4/07/2007.

¹⁹² Ibid., 25/12/2006.

¹⁹³ Ibid., 04/10/2006.

¹⁹⁴ Ibid., 04/10/2006.

¹⁹⁵ Ibid., 5/07/2007.

Vorobyshek's Euroscepticism also stems from the fact that she considers her country's positioning in relation to Europe as peripheral. She makes a promise that on her work trip to Paris she will 'make a good impression' on Europe and thus help Azerbaijan's EU ambitions.¹⁹⁶ At the same time, however, when Bulgaria and Romania join the European Union, Vorobyshek experiences mixed feelings. While she hopes that perhaps Azerbaijan might have a chance to join too, she wonders whether seeking EU membership would entail 'holding out a hand like a poor relative begging at the EU door'.¹⁹⁷ 'А нам на самом деле стоит задуматься, нам это надо' – she wonders.¹⁹⁸ According to Vorobyshek, seeking membership of the European Union would place Azerbaijan in a position of a beggar entering a master-slave paradigm, suggesting that even upon joining other European countries, her country's position would be one of weakness, dependency and inferiority. It is for this reason that Vorobyshek wonders whether an alternative, not necessarily European course might serve as a better option for the country which has only just emerged from its previous 'master'.

In fact, recently, Azerbaijan has been steadily growing both self-sufficient, not least because Western democratic discourse, akin to Russian neo-imperialism, has come to be seen by Azerbaijan's political elite as constraining the Azerbaijani state in its ability to exercise 'full' sovereignty and enjoy autonomy in its domestic and foreign policies.¹⁹⁹ Through organising and hosting various events of international magnitude, the country has made efforts 'to position itself as a crossroads and bridge between civilisations and, as such, as an emerging leader and world centre in promoting interfaith and intercultural dialogue across the globe'.²⁰⁰ This eagerness to become an important world player is apparent in the country's willingness to

¹⁹⁶ Ibid., 20/08/2006.

¹⁹⁷ Ibid., 29/09/2006 (с протянутой рукой, как бедным родственникам, стоять у самых его дверей).

¹⁹⁸ Ibid., 29/09/2006.

¹⁹⁹ Murad Ismayilov, 'Power, Knowledge, and Pipelines: Understanding the Politics of Azerbaijan's Foreign Policy, *Caucasus Survey*, 2.1-2, (2014), 79-129 (p. 90).

²⁰⁰ Ismayilov, 'Power', p. 97.

help developing countries. Vorobyshek echoes such themes when she boasts, for instance, that Azerbaijan has committed itself to implementing all the goals of the UN's Million Development Goals project, one of them being the provision of drinking water to 'third world' countries.²⁰¹ She also gushes how the president emphasizes his country's sovereignty in his diplomatic visits. She jokes: 'интересно, в какую бы страну ни поехал бы наш президент, репортаж оттуда начинается со слов, что это страна была одной из первых, кто признал независимость Азербайджана. Я насчитала таких стран пятнадцать'.²⁰² However, Vorobyshek suggests that despite the country's best efforts, Azerbaijan is still far from achieving complete cultural and economic self-sufficiency, as is well epitomised by one of her flights with the national airlines: 'по TV показывают американский фильм с титрами на немецком, по радио транслируют итальянскую музыку, кормят едой турецкого производства, учитывая, что лечу из Москвы, все объявления — на русском. Добро пожаловать в Азербайджан!!'.²⁰³

Similar tendencies of inefficiency due to multiple influences govern Vorobyshek's own organisation, which, like 'Last Hope', is funded by foreign benefactors whom she teasingly describes as 'bloodsuckers'.²⁰⁴ Vorobyshek's boss Pasha is depicted as incompetent and governed by selfish motivations. He is reluctant to spend money on charitable actions, such as helping homeless children. Vorobyshek has to carefully manipulate him into taking steps that benefit society. Pasha finally agrees to help the children's home after Vorobyshek reluctantly complies to his whims. Pasha instructs Vorobyshek that the children's home should send him and the NGO a thank you letter, and that Vorobyshek has to personally make sure that these letters are also sent to the head office in Geneva. Pasha realises that his act of seeming altruism

²⁰¹ Yuzbashi, *From Vorobyshkek*, 19/12/2006. The Millennium Development Goals refers to the eight international development goals for the year 2015 that had been established following the Millennium Summit of the United Nations in 2000.

²⁰² *Ibid.*, 13/12/2006.

²⁰³ *Ibid.*, 13/04/2007.

²⁰⁴ *Ibid.*, 17/08/2006.

will benefit his public image and earn him brownie points with western donors.²⁰⁵ In another instance, Vorobyshek has to ensure that Pasha's training in Italy receives the right publicity through coverage in national news, and once more highlights Pasha's inefficiency by reminding him that it is important that he recollect the name of the organisation which conducted the workshop!.²⁰⁶ Pasha's predecessor seems no better than Pasha as it transpires that he has nepotistically demoted the hardworking Vorobyshek in favour of his niece.²⁰⁷

Vorobyshek is equally critical of the efficiency in the public and bureaucratic sectors. For instance, she is stunned by the incompetence of some of her countries' diplomats who are clueless about how NGOs work. She recollects her shock upon having had to explain to one of these diplomats the basic concepts of working with public organisations, the diaspora, and the history of the conflict [presumably the war in Nagorno-Karabakh].²⁰⁸ Yuzbashi's work thus corroborates Huseyn Aliyev's statement that while in the Western context civil society is largely seen as a not-for-profit sector, in the South Caucasus, civil society and volunteer work are closely associated with personal gain or profit-making, owing to the general lack of understanding of the concept, the lavish funding that NGOs receive from their foreign donors, and the paucity of alternative opportunities for prestigious and well-paid work.²⁰⁹

Given all this, one effect of Yuzbashi's satire is to expose Azerbaijan's challenges in catching-up with western standards of democracy and modernity. Yet she is equally critical about the supposedly 'normal' Western perspective. Like Kalas, Yuzbashi suggests that post-Soviet countries and, by extension, their NGOs, still have a long way to go before transcending self-Orientalism, defining an independent path, and working out an effective bureaucracy divorced from the Soviet legacies.

²⁰⁵ Ibid., 9/01/2007.

²⁰⁶ Ibid., 12/02/2007.

²⁰⁷ Ibid., 14/09/2006.

²⁰⁸ Ibid., 15/09/2006-16/09/2006.

²⁰⁹ Huseyn Aliyev, 'Examining the Use of Informal Networks by NGOs in Azerbaijan and Georgia', *Journal of Civil Society*, 11.3 (2015), 317-332 (p. 326).

Conclusion

One of the defining characteristics of post-Soviet postcoloniality – the secondary Eurocentrism spreading over the ‘colonised’ as well as the ‘colonisers’ – remains acutely pronounced in the functioning of NGOs in post-Soviet Kazakhstan, Tajikistan and Azerbaijan. Russophone women’s NGO narratives offer an intimate insider glimpse into these neo-colonial dynamics. In Kalaus’s *Фонд*, interactions between the Russian superior Oleg and his Kazakh colleagues reveal that Russia’s historical inferiority complex vis-à-vis the West, which informed Soviet colonialism, continues to feed the country’s Orientalist attitudes towards Central Asia and the ensuing discourse on the region’s underdevelopment. Kalaus suggests that the employees of the local NGOs in turn internalise Orientalist attitudes. In Kasymova’s *Таджик*, self-Orientalising tendencies are most notably evidenced by Tajik women activists’ approaches to gender, which they understand through the lens of the Soviet civilising mission and Western feminism. Kasymova highlights how NGOs’ subjection to gender Orientalism also fosters an unhealthy rural-urban divide among women’s communities.

Rather than merely critiquing foreign actors, the authors point to the complicity between neo-colonial forces, self-serving elites and their subjects. They expose the aggressive efforts of direct transplantation of western epistemology to the region, the problematic legacies of the Soviet colonial past, the persisting Russian political presence in the postcolonial present, and finally, local corruption. According to them, it is this complex whirlpool of political influences that limits NGOs’ positive impact on post-Soviet countries which, despite formal independence, are still struggling to define a sovereign political path and a coherent post-Soviet

identity. This phenomenon is most explicitly critiqued in Rena Yuzbashi's novel which caricatures Azeri modernity.

Finally, as women make up the majority of the aid sector, they are at the forefront of negotiating how the norms promoted by their countries' NGOs can be adopted, adapted, or resisted before they are transferred to women that these organisations are supposed to serve. Russophone women's NGO narratives reveal that aid workers not only struggle to critique these norms, but also fail to address women's double colonisation in the aid sector, even becoming complicit in it, as evidenced by Zulfiya's decision not to expose the sexual abuses of the Tajik oligarch Rustam. However, through their very critiques from within the elite system, Kalas, Yuzbashi and Kasymova defy the object position to which women tend to be relegated in the political power games of their nations, emphasising that the relation between them and the state actors should not be seen simply in terms of exploitation, but rather in terms of 'conviviality'.

Chapter Five

Beyond Identity: Cyborgs, Queers and Other Posthumans of Sci-Fi Utopias

Introduction

This thesis began by analysing how post-Soviet writers come to terms with the trauma of the post-Soviet transition through various evocations of the postcolonial ‘unhomely’ whereby national belonging is mostly associated with experiences of pain and alienation. This chapter focuses on an alternative method of negotiating post-Soviet selfhood by sci-fi writers whose utopic and dystopic visions altogether call into question the concept of national identity and often reject it in favour of post-Soviet posthumanism. The main focus of my analysis is *Совсем Другие* (2018), a collection of feminist and queer sci-fi stories by twelve Kazakh and Kyrgyz (as well as two Russian and one Korean) writers, ecofeminists and gender activists.¹ I approach the collection through critical methodology at the intersection of posthumanist and postcolonial theory, especially through Donna Haraway’s concepts of cyborg identities and companion species, as well as Jacques Derrida’s essays on postmodern subjectivity. The utopias in the stories are populated by humans, cyborgs and non-human beings that often coexist harmoniously in a technological world that is free from colonial impulses, holds a high respect for the environment, does not seek to establish a hegemony of humans over animals, and rejects the hierarchies of race, gender and class. I read the collection as the authors’ attempt to

¹ *Совсем другие*, ed. by Oksana Shatalova and Georgy Mamedov (Bishkek: SHTAB Press, 2018)

critically examine the Soviet colonial project and the post-Soviet realities in Central Asia, including the often-neglected ecological and LGBTQ+ issues, and argue that their utopias serve as platforms for imagining alternative post-Soviet, post-human identities which challenge what they perceive as racist, nationalistic and patriarchal conceptions of current post-Soviet selfhood.

The tendency to keep the utopian spirit alive and draw politically subversive energies from it can be considered a wider post-Soviet phenomenon not limited to Central Asia. A notable example is *KAJET* journal's recent issue – 'On Utopias'. *KAJET*, a 'journal of Eastern European encounters', revamps 'the piercing and onerous legacy of samizdat endeavours' in Eastern Europe.² It combines an intellectual and 'hip' approach to provide 'an alternative medium where artists & academics can actively co-exist and thrive'.³ Based in Bucharest, Romania, where 'independent magazines have long been used as a piercing political weapon', *KAJET* intends to break down misconceptions and generalised ideas about the Eastern European region, or the 'Other' of Western Europe.⁴ 'Undeterred by its constant position as *l'autre* [Other] in the world order paradigm, Eastern Europe is more than just itinerant gloom, more than a sheer pile of debris hanging around and awaiting reconstruction' – *KAJET* claims.⁵ Their second issue 'On Utopias' critiques 'the current desolate order' in post-Communist Eastern Europe and reflects on the region's 'troubled relationship with the notion of utopia'.⁶ According to the issue's editor Petrică Mogoş :

The fall of communism across the Eastern Bloc triggered the emergence of a new environment marked by commodification, precarity, dread, alienation, and depression. Unable to creep in the paralysing portal toward neoliberal capitalism, the collective utopia of communism was suddenly demystified and fragmented into a myriad of private utopias. The desire called utopia

² *KAJET Journal*, 'A Manifesto: or Why Bother about Eastern Europe?', para. 4 <<https://www.kajetjournal.com/manifesto>> [accessed 2 September 2019].

³ *KAJET Journal*, 'A Manifesto', para 4.

⁴ *KAJET Journal*, Press Page, <<https://www.kajetjournal.com/press>> [accessed 4 September 2019].

⁵ *KAJET Journal*, 'A Manifesto', para 2.

⁶ *KAJET Journal*, Issue 2, 'On Utopias', edited by Petrică Mogoş and Laura Naum, editorial excerpt, <<https://www.kajetjournal.com/issue-no2>> [accessed 4 March 2019].

disintegrated. Post-communism became anti-utopian par excellence, but also entirely devoid of prospects – a vast and complete emptiness. Post-communism became the age of nothingness.⁷

While contemporary writers from the post-Soviet sphere certainly evidence a widespread perception of vacuity,⁸ Mogoş's fissured statement raises a question on whether 'a myriad of private utopias' actually signifies absence of utopia, let alone 'the age of nothingness'. As shall I explore later, contemporary writers from Central Asia blur the distinction between 'private' and 'collective' utopias as their acts of imagining personal utopias are also political acts aimed at prompting society towards a collective reflection on alternative post-Soviet realities. *KAJET*'s approach appears similar, although more cautious. In view of the perceived pessimistic reality, 'the age of nothingness', the editors of *KAJET* ask: 'what do we have to do in order to convey a new meaning of resistance and how do we re-imagine an Eastern European future?'⁹, more specifically, 'is there room for utopia after utopia?'.¹⁰ An affirmative answer to this question is explicit in the project's declared ambition 'to decipher and resurface utopian alternatives.'¹¹ A similar aim is proclaimed more boldly by the Kyrgyz publication 'Бишкек утопический' – 'найти в утопиях прошлого материал как для критического осмысления настоящего, так и для радикального воображения будущего'.¹²

Both 'Бишкек утопический' and the publication *Совсем Другие* are part of the same project funded by SHTAB Bishkek. Founded in 2012 in Bishkek, SHTAB (the School for the Creative Actualisation of the Future) is a pan-Central-Asian collective of thinkers, artists and activists. SHTAB labels its projects, which re-evaluate the Soviet past and imagine post-Soviet

⁷ Petrică Mogoş, 'Age of Nothingness' in 'On Utopias', p. 11.

⁸ As I explored in the chapter on the unhomey in post-Soviet literature.

⁹ Mogoş, 'Age of Nothingness', p. 11.

¹⁰ *KAJET Journal*, Foreword to 'On Utopias', <<https://www.kajetjournal.com/issue-no2>> [accessed 4 March 19].

¹¹ *KAJET Journal*, editorial excerpt, <<https://www.kajetjournal.com/issue-no2>> [accessed 4 March 2019]

¹² The project's official website <<http://www.art-initiatives.org/ru/content/seriya-kart-utopicheskaya-istoriya>> [accessed on 6 March 2019].

utopias, as queer communist activism. Members of SHTAB understand queer in a broad sense, as ‘a rejection of all gender, ethnic, racial and national boundaries’ and consider that ‘queer and communism are mutually dependent and inevitably interlinked notions’ which both denote the process of overcoming alienation’.¹³

In Bishkek, SHTAB has ran tours of ‘Utopian Bishkek’, produced plays and made posters and short films for leftist and LGBTQ+ political organisations. One of the group’s most daring projects was a hoax on the ‘Utopian Bishkek’ that had apparently flourished just below the conservative surface of Brezhnev-era Central Asia.¹⁴ The group claimed that they discovered materials belonging to the previously unknown ‘Kollontai Commune’ supposedly active in 1970s Frunze, the capital of the Soviet Socialist Republic of Kirghizia. In 2015, at a public lecture in Moscow organised by an oligarch-backed art foundation, the co-founder of SHTAB Georgy Mamedov presented the research findings which later turned as figments of SHTAB’s utopic imagination. According to SHTAB, The ‘Kollontai Commune’ (named after the Bolshevik feminist leader Alexandra Kollontai) communicated with each other through postcards of the buildings of socialist Frunze, on the backs of which were inscribed quotations from Marx, Lenin and Engels, such as ‘MAKE WAY FOR COSMIC EROS’ (Marx and Engels). The ‘Kollontai Commune’ apparently went even further and questioned heteronormative modes of being in favour of fluid identity models.¹⁵ SHTAB claimed that the Commune also made architectural drawings of extraordinary lightweight structures floating freely in space, evidently inspired by the ‘Flying City’ of the 1920s architect Georgy Krutikov, but again, surpassed the daring spirit of the early Soviet culture through their proposed sexual

¹³ Samuel Goff, ‘SHTAB: The Queer Communists of Bishkek Bringing Politics and Art Back Together’, *The Calvert Journal*, 11 December 2017
<<https://www.calvertjournal.com/features/show/9356/new-east-100-shtab-queer-communists-bishkek>> [accessed 7 September 2019]

¹⁴ Owen Hatherley, *The Adventures of Owen Hatherley in the Post-Soviet Space* (London: Repeater Books, 2018), p.144.

¹⁵ Hatherley, *The Adventures*, p. 144.

experiments in cosmos. While the oligarchs at the art conference in Moscow received the findings with great enthusiasm, the ‘artefacts’ discovered by SHTAB were mere fabrications – posters found in second-hand bookshops in Bishkek. In the previous chapters, I have suggested that a similar trickster sensibility characterises Russophone women’s writings, especially the aid narratives. Indeed, SHTAB’s deception of Russian oligarchs closely resonates with Rena Yuzbashi’s caricatural portrait of Azeri oligarchs who wrongly perceive a fire extinguisher as an art piece when the protagonist plays a prank on them. But SHTAB’s hoax was intended as more than ‘a joke on the art world, or on credulous leftist aesthetes, hoping to validate their politics in the Soviet experiment’.¹⁶ It meant to fill an important gap, ‘of inserting into Soviet history something that it ought to have had but didn’t’.¹⁷

SHTAB’s latest project *Совсем Другие* which I analyse in this chapter, is the next step in the group’s programme of selectively drawing from and reimagining the project of Soviet socialism in the post-Soviet era. Interestingly, the phenomenon of reappraising utopian ideals is not dominant in Russian culture.¹⁸ Neither are metaphors of transhuman bodies used to the same effect in the metropolitan literary discourse as they are in the post-Soviet, post-colonial texts from Central Asia.¹⁹ The proliferation of posthuman utopias in Russophone culture differs

¹⁶ Ibid., p.145.

¹⁷ Ibid., p.145.

¹⁸ On the whole post-Soviet Russian sci-fi literature evoking alternative utopian/dystopian (e.g. works by Victor Pelevin, Vladimir Sorokin) has not moved far beyond the traditional male-dominated world of such authors as the Strugatskys and Yevgeny Zamyatin.

¹⁹ The most dominant transhuman character, one that has proliferated on the Russian cultural scene, is a vampire. My close readings of two Russian novels on vampires, Victor Pelevin’s *Empire V* (Moscow: Eksmo, 2006) and Maksim Chertanov’s (penname of Mariya Kuznetsova) *Роман с кровью* (Moscow: Agraf, 2003) suggest that vampires echo Russia’s fears of the ‘Other’, internal colonisation, Westernisation, capitalism and technologies. Vampires appear as members of secret and most powerful organisations seeking to control humans. When Russia’s identity anxieties are evoked, one should also expect discussion of the ‘Eastern’ other. Indeed, vampires in these texts also echo the prevalence of racist discourses in post-Soviet Russia. Some vampire groups specifically target the nationalities of the Caucasus and Central Asia. Furthermore, the protagonist in both texts is an existentially lost young man seeking a father figure and easily manipulated by the Skinhead-type vampire organisations. Vampires are not exclusive to post-Soviet Russian literature, see for instance Kazakh author Lilya Kalas’s (one-off pen-name ‘Gulya Korolyova’) *Роман с кровью* (Almaty: Искандэр, 2005). On vampires in post-Soviet Russian culture see Etkind, ‘Post-Soviet Hauntology’ and ‘Stories of the Undead’.

from the preoccupation of metropolitan writers with more conservative evocations of transhuman figures, especially vampires – the archetypal ‘Others’ of world literature since Bram Stoker’s *Dracula* (1897).²⁰ While authors in Central Asia and the Caucasus are concerned with challenging postcolonial nationalisms and the legacies of Soviet colonialism, Russian literature is preoccupied with commentary on Russia’s anxieties over its perpetual Others – the West and Russia’s ‘Eastern’ neighbours’. The contrast further suggests that evocations of utopian visions in the post-Soviet sphere outside Russia are much more than mere incidental motifs.

An important difference between Central Asian and Eastern European utopian projects, as evidenced in *Совсем Другое*, lies in the former region’s firmly pronounced postcolonial dimension.²¹ In general, the urgency of examining Central Asia’s colonial past is also explicit in other cultural projects in Central Asia. For instance, in June 2018, leading contemporary artists in Kyrgyzstan devoted an exhibition to the question of post-Soviet identity and Soviet colonialism in Central Asia (Figure 9).

²⁰ As Elleke Boehmer points out, by tracing a map of Britain under threat of invasion from the East, *Dracula* gives expression to ‘an imperialism that feels itself to be overstretched and insecure’. See Elleke Boehmer, ‘Empire and Modern Writing’, in *The Cambridge History of Twentieth-Century English Literature*, ed. by Laura Marcus and Peter Nicholls (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), p. 56. On the close symbolic connection between vampires and colonialism see *Transnational and Postcolonial Vampires: Dark Blood*, ed. by Johan Höglund and Tabish Khair (Basingstoke and New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013).

²¹ Contemporary East European cultural theorists are often primarily concerned with negotiations of a perceived neo-colonial relationship to Western Europe and the EU, and mainly critique Soviet colonialism for exacerbating the Othering of Eastern Europe within the European family. See for instance, György Péteri ‘The Occident Within: Or The Drive For Exceptionalism and Modernity’, *Kritika: Explorations In Russian And Eurasian History* 9.4 (2008), 929-937; Marysia H. Galbraith, ‘Between East and West: Geographic Metaphors of Identity in Poland’, *Ethos*, 32(2008), 51-81; Jaroslaw Oleszczynski, ‘Bridging the Post-Soviet and the Postcolonial: How can the Soviet Colonies be Located within the Postcolonial Discourse? A Case Study of Poland and Romania’ (unpublished master’s thesis, Universiteit Leiden, 2017).

Figure 9. Exhibition 'Red Pill' organised by the artistic organisation Laboratoria Ci, Kyrgyz National Museum of Fine Arts named after Gapar Aitiev, Bishkek, 9 June - 30 June 2018. The photo is my own.²²



Совсем Другие's approach to the Soviet past is inquisitive: it highlights the importance of critically assessing rather than erasing the Soviet past, and while denouncing aspects of Soviet colonialism, also recognises the emancipatory potential of Soviet communist ideology. Most of the collection's explorations of what it means to be gay, lesbian, transgender, non-human or non-white, or how these categories can be reimagined in utopias (often Soviet-inspired ones), are situated within a (post)colonial framework. The postcolonial dimension further reinforces the relevance of utopian thinking for the project. In many ways, there exists a natural connection between postcolonialism and utopian literature. Both call into question notions of time, space, and identity, both are arguably concerned with coming to terms with

²² The banner was designed by Zoya Fal'kova and reads: 'Колонизировали колонизировали да не выколонизировали'.

the nostalgia and horrors of the past and possibilities of a new future, and both could be seen to share a desire for new borders and geographical mappings.²³ As Bill Ashcroft highlights,

postcolonial writing is suffused with future thinking, with a utopian hope for the future, a belief in the reality of liberation, in the possibility of justice and equality, in the transformative power of writing and at times in the potential global impact to be made by postcolonial societies.²⁴

In his monograph on anglophone postcolonial writings on utopia, Ralph Pordzik argues that the utopian novel has a particular interest in coming to terms with the problems created by the disenchantment with cultural nationalism and decolonization on the one hand, and the disillusionment with Marxism and utopian idealism that followed the end of the socialist world on the other.²⁵ Indeed, if utopianism thinking holds an important place in postcolonial epistemologies, it acquires an even more special significance in the post-Soviet/colonial context. The Soviet Communist project can be characterised as a utopic project *par excellence*, and like other political projects with utopic tendencies, it has found an ironic channel into the realm of totalitarian dystopias under Stalin's Terror. As Ashcroft remarks, the mobilization of society for the betterment of all, for the 'common good', is virtually indistinguishable in utopias and dystopias, proven by the fact that all 'achieved utopias' such as Third Reich, Stalinist Russia, the Cultural Revolution, and neo-liberal Capitalism, have turned 'degenerate'.²⁶ As Ashcroft aptly points out, it is perhaps no accident that the first modern dystopian novel is Yevgeny Zamyatin's *Mbl* (1921).²⁷ The novel was written just as Soviet Russia was coming into existence.

²³ Narin Hassan, 'Review of *The Quest for Postcolonial Utopia: A Comparative Introduction to the Utopian Novel in the New English Literatures. Studies of World Literature in English* by Ralph Pordzik', *Utopian Studies*, 12.2 (2001), 362-64 (p. 362).

²⁴ Bill Ashcroft, 'Introduction: Spaces of Utopia', *Spaces of Utopia* 2.1 (2012), 1-17 (p. 2).

²⁵ Ralph Pordzik, *The Quest for Postcolonial Utopia: A Comparative Introduction to the Utopian Novel in the New English Literatures* (Bern: Peter Lang, 2001).

²⁶ Ashcroft, 'Introduction', p. 2, p. 10

²⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 10.

In large part due to a close connection between the soviet project and utopian thinking, the Soviet period saw the flourishing of the sci-fi genre in Russia with authors drawing multifaceted parallels between the soviet state and fictional utopian states usually set outside Earth. Many of the early Soviet sci-fi authors such as Alexander Belayev, Grigory Adamov, Vladimir Obruchev and Alexey Tolstoy were influenced by socialist writers as H.G. Wells who visited Soviet Russia several times, subscribed to Marxist political agendas, and often satirised capitalism. Much of this early Soviet sci-fi features a ‘wonderful catastrophe’ (the forces of chaos produce the collapse of the old world order, out of which comes new organisation) and exhibits a certain ideological diversity, but one that ‘essentially reflects the varieties of National-Bolshevism’.²⁸ However, exceptions here include anti-utopian and tentatively subversive visions such as Yevgeny Zamyatin’s *Мы* (1921) and Mikhail Bulgakov’s *Собачье сердце* (1925). By the 1930s, with the rise of Stalinism, the first phase was abruptly displaced by ‘markedly formulaic, decidedly paranoid, and ideologically ossified’ sci-fi focusing on the conflict between upholders of Soviet order and evil conspirators threatening it.²⁹ By the late 1940s and early '50s, such sci-fi adhering to a strict ideological formula ‘turned into an unwitting parody not only of itself but of the official ideology whose tenets it was expected to uphold’.³⁰ In 1950, Ivan Efremov’s *Туманность Андромеды* (1950) ushered a ‘thaw’ and a breakthrough for the previously ‘short aim’ science fiction which never ventured more than a few decades into the future, tackled social issues more directly, and inspired the new generation of sci-fi writers, most notably the Strugatsky brothers.³¹ Sci-fi works of the late Soviet period, reaching a high point in the works of the Strugatskys and Efremov, are no longer informed and dominated by a single ideology but instead ‘turn on the clash of ideologies’, thereby

²⁸ Rafail Nudelman, ‘Soviet Science Fiction and the Ideology of Soviet Society’, *Science Fiction Studies* 16.1(1989), 38-66 (p. 38).

²⁹ Nudelman, ‘Soviet’, p. 38.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 38.

³¹ ‘OFF-Line’ Interview with Boris Strugatsky (in Russian), December 2006, the official website of the Strugatsky brothers <<http://www.rusf.ru/abs/int0099.htm>> [accessed 3 March 2019]

resuscitating the utopianism of early Soviet science fiction, in the form of what are, first of all, ‘ideological possibilities rather than social ones’.³²

Совсем Другие [henceforth referred to as SD] unambiguously positions itself as a successor of Soviet sci-fi writing. In the collection’s afterword ‘АКТИВИЗМ КАК ФАНТАСТИКА, ФАНТАСТИКА КАК АКТИВИЗМ’, the editors Oksana Shatalova³³ and Georgy Mamedov³⁴ recognize their intellectual indebtedness to Soviet sci-fi writers and their ‘politically engaged’ [политически активная] literary output. After declaring that the Soviet sci-fi school cannot currently boast any successors, they propose that ‘только современная активистская фантастика, т. е. фантастика социально ангажированная, способна претендовать на место пусть не точного, но близкого аналога советской школы’.³⁵ At the same time, they emphasise that their relation to these works is complex [сложная] and that they use them as important reference points both for ‘confrontation and solidarity’.³⁶ This Janus-faced approach, they explain, is reflected in the collection’s title – ‘Совсем Другие’ – which resonates with the authors’ critical view of the literary-philosophical as well as political conception of two popular sci-fi authors, the Strugatsky brothers. The title ‘Совсем Другие’ is inspired by ‘Почти такие же’ – the name of a chapter in *Полдень XXII* (1961) by the Strugatskys. In the view of the collection’s contributors, the main pitfall of the Strugatsky brothers’ narratives lies in their failure to fulfil sci-fi and utopian discourses’ potential for radical thinking and political activism. Their imagination, they argue, is limited to the creation of utopian worlds which merely mimic the socio-political systems of Earth and promote the hegemony of the male intelligentsia: ‘светлое коммунистическое будущее, сконструированное писателями, населяют не неведомые киборги и фрики, а обычные советские интеллигенты – «ПОЧТИ

³² Nudelman, ‘Soviet’, p. 38.

³³ Oksana Shatalova (born 1972) is an Almaty based artist, gender activist, co-founder of an NGO SHTAB, and contributor to a feminist zine ‘Weird Sisters’.

³⁴ Georgy Mamedov (born 1984) is a Bishkek based cultural worker, teacher and gender activist.

³⁵ SD, pp. 324-325.

³⁶ Ibid., p. 324

такие же» физики и лирики, коротающие со Стругацкими вечера за анекдотами про Брежнева и синхрофазотрон'.³⁷ The Strugatskys' utopias, they add, are 'exclusively male', refuse to consider women as fully human, and despise intellectually inferior 'grey' others [серые].³⁸

The editors extend their criticism to sci-fi literature of the wider world and argue that with a few exceptions (Ursula K. Le Guin and Kim Stanley Robinson) sci-fi authors display a remarkable rigidity in the imagination of gender and other social relations when creating outer space utopias. In most of them, even in communist utopias which eradicate exploitation and alienation, one can still find states, nations, families, romantic relations, parents and children.³⁹ In other words, 'социальное воображение значительно отстает от технологического'.⁴⁰

In response to these heteronormative sci-fi representations, SD attempts to imagine new forms of societal relations 'existing beyond a patriarchal and capitalist matrix'.⁴¹ The collection imagines worlds without exclusion, ones which give voice to science fiction's voiceless heroes, women, people with disabilities, gays, lesbians, transgenders, 'всех тех, кого либералы снисходительно называют «меньшинствами», а консерваторы – «уродами» и «нелюдьми»', as well as to other non-humans, cats, dogs, birds, plants and other creatures 'сложного и запутанного происхождения'.⁴² Since the collection's aim is to question identity politics and give voice to postcolonial, queer and non-human subjects, the authors' approach draws from the ideological politics at the intersection of cyborg, cyber-feminist, ecofeminist, posthumanist and postcolonial movements. The theories in these fields are particularly relevant for the project since they all contest to some degree the borders and

³⁷ Ibid., p. 325.

³⁸ '«Серые» – определение мракобесов и невежд из романа Стругацких «Трудно быть богом» (1964)' – editors' note, SD, p. 326.

³⁹ Here alienation is referring to Karl Marx's concept of social estrangement or *Entfremdung*.

⁴⁰ SD, p. 322.

⁴¹ Ibid., p. 324.

⁴² Ibid, p. 324.

boundaries of race, class, and gender, and highlight that members in all of the above-mentioned ‘minority’ categories (women, gays, animals etc.) have been made ‘Other’ in western identity politics, especially in the context of colonial domination. As some of the leading postcolonial scholars point out:

It is (and was) by marking ‘others’ (of whatever sort) as ‘animal’ that conquest and colonization (as well as other forms of domination) have been, and continue to be justified and prosecuted – on other humans as well as on non-human animals themselves.⁴³

Various critics have examined how the colonised, women, animals and non-heterosexual people have been subjected to the dehumanising prosecution of this sort. Jacques Derrida, Cary Wolfe, Alfred W. Crosby and others have argued that racism is predicated on speciesism because the human is by definition the not animal or animalistic.⁴⁴ Achille Mbembe points out that colonial violence encompasses a range of humans, plants, animals and objects, and feeds itself by forging a ‘close connection, both venal and convivial, among slave-being, animal-being, native-being, and thing-being’.⁴⁵ In other words, colonial power does not only turn humans into slaves, and slaves into animals, but also makes slaves of animals and so forth.

⁴⁶ Feminist scholarship has highlighted how the ideological justification for women’s alleged inferiority has been made by associating them with children, animals, and other ‘savages’ and devaluing women’s ‘private’ and emotional worlds in favour of the ‘public’ values of reason

⁴³ Ashcroft et al., *Post-Colonial*, p. 198.

⁴⁴ Peter Singer who coined the term ‘speciesism’ makes an analogy between human racism and speciesism. Peter Singer, ‘Practical Ethics’, in *The Animal Ethics Reader*, ed. by Susan Armstrong and Richard Botzler (London and New York: Routledge, 2003), p. 34. See also Cary Wolfe, *Animal Rites: American Culture, the Discourse of Species, and Posthumanist Theory* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003), especially p.43; Alfred W. Crosby, *Ecological Imperialism: The Biological Expansion of Europe, 900-1900* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986); Jacques Derrida, *The Animal That Therefore I Am*, trans. by David Wills (New York: Fordham University Press, 2002).

⁴⁵ Mbembe, *On the Postcolony*, p. 240

⁴⁶ Audra Mitchell, ‘Posthumanist Post-Colonialism?’, *Worldly*, 2015

<<https://worldlyir.wordpress.com/2015/02/26/posthumanist-postcolonialism/>> [accessed 20 January 2019].

and order through what ecofeminist philosopher Karen J. Warren calls a ‘logic of domination’.⁴⁷ Elizabeth Spelman coined the term ‘somatophobia’ to characterize this ontological and ideological association of women with animals.⁴⁸ In their turn, feminist postcolonial scholars have pointed out the link between colonial and patriarchal discourses dehumanising women. Maureen O’Connor, for instance, has turned her attention to the fact that the Irish have been described as both ‘female’ and ‘bestial’ in colonial discourse and argues that women’s association with the natural contributed to the double oppression of women by both colonial and patriarchal systems.⁴⁹ Since the category of the animal ‘is always at the ready’ for the abuse of human others, people of non-heterosexual orientation have similarly been historically subjected to dehumanising discourses.⁵⁰ Focusing on the specific discursive relations between male homosexuality and animality, Ed Madden has examined the ways in which the binary of natural/unnatural dichotomy has been used ‘to subordinate and diminish both sexual difference and the nonhuman, the queer and the animal’, as well as the ways in which ‘the discourse of animality – as figure of both the natural and the nonhuman – is used to justify violence against (sexual) Others’.⁵¹

Instead of these hierarchical ethics of humanity, postcolonial theorists call for genuine forms of human relations that are built on ‘solidarities across class, race and national boundaries’⁵² rather than violence and subjugation. A posthumanist postcolonial ethos

⁴⁷ Karol J., Warren, *Ecofeminist Philosophy: A Western Perspective on What it is and Why it Matters* (Notre Dame IN: Notre Dame Press, 1999), p.2. See also *Animals and Women: Feminist Theoretical Explorations* ed. by Carol J., Adams and Josephine Donovan (Durham, NC; London: Duke University Press, 1995); Maureen O’Connor, *The Female and the Species: The Animal in Irish Women’s Writing* (Oxford: Peter Lang, 2010)

⁴⁸ Elizabeth Spelman, ‘Woman as Body: Ancient and Contemporary Views’, *Feminist Studies*, 8.1 (1982), 109-131.

⁴⁹ O’Connor, *The Female*, passim.

⁵⁰ *Animals in Irish Literature and Culture* ed. by Kathryn Kirkpatrick and Faragó Borbála (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015), p .5.

⁵¹ Ed Madden, “‘Even the Animals in the Fields’: Animals, Queers, and Violence”, in Kirkpatrick and Borbála, eds, *Animals*, p. 106.

⁵² Chandra Talpade Mohanty, *Feminism without Borders: Decolonizing Theory, Practicing Solidarity* (Durham, NC and London: Duke University Press, 2003), p. 19.

encourages the extension of these affinities and connections across the boundary of species and forms of being.⁵³ Donna Haraway's theories bring all the historically problematic categories associated with race, gender, class or speciesism, under a posthumanist lens. Before becoming a prominent theorist in science and technology studies, Haraway, whose works span across gender, technology and biology, originally trained as a primatologist. Haraway highlights that Western discourses and traditions such as patriarchy, colonialism or essentialism are rooted in 'antagonistic dualisms' such as self/other, culture/nature, male/female, civilised/primitive, right/wrong, truth/illusion, total/partial, God/man that have all been 'systematic to the logics and practices of domination of women, people of color, nature, workers, animals – in short, domination of all constituted as others, whose task is to mirror the self'.⁵⁴

Haraway's cyborg theory, elaborated in her seminal essay for contemporary feminism – 'A Cyborg Manifesto' (1984) – provides a challenge to these antagonistic dualisms.⁵⁵ It essentially proposes a post-humanist and post-structural approach to digital age feminism by prioritizing mixture (identified with coalitional politics) over binary thinking (identified with forms of oppression, such as colonialism). 'A Cyborg Manifesto' is concerned with how the shift from modern to postmodern epistemology entails a shift from the unified human subject of identity to the hybridized posthuman of technoscience. Haraway takes up a figure of a cyborg to represent the multiple intersections between human, non-human and machine, arguing that in the current technological age 'we are all chimeras, theorized and fabricated hybrids of machine and organism; in short, we are cyborgs'.⁵⁶ Rosi Braidotti's later work on

⁵³ Mitchell, 'Posthumanist'; Mbembe, *On the Postcolony*, p. 27.

⁵⁴ Donna Haraway, 'A Cyborg Manifesto: Science, Technology, and Socialist-Feminism in the Late Twentieth Century', in *Simians, Cyborgs and Women: The Reinvention of Nature*, Routledge (New York, 1991), pp. 149-81, p. 171.
<https://web.archive.org/web/20120214194015/http://www.stanford.edu/dept/HPS/Haraway/Cyborg_Manifesto.html> [accessed 16 November 2018].

⁵⁵ Haraway, 'A Cyborg'.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 150.

critical posthumanism similarly encourages us to think through relations of ‘transversal inter-connection or an “assemblage” of human and non-human actors’.⁵⁷

Haraway rejects the notions of essentialism proposing instead a chimeric, monstrous world of fusions between animal and machine, of political coalitions along the lines of affinity rather than identity. In *When Species Meet* (2008) she questions the separation between humans and their environment and highlights that our bodies are formed of numerous microorganisms, like fungi and bacteria ‘which play in a symphony necessary to my being alive at all’.⁵⁸ We cannot exist in the world independently, without the company of these tiny companions, ‘[t]o be one is always to *become with many*’.⁵⁹ To point to this ongoing process of ‘becoming with’, Haraway employs the term ‘companion species’. Companion species ‘does not mean smallish animals treated like indulged children-in-fur-coats (or in fins or feathers) in late imperial societies’,⁶⁰ rather it denotes Haraway’s view that humans should think about the multiple ways in which we cohabit with organisms and cultivate a sense of responsiveness and accountability to other beings. This interaction should not seek to humanise other non-human creatures, nor aspire to an impossible, utopian ideal of nonviolence and equality, but rather to find a ‘responsible relation to always asymmetrical living and dying, and nurturing and killing’.⁶¹

Haraway’s posthuman theories advocating the kinship of the species find a striking echo in Soviet literature, a connection not acknowledged in SD. In this regard, futurist poet Velimir Khlebnikov’s ideas are particularly forward-thinking. Consider, for instance, an excerpt from his piece ‘Пусть на могильной плите прочтут’ [Let them read on my gravestone] (24 November 1904):

⁵⁷ Rosi Braidotti, *The Posthuman* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2013), p. 45.

⁵⁸ Donna Haraway, *When Species Meet* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2008), p. 4.

⁵⁹ Haraway, *When Species Meet*, p. 4.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 165.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, p. 42.

Пусть на могильной плите прочтут: он боролся с видом и сорвал с себя его тягу. Он не видел различия между человеческим видом и животными видами и стоял за распространение на благородные животные виды заповеди и ее действия “люби ближнего, как самого себя”. Он называл неделимых благородных животных видом своими ближними [...].⁶²

Another example of a proto post-humanist Soviet author is Andrei Platonov who often challenges the prioritisation of the human experience over the non-human in his works.⁶³

Haraway’s posthuman theories are particularly useful as an ideological tool for the authors of SD since feminist cyborg writing has the potential ‘to imbue problems of identity and subjectivity with gender/racial consciousness’.⁶⁴ As Haraway points out, ‘the cyborgs populating feminist science fiction make very problematic the statuses of man or woman, human, artefact, member of a race, individual entity, or body’.⁶⁵ In addition, the collection’s postcolonial focus further brings out the potential for emphasising the issue with these ‘problematic statuses’ and what Haraway recognises as ‘polyvocal, unassimilable, radical difference made visible in anti-colonial discourse and practice’.⁶⁶ In fact, Haraway’s works are often inspired by postcolonial theories and writings by ‘women of colour’.⁶⁷

That gender activists in Central Asia should pioneer embracing the theories of posthumanism and question the current conceptions of humanity is even less surprising since they consider that within dominant heteronormative discourses in post-Soviet Central Asia,

⁶² Velimir Khlebnikov, ‘Пусть на могильной плите прочтут’ (24 November 1904) in *Время – мера мира* (сборник) (Moscow: Litres, 2019), p. 23.

⁶³ In ‘The Ecological Poetics of Andrei Platonov: A Reading of Short Stories from the Late 1930s and 1940s’ (unpublished master’s thesis, Oxford University, 2017), Oxford University DPhil candidate Alexander Thomas has argued that Platonov ‘should be seen as a harbinger of ecological thought in twentieth century literature, with a profoundly ecological poetics at the core of his work’ (p.10).

⁶⁴ Hui-Chuan Chang, ‘Feminist Cyborg Writing and the Imagining of Asia’ in *Spaces of Utopia*, 2.2 (2012), 45-60 (p. 45).

⁶⁵ Haraway, ‘A Cyborg’, p. 178.

⁶⁶ Ibid., p. 177.

⁶⁷ Consider for instance Haraway’s following claim : ‘Trinh T. Minh-ha’s inappropriate/d others in her *Woman, Native, Other: Writing Postcoloniality and Feminism*, resulted in an essay I titled ‘The Promises of Monsters: Reproductive Politics for Inappropriate/d Others’” <<https://adanewmedia.org/2013/11/issue3-haraway/>> [accessed 20 June 2018]. See also Haraway, ‘A Cyborg’, especially pp. 155-157.

women and the LGBTQ+ community have often been made to feel subhuman. One of the contributors to the collection, Syinat Sultanalieva, suggests that people of non-heterosexual orientation in Kyrgyzstan have a tendency to internalise homophobia to an extent of questioning their right to existence:

You can't really convince a gay or lesbian person to look after their health and safety unless they are proud of who they are, if they don't have problems with internal homophobia or transphobia, because it is a really huge problem in the community and because people don't think that they are normal, they think that they are sick...They think they deserve to die earlier.⁶⁸

Syinat Sultanalieva's 'Элемент 174' (2018)

Sultanalieva (born in 1984) is a Bishkek-based queer-feminist activist, feminist sci-fi writer, and PhD researcher at the University of Tsukuba, Japan. Her views on the discourse of queer sub-humanity quoted above are echoed in her story 'Элемент 174' which opens the SD collection. The story also suggests a close connection between feminist and queer activism, a connection which became a source of public scandal following the Woman's Day march on 8th March 2019 in Bishkek. Disconcerted members of the public, several politicians, and conservative nationalist groups such as Kyrgyz Choroloru were outraged that feminists in the march were joined by queer activists, denounced the occasion as a gay parade, and demanded that the mayor resign for allowing it. Female deputy in parliament Jyldyz Musabekova called on Kyrgyz people to beat sense into all queers (in all senses) with the following Facebook post: 'The men who do not want to have children and the girls who do not want to pour tea [...] must not only be cursed, they must be beaten. We have to beat the craziness out of them. Are there

⁶⁸ Shawn M. Gaylord, 'Voices for Equality: Syinat Sultanalieva', *Human Rights First* <<https://www.humanrightsfirst.org/blog/voices-equality-syinat-sultanalieva>> [accessed 21 January 2019].

any decent guys out there [willing to do that]?’.⁶⁹ Reactions to the march demonstrated the salience of the homophobic and patriarchal discourse in Kyrgyzstan, as well as in the neighbouring Kazakhstan, and evoked similar reactions to gay rights in other post-Soviet countries, most notably in Georgia where participants of the 2013 anti-homophobia rally came under physical attack by clergymen and other conservatives.⁷⁰

The key event informing the plot of Sultanalieva’s story is the expulsion of the Earth’s LGBTQ+ community into a planetary system called Omai. The story, which begins around four hundred years after the expulsion, is narrated by ‘ambassador Djenri’ (‘посолка Дженри’), a covert lesbian woman from planet Earth who has been sent on a seemingly diplomatic mission to Omai, which is now populated by the descendants of all the Earth’s queer exiles. The true aim of the mission concerns a rumour that the scientists of Omai discovered an important natural resource – element 174. If the rumour is proven true, the protagonist is tasked with setting the Earth’s colonial plans for Omai in motion and attempting to bring back a scientist who would serve as a native informant either willingly or by force. During her stay, Djenri is assigned a local guide – a beautiful young native woman Aily who later turns out to be a cyborg. Djenri becomes smitten by Aily and decides to bring her back to Earth, with Aily’s seeming consent. All her plans fail, however as it turns out that Aily and the council of Omai are aware of the Earth’s and its envoy’s true intentions. At the end of the story, Djenri is

⁶⁹ *RFE/RL*’s Kyrgyz Service, ‘Rainbow Rage: Kyrgyz Rail Against LGBT Community After Central Asia’s “First” Gay-Pride March’, *RadioFreeEurope/RadioLiberty* <<https://www.rferl.org/a/rainbow-rage-kyrgyz-rail-against-lgbt-after-central-asia-s-first-gay-pride-march/29825158.html>> [accessed 17 March 2019]; See also Anna Kapushenko, ‘Мэр Бишкека заявил о законности женского марша. «Кырк Чоро» требовали его отставки из-за участия в акции ЛГБТ-людей’, *Kloop.KZ*, 11 March 2019 <https://kloop.kg/blog/2019/03/11/mer-bishkeka-zayavil-o-zakonnosti-zhenskogo-marsha-kyrk-choro-trebovali-ego-otstavki-iz-za-uchastiya-v-aktsii-lgbt-lyudej/?fbclid=IwAR1Pmfkvxq94JWzdBh0wwCg7rKwMIaO2t_mHDvAyF3tg8JxP6dRNbnMAEvo> [accessed 4 September, 2019]

⁷⁰ ‘Clashes at Gay Rally in Georgia’, *BBC News* <<https://www.bbc.com/news/av/world-europe-22565723/conservatives-attack-gay-activists-at-rally-in-tbilisi>> [accessed 17 March 2019]; See also Tinatin Zhvania, ‘Dzaladobashi gadazrdili anti-gei protesti’ [ant-gay protest turning into violence], *Reporter*, 20 May 2013 <<http://reporter.ge/dzaladobashi-gadazrdili-anti-gei-protesti-7/>> [accessed 2 September 2019].

dismayed to realise that instead of traveling back to Earth, she is being escorted by Aily to Omai's military department.

My reading of the story brings together the postcolonial and the posthuman contact zone perspectives. It focuses on two key encounters of the story, the encounter between Earth and Omai, and the encounter between the exiles from Earth and their new planet, Omai. I argue that through these two encounters the author presents us with two contrasting models of what Mary Louis Pratt terms as a colonial 'contact zone'. Pratt introduced the concept of a 'contact zone' in her seminal keynote speech at the MLA conference, and elaborated it further in her study *Imperial Eyes: Travel Writing and Transculturation*, defining it as 'the space of imperial encounters, the space in which peoples geographically and historically separated come into contact with each other and establish ongoing relations, usually involving conditions of coercion, radical inequality, and intractable conflict'.⁷¹ The contact zone between Earth and Omai is rooted in the asymmetrical model of dominance. By contrast, the contact zone between the exiles from Earth and the new planet they colonised embodies Communist notions of equality and conforms to Donna Haraway's posthumanist ideals of interspecies communication and companion species.

When the protagonist Djenri arrives for her hidden colonial mission to Omai, she finds out that the planet's inhabitants – the descendants of queer-feminist exiles from Earth – are coexisting harmoniously with cyborgs, as well as nature, animals and other non-human species of the neighbouring planets. Sultanalieva's utopia thus imagines a model of co-existence of multiply displaced beings that challenges modern paradigms of subjectivity as imagined by Haraway who claims:

⁷¹ Mary Louise Pratt, *Imperial Eyes: Travel Writing and Transculturation*, 2nd edn (London: Routledge, [1992] 2008), p. 8.

I think what I would want is more of a family of displaced figures, of which the cyborg is one, and then to ask how the cyborg makes connections with these other nonoriginal people... who are multiply displaced. Could there be a family of figures who would populate our imagination of these postcolonial, postmodern worlds that would not be quite as imperializing in terms of a single figuration for identity? ⁷²

While the geopolitical profile of the Earth revealed to the story's readers is limited, it roughly replicates that of today's world. According to the narrator, the Earth's official language is English. Djenri herself comes from a deeply religious Christian country where Russian is the main language. Most of the Earth's population is made up of men, with the few remaining women being regarded as second-class citizens. Feminism and non-heterosexual orientation are deemed ungodly and people suspected of belonging to or supporting either of these modes have been exiled to the edge of the Solar System. To further persecute these undesirable 'queer-feminists' and eradicate their influence on the Earth's electorate, the government tasked this subversive group with what they considered a doomed mission of exploring a new galactic system. The regime would falsely present the political exiles as willing initiators of the mission. It was hoped that the exiles would die as foolish romantics, and that their sympathisers on Earth would no longer regard them as victims. However, the mission did not go according to plan as while the Earth was 'ideologically cleansed and unified', the exiles discovered Omai – a galactic system with a superior geopolitical position and a greater number of planets with life-potential. For a time, Omai was officially annexed to the Earth as a colony, but it later declared independence and disappeared from the Earth's political radar. When rumours about element 174 began to circulate, Omai was put back on the Earth's political radar.

⁷² Donna Haraway, 'The Actors are Cyborgs, Nature is Coyote, and the Geography is Elsewhere: Postscript to "Cyborgs at Large"', in *Technoculture*, ed. by Andrew Ross and Constance Penley (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1991), p. 13.

In the course of narration, it becomes apparent that the Earth's dominant political drive is imperialistic and that its contact zone with Omai is based on what Pratt describes as 'conditions of coercion, radical inequality, and intractable conflict'.⁷³ The narrator explains that the Earth's rulers cannot forgive themselves for unknowingly weakening their colonising drive. Omai holds greater potential for 'imperial expansion of galactic scale' and stands in the way of the Earth's own expansion due to its central location in relation to other systems, as well as its apparent possession of such resources as element 174.⁷⁴ Djenri admits that the true intention of her seemingly diplomatic mission is to colonise Omai by diluting its population with settlers from Earth, sowing discord, and reforming the planet's traditions and beliefs:

Нам следовало внедриться в их ряды, смешать их с нами, и глядишь, через столетие-другое и следа от омайских тупиковых идей не останется, а их наука будет служить Земле. Рано или поздно они поймут, что лучшая стратегия – нападение, а не сотрудничество.⁷⁵

Followingly, Djenri approaches Omai with the downgrading stance of a coloniser. The language of Omai puzzles her. When Aily is referred to by another Omaian as Aily-serdar (Айлы-сердар), Djenri considers the foreign language strange and non-human, with no apparent reason except for the fact that it is different from her own, she wonders: '«Сердар»? Это ещё что такое? Боже, какой у них странный язык. Ничего человеческого'.⁷⁶ In contrast, in order to avoid linguistic colonisation, Omaians employ Esperanto, considering that no one language or culture is superior to others.⁷⁷ But Djenri cannot be easily swayed by these progressive policies and considers Omaians as inherently backward. The Earth's sense of superiority stems from the belief that people of Omai are queer feminists, therefore sinners and

⁷³ Pratt, 'Arts', p. 8.

⁷⁴ *SD*, p. 20.

⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 20.

⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 15.

⁷⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 20.

‘Satan’s pawns’.⁷⁸ Djenri internalises this discourse and refers to women in Omai as ‘fools’ who cannot be trusted with handling element 174. Her mission is to save the Earth and its colonies ‘от возможной аннигиляции из-за этих дур’.⁷⁹

Ironically, Djenri herself is a ‘shameless lesbian’ who has to repress her sexuality since non-heteronormative sexuality is punished on Earth. She only has contact with few women, most of whom are very young or related to her. She refuses to commit a ‘sin’ by tempting them, after all, she is ‘не настолько безбожна, чтобы совращать их’.⁸⁰ The only way for Djenri to satisfy her needs on Earth is to risk her life by visiting illegal sex-shops in the outskirts of the ‘Wild Zone’ where she was once brutally gang-raped due to her sexual orientation. Thanks to her father’s important position in the government, Djenri is educated and can pursue a career in politics, but as a woman, she is denied other privileges, such a right to a family and land ownership. Despite her physical appearance, Djenri considers herself a true male, ‘до мозга костей верной мужчинам своего великого рода’.⁸¹ Her avatar, a projected image used for long-distance communication, is male (female avatars are prohibited) and represents her ideal self – a tall, well-built red-headed man.

Unaccustomed to positive female role-models, Djenri admires Aily, recognising that she is ‘сильная, независимая, знающая, очень красивая – и совершенно невозможная на Земле’.⁸² Djenri later finds out that Aily is in fact a cyborg and a military commander of Omai who is leading a military operation to protect her planet. In this regard, Aily’s description is reminiscent of feminist posthumanist artist Lynn Randolph’s vision of a female cyborg in her painting *Self-Consortium* (1993) (Figure 10). Randolph collaborated with Haraway on many

⁷⁸ Ibid., p. 22.

⁷⁹ Ibid., p. 8.

⁸⁰ Ibid., p. 7.

⁸¹ Ibid., p. 22.

⁸² Ibid., p. 22.

of her projects and provided visual images for her essays as well as covers for her books.⁸³ Randolph's images are more than mere visual gateways to Haraway's works, as she highlights, 'Our words and images were not captions or illustrations of each other's ideas. They were inspired by one another's efforts and by the urgent social, cultural, and political practices we wanted to interrupt'.⁸⁴

Figure 10. Lynn Randolph, *Self-Consortium* (1993)⁸⁵



According to Randolph, *Self-Consortium* is inspired by Haraway's work and many sci-fi novels and portrays a young android woman who 'flaunts her electronic bio-constructedness' and is set to 'negotiate a new world order'.⁸⁶ Similarly, Aily is a cyborg who blurs the boundary

⁸³ These include a cover image for the editions of Haraway's *Simians, Cyborgs and Women: The Reinvention of Nature* (1991) and *Modest_Witness@Second_Millennium.FemaleMan©Meets_OncoMouse™: feminism and technoscience* (1997).

⁸⁴ Lynn Randolph, *Modest Witnesses: A Painter's Collaboration with Donna Haraway*, (2010), p.14 <<http://companionrandolph.blogspot.com/2010/11/modest-witnesses-painters-collaboration.html>> [accessed on January 20, 2019].

⁸⁵ Randolph, *Modest*, p. 17.

⁸⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 17.

between humans and non-humans and who is set to oppose the Earth and help usher a liberal social structure modelled on Omai's system. But Sultanalieva adds a new, racial dimension to her cyborg vision by making Aily dark-skinned. Aily is not only set to save women and oppressed gender minorities on Earth, but to also quell Earth's colonial drives. At the end of the story she turns from a passive object of Djenri's colonial gaze and erotic fantasies, to an anti-colonial liberationist activist. As Aily escorts Djenri to Omai's military department, she parrots Djenri's secret thought back at her, declaring that 'Лучшая защита – это своевременное нападение'.⁸⁷

When Djenri first meets Aily, she is immediately smitten. The beautiful, darker-skinned Aily, she muses, is just the sort of beauty that 'lonely and unhappy' people like herself secretly fantasise about at night, all while fearing to be discovered by older brothers.⁸⁸ Aily's attractiveness is heightened by her exoticism, she is the 'Other' of Djenri's colonial gaze, an imperial gaze that eroticizes, trivialises, bestialises or infantilises what it falls upon.⁸⁹ If the protagonist's identity can metaphorically be read as that of a white, Orthodox, Russophone coloniser, Aily could be seen as belonging to one of the Central Asian nationalities. Not only is Aily darker-skinned, but as she points out, her name means 'lunar' in Old Turkic.⁹⁰

Despite her attraction to Aily, in her attitude to Omai, Djenri manifests an internal conflict characteristic of colonial exploiters pursuing civilising missions. She admits that science and technology seem more advanced in Omai and is determined to fulfil her goal of subjugating the planet to the Earth's control.⁹¹ On the one hand, she assumes that Omai's ideals are backward, 'тупиковые', that the people of Omai are 'извращенцы и бунтари' living in

⁸⁷ *SD*, p. 32.

⁸⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 7.

⁸⁹ Ann Kaplan has introduced the concept of the imperial gaze to denote how in the postcolonial context the observed find themselves defined in terms of the privileged observer's own set of value-preferences. See Ann Kaplan, *Looking for the Other: Feminism, Film and the Imperial Gaze* (New York: Routledge, 1997).

⁹⁰ *SD*, p. 8.

⁹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 8.

chaos.⁹² In line with a characteristically Orientalist mentality, she is equally fascinated by the noble savages who symbolise humanity's innate goodness untouched by civilisation. She finds their world new, strange, and exciting – 'возбуждающим' – evocative of certain eroticism.⁹³ People of Omai are portrayed as particularly respectful of their surroundings. We learn that Omaiians refused to 'terraform' their planet, meaning that they did not alter the 'authentic ecology' through advanced technology.⁹⁴ The land of Omai is untouched and Djenri enjoys her surroundings, 'необработанные, необжитые скалистые горы и мерцающие озёра'.⁹⁵ Instead of terraforming and harming the environment to suit their needs, Omaiians terraformed themselves in order to exist harmoniously with nature.⁹⁶ Djenri cannot help but feel respect for these 'kooks' (чудаки) and suspects that they hold wisdom which is lacking on Earth: 'Глупость, конечно, несусветная, но в этом было что-то поэтическое, уже утраченное нами'.⁹⁷

In contrast to Omai's enlightened ecopolitics, the Earth has previously made an unsuccessful attempt of terraforming a system of seven planets, leading to their destruction.⁹⁸ Here, it is possible to read into the story an allegorical allusion to the destructive environmental effects of Soviet colonialism in Central Asia, such as the disappearance of the Aral Sea accompanying the cotton industry, or the soil erosion in Northern Kazakh lands during Nikita

⁹² Ibid., p. 12.

⁹³ Ibid., p. 11.

⁹⁴ Terraformation, or 'Earth shaping' is a concept commonly found in works of science fiction, especially in the sub-genre of ecological science fiction and refers to the alteration and engineering of celestial bodies, such as a planet, a moon or an asteroid, to resemble Earth. This process generally involves the manipulation of the targeted extra-terrestrial terrain's climate, atmosphere, topography, and ecology to suit human needs. Real-world scientists have also proposed terraforming to enable the long-term colonization of Mars, however, according to NASA, present-day technology does not allow for this process to be possible. See 'Terraform | Definition of Terraform in English by Oxford Dictionaries', *Oxford Dictionaries | English* <<https://en.oxforddictionaries.com/definition/terraform>> [accessed 14 February 2019]; Bill Steigerwald, 'Mars Terraforming Not Possible Using Present-Day Technology', *NASA*, 2018 <<http://www.nasa.gov/press-release/goddard/2018/mars-terraforming>> [accessed 14 February 2019].

⁹⁵ *SD*, pp. 10-11.

⁹⁶ Ibid., p. 30.

⁹⁷ Ibid., p. 9.

⁹⁸ Ibid., p. 9.

Khrushchev's infamous Virgin Land Campaign. In the early 1900s, the Aral Sea (lying between Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan) was the fourth largest inland lake in the world and provided important ecosystem services to local communities, including the provision of fishing stocks and the preservation of the local water and soil quality.⁹⁹ The Aral Sea's volume and salinity levels were stabilized by fresh water from the Syr Darya and the Amu Darya, but from 1918 Soviet policymakers diverted these streams for irrigation in order to increase the production of a major Soviet export – cotton – or 'white gold'.¹⁰⁰ Consequently, the freshwater influx to the Sea declined while salinity increased, leading to the collapse of the formerly thriving fishing industry and the rapid shrinking of the Sea. Adding to the damage, the dried-up seabed produced dust storms laden with chemicals and pesticides from the intensive agriculture occurring along the two rivers. This in turn led to increased air and water pollution levels, and crop damage in the region, as well as the soaring of cancers, respiratory diseases, anemia, miscarriages, and kidney and liver diseases. As a result, thousands of people were forced to abandon their homes as their livelihoods dried up and their health was threatened.¹⁰¹

The Virgin Lands campaign launched by Khrushchev in 1953 to cultivate the steppe lands for grain exacerbated the damage. As Paul Brummell and Maria Oleynik point out, 'the Virgin Lands Campaign should rightly be placed on that depressingly long list of Soviet initiatives undertaken in Kazakhstan with little regard for the environmental consequences'.¹⁰² The campaign's reliance on single crop cultivation, deep ploughing and the year-on-year planting of grain reduced the fertility of the soil, and, in combination with the ferocious steppe winds, resulted in major soil erosion problems.¹⁰³ The exploitation of nature at this scale is an

⁹⁹ Karen Bennett, 'Disappearance of the Aral Sea', World Resources Institute, 2008
<<https://www.wri.org/blog/2008/05/disappearance-aral-sea>> [accessed 23 January 2019].

¹⁰⁰ Bennett, 'Disappearance'.

¹⁰¹ Ibid.

¹⁰² Paul Brummell and Maria Oleynik, *Kazakhstan* (Chalfont St Peter: Bradt Travel Guides, 2018), p. 70.

¹⁰³ Brummell and Oleynik, *Kazakhstan*, p. 70.

important recurring theme in the collection and highlights colonialism's oppression of not only human, but non-human forms.¹⁰⁴

Afraid that Earth might destroy their planet, Omaians keep their distance, even though they maintain a policy of openness with all other planets.¹⁰⁵ Omai's infrastructure is organised in five levels and Djenri is surprised to learn that the fifth level is reserved for military affairs. When she asks Aily whether military readiness contradicts Omaian philosophy, Aily explains that it is necessary for Omai to protect its achievements from potential aggressors. While she quickly changes the subject, Djenri suspects that it is the Earth's aggression that Omaians fear.¹⁰⁶ Omaians suspect that the philosophies practised by Earth and Omai differ radically. The planets in the Omai's system have different cultures and traditions, but they share not only the philosophy of queer-feminism, but also the core of their value system whereby 'основополагающими считаются принципы взаимопомощи, отказа от насилия, постоянной рефлексии и сознательности, принятия различий навыков, мышления, физических и психических возможностей, их равенства и вместе с тем – особенности каждого проявления'.¹⁰⁷ In order to implement these ideals, the five levels on Omai are not strictly delineated and Omaians have an opportunity of moving between them and practising different fields, whether science, art or sport.

That the organisation of Omai resonates with Soviet communist ideals of community and personal development is not incidental. In the collection's afterword, the editors point out

¹⁰⁴ Most notable is Anastasiya Kizilova's contribution written as a fictional Wikipedia entry on cybernetic plants – 'полимеризированные кибернетические растения (ПКР)'. The entry explains that after the twentieth-century discovery of the plants' ability to communicate through signals, scientists developed polymerised cybernetic plants, allowing humans to interpret their signals and optimise plant cultivation. By the beginning of XXII century, forty five percent of the planet's flora became polymerised and 'enslaved' by major medical and agricultural corporations. As a result of the efforts of hackers and plant right activists campaigning for the liberation of plants from oppression, a new technology was conceived to allow direct communication with plants. By XXIII plants became full participants in public life, politics, culture and science. (*SD*, pp. 34-41)

¹⁰⁵ *SD*, p. 20.

¹⁰⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 18.

¹⁰⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 19.

the potential of building on certain ideas of the Soviet era, namely the belief of mental parity as advocated, for instance by the Tashkent-born scientist and sci-fi author Genrikh Altshuller (penname Genrikh Altov) and Soviet Marxist philosopher Evald Il'enkov. In both his creative and scientific work, the editors point out, Altshuller explored a belief that talent is a product of social circumstances rather than an inherent gift, and championed his conviction that genius should become a banality accessible to all (an argument also propagated by Il'enkov).¹⁰⁸ the editors consider this model of applying the logic of historical materialism in conjunction with the ethical principle of equality to be the most 'heuristic' and 'inspiring' of all the intellectual developments in Soviet thought, whether in the fields of psychology, philosophy and writing.¹⁰⁹ The structure of *Omai* seems to be paying homage to these ideals with its rootedness in the ideals of equal opportunities for intellectual development.

Non-religiousness, or at least secularism, is another field in which *Omaians* appear to be replicating the atheistic order of the Soviet State. It can be deduced that the queer feminists from Earth broke away from the tradition of religious practices on Earth, or that they never practised them in the first place. Critics have highlighted that in religious discourse, including Christian discourse, nature has often been used to condemn homosexuality as unnatural or against nature, with nature being equated with heterosexuality and reproduction.¹¹⁰ The religious status of *Djenri's* country where the state persecutes queer people in the name of religion and national unity can be read as a hyperbolic allegory of the close connection between the Russian State and the Russian Orthodoxy and the accompanying homophobic discourse of gay people as nature's anomalies. More specifically, a hyperbolised parallel can be drawn between the Russian 'gay propaganda law' of 2013 and the Earth's expulsion of queer-feminists to the edge

¹⁰⁸ Ibid., p. 329.

¹⁰⁹ Ibid., p. 329.

¹¹⁰ See for instance John Boswell, *Christianity, Social Tolerance, and Homosexuality: Gay People in Western Europe from the Beginning of the Christian Era to the Fourteenth Century* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1980), pp. 137-156; pp. 303-332.

of the Solar System, and eventually to Omai. Unlike people on Earth who practise monotheistic religions, Omaians are not religious, rather they appear to be practising a form of pagan faith. The names of Omai and its nearby planets are all drawn from the mythology of Earth-worship and female goddesses, as Aily explains to Djenri, ‘«Омай» происходит от имени древнетюркской богини-прародительницы. «Гея» – древнегреческая богиня-Земля, «Ата- бей» – богиня-давшая-начало у аравакских племён Таино, живших до прибытия Колумба’.¹¹¹ Unsurprisingly, Djenri considers the earth mythology which is central to these planets’ beliefs as ‘barbarian’:

Мне даже стало неловко за Айлы, да за всех омайнов, которые веками называли себя именем каких-то древних шлюх. – Понимаете, на Земле всё, что было до нашего триединого пророка, считается недостойным памяти. Только Мошеиисухаммед, только хардкор, – пошутила я, раскрепощенная отсутствием братьев, которые могли меня сдать отцу, или хуже, нашим святым за такое легкомысленное обращение с М-И-М.¹¹²

In colonial encounters, the deities of indigenous communities are often conceived by the colonisers as ‘idols’ which their missionaries should destroy in order to convert the colonised to their own ‘civilised’ religion (or in the case of the Soviet Union, atheism).¹¹³ Djenri is similarly scoffing at the idols of Omaians and opposes them to the saints of the Earth’s accepted religions. It is likely that the prophet with a triune nature that Djenri is referring to is Christ. In the more ambiguous reference to Мошеиисухаммед, Djenri might be playing with the names of the prophets in three major monotheistic religions, Moses [Мошè/Мойсей] in Judaism, Jesus [Иисýс] in Christianity and Muhammad [Мохамед] in Islam. One could also speculate about the derogative, or perhaps feminist black humour echoes inherent in the word (e.g. мошонка [scrotum], сухой [dry]). Djenri’s fear that she might be reprimanded for her

¹¹¹ *SD*, p. 21.

¹¹² *Ibid.*, p. 21.

¹¹³ A particularly powerful fictional account of the colonial encounter between the missionaries and indigenous tribes can be found in Chinua Achebe’s *The Things Fall Apart* (1958) which focuses on the early stages of British colonialism in Nigeria.

playfulness by her family and the clerics points to the sanctity of religion on her planet and the closeness of Church and State in her country.

Omaians' choice of eliminating the worship of male gods informs another key difference between Earth and Omai – the consumption of meat. Unlike people on Earth, Omaians are vegan. In her anthropological survey of over a hundred nontechnological cultures, Peggy Sanday found a correlation between plant-based economies and women's power and animal-based economies and male power. She identified the worship of male gods as one of the key characteristics of economies dependent on the processing of animals for food.¹¹⁴ Sanday's research also confirmed that plant-based economies are more likely to be egalitarian. This is because in societal structures where women gather vegetable food and the diet is vegetarian, they gain an essential economic and social role without abusing it.¹¹⁵ The structure of Omai resonates with the power dynamics within plant-based matriarchal units.

It is no coincidence that Sultanalieva devotes a significant part of her short story to the issue of veganism since the racial and sexual politics of meat consumption often inform postmodern thinking on subjectivity. As critics such as Carol J. Adams, Jacques Derrida and others has shown, the culture of meat-eating is deeply informed by discourses and practices that perpetuate domination and assimilation of women, animals, and Others. For Derrida, questioning our meat-eating practices is an important step in rethinking subjectivity, questioning our understanding of what constitutes an 'animal', and imagining alternative, ethical relations between human beings and animals. Through his concept of *carnophallogocentrism*, Derrida interrogates the consumption of animal bodies, identifying a connection between the oppression of women and the brutalization of animals. Derrida writes:

¹¹⁴ Peggy Reeves Sanday, *Female Power and Male Dominance: On the Origins of Sexual Inequality* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981), pp. 35-50.

¹¹⁵ Sanday, *Female Power*, pp. 15-33.

The virile strength of the adult male, the father, husband, or brother . . . belongs to the schema that dominates the concept of subject. The subject does not want just to master and possess nature actively. In our cultures, he accepts sacrifice and eats flesh.¹¹⁶

Carnophallogocentrism highlights the sacrificial (carno), masculine (phallo), and speaking (logo) dimension of classical conceptions of subjectivity. For Derrida, sacrifice is at the heart of *carnophallogocentrism*, and is itself rooted in the animal sacrifice in Western mythology and religion, whether in the guise of Diana in Greco-Roman mythology, or the Abrahamic God's instruction for Adam to dominate other beasts in the Judeo-Christian tradition.¹¹⁷ Carnivorous virility is manifested not only in our eating practices, but also morality, religion and politics, thus informing our conception of subjectivity throughout the (human) cultural or civilizational field. According to Derrida, within the metaphysics of subjectivity, there have been 'many "subjects" among mankind who are not recognized as subjects' – animals, as well as other Others, such as women, children or various minority groups are excluded from the status of full subjects as they are considered to be lacking in the basic traits of subjectivity.¹¹⁸ This leads Derrida to remark that '[w]e are all – vegetarians as well – carnivores in the symbolic sense',¹¹⁹ suggesting that we have all being implicated in perpetuating oppression of one form or another.

Vegetarian-ecofeminist Carol J. Adams has written extensively about flesh-eating as an enactment of domination. In her seminal work *The Sexual Politics of Meat* Adams charts the construction of traditional masculinity through meat-eating and argues that '[i]n many ways,

¹¹⁶ Jacques Derrida and Jean-Luc Nancy, "'Eating Well", or the Calculation of the Subject', in *Derrida, Points ...: Interviews, 1974–1994*, ed. by Elizabeth Webber, trans. by Connor Peter and Avital Ronell (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1995), pp. 255-287 (ellipsis in the original).

¹¹⁷ Derrida discusses these myths in the first three lectures published as part of Jacques Derrida, *The Animal That Therefore I Am*, trans. by David Wills (New York: Fordham University Press, 2002)

¹¹⁸ Jacques Derrida, 'Force of Law: The Metaphysical Foundation of Authority', *Cardozo Law Review*, 11.5-6 (1990), 919-1047 (p. 951).

¹¹⁹ Daniel Birnbaum and Anders Olsson, 'An Interview with Jacques Derrida on the Limits of Digestion', *E-Flux*, 2(2009) <<https://www.e-flux.com/journal/02/68495/an-interview-with-jacques-derrida-on-the-limits-of-digestion/>> [accessed 6 February 2019].

gender inequality is built into the species inequality that meat eating proclaims, because for most cultures obtaining meat was performed by men'.¹²⁰ Adams characterizes women and animals as linked by a 'fused oppression' operating through a patriarchal language that pairs 'meat eater' with 'virile male' and women with animals'.¹²¹ 'We oppress animals', Adams argues, 'by associating them with women's lesser status'.¹²² Both woman and animal are construed as 'matter without spirit' – that is, objectified, thing-like, instrumentalized, which leads to their manipulation, since 'when one is matter without spirit, one is the raw material for exploitation and for metaphoric borrowing'.¹²³ The cover of Adams's book, the iconic *Cattle Queen* image of a naked woman in a red cowboy hat, with traces of rib, chuck, loin, round and rump cut across her flesh, epitomises such objectification (Figure 11).

Similar images abound in the adverts of modern meat industries and fast-food chains which rely on phallic images of meat and sexualised, often pornographic depictions of women consuming meat that symbolically degrade both men and women. Burger King's controversial 2009 advert campaign for their 'Seven Incher' burger made in Singapore is one example (Figures 12a and 12b).¹²⁴ The model portrayed in one of the ads (Figure 12a) claimed that her face was used without her knowledge and complained: 'Burger King raped my face'.¹²⁵ Derrida's concept of *carnophallogocentrism* can be read as a response to precisely such phallic associations of meat-eating. For Derrida, in order to prove the carnophallogocentric structure of subjectivity 'it suffices to take seriously the idealizing interiorization of the phallus and the

¹²⁰ Carol J. Adams, *The Sexual Politics of Meat: A Feminist Vegetarian Critical Theory* (New York: Continuum, [1990] 2010), p. 58.

¹²¹ Adams, *The Sexual*, p. 102.

¹²² *Ibid.*, p. 102

¹²³ *Ibid.*, p. 73.

¹²⁴ Photos by Burger King. Sourced from Radhika Sanghani, "'Burger King Raped My Face", Claims Model on Angry YouTube Video', 7 August 2014, *The Telegraph*

<<https://www.telegraph.co.uk/women/womens-life/11018413/Burger-King-raped-my-face-claims-model-on-angry-YouTube-video.html>> and

<<https://captainslippyrylegsvoyage.wordpress.com/2016/11/06/burger-babes/>>

[both accessed on 15 February 2019]

¹²⁵ Sanghani, "'Burger King'.

necessity of its passage through the mouth'.¹²⁶ The cover of an American rapper Ludacris's album 'Chicken N Beer' (Figure 13)¹²⁷ takes Burger King's *carnophallogocentrism* a step further by depicting a woman's leg about to be cannibalistically devoured by the singer. In the post-Soviet context, Russian meat restaurants are also widely advertised as 'для настоящих мужчин' or called 'macho'.¹²⁸

Figure 11. *The Cattle Queen*



Figures 12a and 12b. *Burger King Ad Campaigns (2009)*



¹²⁶ Derrida and Nancy, p. 280.

¹²⁷ Photo by Chicken and Beer, sourced from Apple Itunes <https://itunes.apple.com/au/album/chicken-n-beer/13074271> [accessed 15 February 2019]

¹²⁸ For instance, 'Настоящий мужчина ест мясо! Много мяса' – declares Russian steak house Праймбиф Бар (12 April 2018) <<https://www.facebook.com/primebeef.rus.bar/photos/«Настоящий-мужчина-ест-мяс-/2053703481511676/>> [accessed 3 September 2019]. One can also easily find online meat-based recipes for 'real men' in the post-Soviet space. See, for instance, '10 блюд из мяса для настоящих мужчин' <<https://onedio.ru/news/10-blyud-iz-myasa-dlya-nastoyashih-muzhchin-19629>> [accessed 3 September 2019].

Figure 13. Cover of Ludacris's album 'Chicken N Beer'



The fact that there is no meat industry in Omai is telling. Omai's vegan ideology is crucially connected to the planet's utopian ideals of equality and democracy. The act of eliminating meat opens an opportunity for Omaians to develop an alternative model of subjectivity that is not rooted in sacrifice, exclusion, exploitation and hierarchical relations. In contrast, Djenri's stance as a coloniser from a virile, patriarchal and war-ready planet engenders her suspicion of cultures that do not consume meat. The importance of meat consumption for Djenri is apparent in the fact that her first enquiry upon arriving on Omai concerns the availability of meat on the menu. Djenri requests 'normal meat' for her 'light breakfast', fearing that perhaps there are no cows on Omai and Omaians eat 'some sort of seaweed'.¹²⁹ In response to this uncouth request, Omaian staff explain that all Omaians are vegan, but that they can offer their guest artificial meat. Djenri suspects that the option of artificial meat might have only been added to the menu after her request. In justification of her abruptness, she reveals to the readers that she does not normally eat meat for breakfast but that it is important for her to know whether Omaians eat meat. Djenri's concern indicates that meat-eating is an important marker both of her identity and of Omaians' Otherness.

¹²⁹ *SD*, p. 15.

However, after spending little time on Omai, Djenri quickly becomes insecure about her identity as a follower of Earth politics, leading to her heightened internal conflict. She becomes worried that Omaians are probably looking down on her, fearing people on Earth ‘как отсталых, чумных’.¹³⁰ Her insecurity reaches a high point at the crucial meeting with the Council of Omai. The Council consists of creatures that embody their planets, Gaea – a living tree, Omai – a six-legged alligator, and Atabei – a white shapeless airy mass (Figure 14).¹³¹

Figure 14. Djenri meeting the Council of Omai



Djenri cannot help feeling respectful towards these non-human creatures and meeting them leads her to question her assumptions.¹³² One of the key elements of Haraway’s vision of the meeting between the species is the notion of *respecere*, the act of looking back and respect. For Haraway, *respecere* means ‘to hold in regard, to respond, to look back reciprocally, to notice, to pay attention, to have courteous regard for, to esteem’ and therefore to understand

¹³⁰ Ibid., p. 21.

¹³¹ Ibid., pp. 194-195, illustration by Hagra.

¹³² Ibid., p. 26.

‘that meeting the look of the other is a condition of having face [sic] oneself’.¹³³ Djenri’s encounter with the non-human members of the Council is an engagement in *respecere*. As mentioned earlier, upon her arrival on the planet, Djenri immediately begins to feel respect for Omaians, even as, or especially because, she considers them as different from people on Earth, as ‘kooks’ [чудаки]. Meeting other inhabitants in Omai’s system only deepens her respect. Not only does she come face to face with them ‘reciprocally’, but she engages in an act of intimate communication.

Djenri is taken by complete surprise upon discovering that her dialogue with the council has to unfold in a telepathic matter. Not only would telepathy reveal all her political secrets and the true nature of her mission, but it would also put her in a position of even greater personal embarrassment by making her look like an incompetent fool. Djenri’s forte is ‘words and text’, not empathy.¹³⁴ Her encounter with the council is thus a metaphorical encounter between the supposedly rational thoughts of the coloniser and the thoughts and conceptual processes of their colonised ‘others’ which they invariably label as irrational.¹³⁵

The emotional/rational dichotomy is rooted in the concept of savage/civilised binary which has performed a crucial service in colonial epistemologies and ideologies. As Marianna Torgovnik points out, terms like primitive, savage, traditional, exotic and Other ‘all take the West as norm and define the rest as inferior, different, deviant, subordinate, and sub-ordinable’.¹³⁶ When Djenri comes face to face with the Council, she engages in Harawaian *respecere*, an act of active looking, of holding each other in esteem, and looking critically at oneself. Her political mission was to sow seeds of discord and doubt among Omaians ‘surely,

¹³³ Ibid., p. 88.

¹³⁴ ‘Слова, текст, вот что являлось моей сильной стороной, не эмпатия’, *SD*, p. 24.

¹³⁵ The conception of the colonised as irrational is a staple subject in postcolonial studies. For a concise essay on the topic see Tony Ward, ‘Rationality and Colonisation: A Discourse of the Use of Rationality as an Instrument of Oppression’, 2006 <www.tonywardedu.com> [accessed 15 February 2019].

¹³⁶ Maria Torgovnik, *Gone Primitive; Savage Intellectuals, Modern Lives* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1990), p. 21.

but surely', to convince them that their ancestors were fallen women, and to get them on the Earth's side.¹³⁷ Therefore in the initial stage of the meeting, she makes an effort to conceal her true intentions and convince the council of the Earth's desire to re-establish contact with her long-lost daughters, forget past hurts, and join the forces in the great conquering of cosmos.¹³⁸ However, Djenri's mind unexpectedly resurfaces the memories of her fateful visit in the Wild Zone where she was brutally assaulted.¹³⁹ The recollection of this trauma prompts Djenri to break down in tears and reveal the true cause of her resentment for Omaians – her regret that Omaians left without freeing the remaining women on Earth.¹⁴⁰

Djenri's encounter with the non-human others echoes Jacques Derrida's recollection of his peculiar encounter with his cat. In *The Animal That Therefore I Am* (1997) Derrida explains how having being caught naked by his cat prompts his meditation on what it means to be looked at by 'the wholly other they call animal':

The animal is there before me, there next to me, there in front of me – I who am (following) after it. And also, therefore, since it is before me, it is behind me. It surrounds me. And from the vantage of this being-there-before-me it can allow itself to be looked at, no doubt, but also – something that philosophy perhaps forgets, perhaps being this calculated forgetting itself – it can look at me. It has its point of view regarding me. The point of view of the absolute other, and nothing will have ever given me more food for thinking through this absolute alterity of the neighbor or of the next(-door) than these moments when I see myself seen naked under the gaze of a cat.¹⁴¹

Derrida realises that in this exchange of gazes, the cat is not a mere object of a human gaze, but also an agent of his own reciprocated gaze and point view. This leads him to criticise Western philosophers for of only having 'seen the animal without being seen by it, without being seen seen [sic] by it'.¹⁴² By deconstructing the traditional hierarchical understanding of

¹³⁷ *SD.*, p. 29.

¹³⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 26.

¹³⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 28.

¹⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 29.

¹⁴¹ Derrida, *The Animal*, p. 11.

¹⁴² *Ibid.*, p. 40.

an encounter between humans and animals, Derrida questions the notion of the ‘wholly other’ and challenges the notion of human superiority. Derrida’s subversive thinking carries implications beyond human/non-human theorising as it exposes racist and colonial ideologies’ indebtedness to speciesism, or the belief that most human cultures are superior and very different from other animals. Ultimately, in their challenging of speciesism, both Derrida’s and his cat’s mutual gazing at each other and Haraway’s notion of *respecere* subvert the dynamics of an imperial gaze which bestializes and infantilizes the observed and ‘reflects the assumption that the white western subject is central much as the male gaze assumes the centrality of the male subject’¹⁴³.

As Bidisha Banerjee points out, contrasted with the imperial gaze, Haraway’s notion of *respecere* and Derrida’s act of allowing himself to ‘be seen seen’ by his cat ‘dismantle the centrality of humans and allow not just for autonomy and mutual respect between human and animal, but for the possibility of cross-species ethical relationships’.¹⁴⁴ Sultanalieva’s utopia enacts just such relationships and, through its portrayal of inter-species companionship and queer kinship, destabilises the binary of the coloniser/colonised and articulates new utopic visions of post-Soviet identity.

Hagra’s Graphic Story, Untitled (2018)

A similar message on the need to rethink current conceptions of post-Soviet subjectivity is articulated in a reverse manner in the collection’s graphic story by Kazan-based artist and LGBTQ+ activist Hagra (b.1992). The work achieves contrast between conservative and ultra-

¹⁴³ Kaplan, *Looking*, p. 78.

¹⁴⁴ Bidisha Banerjee, ‘Kinship between “Companion Species”’: A Posthuman Refiguration of the Immigrant Condition in Shaun Tan’s’, *Journal of Postcolonial Writing*, 52 (2016), 399-414 (p. 409).

liberal subjectivities through painting a dystopian, rather than a utopian vision. Hagra's graphics tell a story of two dark-skinned women escaping a dystopian world akin to Hitler's vision of the master race where society only accepts people of an Aryan appearance who are destined to create heteronormative white families. The dystopia could be read as an allegory of the current regime in Russia which similarly promotes family values, denounces homosexuality and displays racist tendencies towards people of non-Slavic appearance, especially ethnicities from the Caucasus and Central Asia.¹⁴⁵ As in the previous story, the political allegories are never explicitly associated with the Russo-Soviet world, but this connection can be deduced by the general consensus among Central Asia's cultural and intellectual elite which assesses the current relations between the region and Russia as postcolonial in nature.

This judgment is evidenced, for instance, in an extensive collection of critical essays assessing the Soviet past, also edited by Oksana Shatalova and Georgy Mamedov. According to one contributor, Sergei Abashin, the postcolonial character of the current relations between Russia and Central Asia is much more evident than the colonial nature of the Soviet Union, one example being the migration from Central Asia to Russia and the Russian attitudes towards migrants.¹⁴⁶ Maria Vil'kovisky and Ruth Jenrbekova, artists of the cultural organisation Creolex Centre in Almaty, share this view. They argue that the hierarchies among Soviet member republics have survived the dissolution of the Union and still position Russia at the top, in the position of a totalitarian older brother : 'Так сегодня воспроизводится сталинская схема «дружбы народов», где мирное сосуществование под одной крышей всех

¹⁴⁵ These attitudes were explored in the chapter on diaspora writers, Uzbek author Bibish and Armenian author Narine Abgaryan.

¹⁴⁶ Abashin, 'Советское', pp. 47-48.

национальностей-сестер гарантируется властью старшего брата, который выступает одновременно и в роли древнего Pater familias, и в роли футуристичного Big Brother'.¹⁴⁷

Figure 15. Hagra, graphic story (2018). Untitled



¹⁴⁷ Creolex Centr (Maria Vil'kovisky and Ruth Jenbrekova), 'Истории Трансоксианы: креольность, композиционизм, трансфеминизм', in Mamedov and Shatalova eds, *Понятия*, pp. 76-130, pp. 86-87.

Hagra's dystopian city certainly fits the model of a totalitarian 'Big Brother' state. The streets are overflowing with advertisements for surgeries offering face masks with white skin and blue eyes (Figure 15). In these images, dark skin complexion is associated with sadness, suggested by the downturned lips and sad 'smileys'. 'Светлые лица' refers not only to the colour of the skin, but also a positive state of mind, everyone who is white-skinned smiles and appears happy, hinting that the government is autocratic in nature and aims to create an image that people fully support the regime. The abundance of surveillance cameras installed on buildings and the flying drones similarly point to an Orwellian 'Big-Brother' structure of the state. In line with the regime's promoted values, all white families in the images are heteronormative. Male and female genders are hypersexualised, with men being depicted with an 'eight pack' and women with three breasts. Men have to perform hegemonic masculinity and act as domineering heads of family, as evidenced by the advert where the father towers over his wife and children, with his arms encircling them as if he were strangling his wife with his right hand and crushing his boy's head with his left.

In the context of Hagra's vision, it is plausible that the dark-skinned women are outcasts in their society not only due to the colour of their skin, and their appearance (they do not have the desirable slim-waisted figures), but also their gender or sexual orientation. Their appearance is so uncommon and undesirable that when they run in the streets while escaping the city, a mother standing nearby is covering her child's face. But even having a white skin is not enough to fit in in the society. During their run, the two female protagonists steal a mask from a random woman's white and wide, blue-eyed face to hide their identity. Once they tear the mask from the woman, a white face is revealed beneath, suggesting that even white women are pressured to change their appearance to fit the required standards of a doll-like appearance.

Figure 16. Hagra, graphic story

Figure 17. Lynn Radolph, *Millennial Children* (1992)

The pair eventually escape through a tunnel and in the final image we see them embracing one another in relief in a post-apocalyptic landscape (Figure 16). Here Hagra adds another, ecofeminist, dimension to the story's message. The dystopia from which the protagonists escape is shown as enclosed in a protective bulb, hinting that its totalitarian regime has led to an ecological catastrophe on Earth. This final image bears a striking similarity to Lynn Randolph's dystopian painting 'Millennial Children' (1992) (Figure 17).¹⁴⁸ Through their works, Haraway and Randolph highlight the dangers of life on Earth at the end of the second millennium.¹⁴⁹ Randolph's *Millennial Children* was painted in preparation for the Republican National Convention in Houston to express concern over the fate of the world in the scenario of George Bush's presidency.¹⁵⁰ George H. W. Bush is depicted in the belly of a demon

¹⁴⁸ Randolph, *Modest Witnesses*, p. 17.

¹⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 17.

¹⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 17. The 1992 Republican National Convention held in the Astrodome in Houston, Texas (August 17 - August 20, 1992) nominated President George H. W. Bush and Vice President Dan Quayle for re-election.

rejoicing in the havoc of a post-apocalyptic landscape where the towers of South Texas nuclear power plants are smoking away, an oil field is blazing, the bayou on the right is polluted and the fish have bellied up.¹⁵¹ Hagra transposes Randolph's scenario to a Russophone context and imbues it with the problematics of race and gender. As a result, it makes visible the 'polyvocal, unassimilable, radical difference' of anti-colonial discourse evoked by Haraway.¹⁵²

Anatoly Chernousov's 'Неполное собрание сочинений Ернэзіка Натальевича Печейкина' (2018)

While Hagra opts for a visual commentary on the effects of repressing this difference, Anatoly Chernousov's contribution to the collection, a short story in the genre of speculative fiction, gives a more robust voice to the anti-colonial discourse which privileges this polyvocal difference, whether in terms of cultural or gender identity in the post-Soviet context. Chernousov (b.1984) is an Almaty-based writer and LGBTQ+ activist. His story – 'Неполное собрание сочинений Ернэзіка Натальевича Печейкина' – is built around extracts from a fictional 'tragic' historian Ernazik Pecheikin's alternative history of Central Asia supposedly recovered in 2098.¹⁵³ The publishers of the extracts criticise the contemporary dire state of affairs in Central Asia which they attribute to the developments following the October (1917) revolution, more specifically to the arbitrary fragmentation of Turkistan and Soviet nationalities policy. These processes, they argue, were detrimental to the region, 'капитализм, национализм, сексизм, гендерная бинарность, сексуальное и лингвистическое однообразие стали горькими реалиями жителей региона'.¹⁵⁴ According to Pecheikin's

¹⁵¹ Ibid., p. 17.

¹⁵² Haraway, 'A Cyborg', p. 177.

¹⁵³ Anatoly Chernousov (born in 1984) is a writer and LGBTQ+ activist from Almaty.

¹⁵⁴ *SD*, p. 256.

alternative history, after the 1917 Revolution, the Central Asian region would be divided into three multi-ethnic, multi-linguistic republics of Turkestan, Zhetysu, and Orenburg which would make up the ‘golden Central Asian triangle’. These republics would uphold the values of socialism, democracy, gender, and cultural and linguistic diversity.¹⁵⁵ They would join the Soviet Union voluntarily, contribute to a true friendship of the peoples and speed up the establishment of socialism.¹⁵⁶ Echoing the collection’s nuanced approach to the Soviet past, Pecheikin’s vision suggests that the historian is not inherently opposed to socialism and even the Soviet Union, but rather the Soviet Union’s development into an empire with colonial tendencies.

The story suggests that Soviet colonialism led to the formation of monstrous postcolonial nationalisms in post-independent nation states in Central Asia. One example of these colonial tendencies is conveyed in Pecheikin’s account of the life of a Soviet woman, a certain ‘great-grandmother’ Olya.¹⁵⁷ The narrator recounts that Olya, a woman widowed in the Second World War and left to provide for her two daughters, worked from morning till night in the *kolkhoz* [Soviet collective farm] for dismal financial reward. The money was only sufficient to be exchanged at a set time for mere ‘crumbs’ of food grown by Olya herself on the collective farm. The narrator puts the blame for her grandmother’s suffering on the government and denounces it for exploiting, and fundamentally enslaving its citizens:

¹⁵⁵ Ibid, p. 282.

¹⁵⁶ Ibid, p. 269.

¹⁵⁷ The structure of the novel is fragmentary with historical discourse being juxtaposed with personal reflections. The passage in question is inserted without a clue of the narrator’s identity. It is unclear if Olya is Pecheikin’s great grandmother.

система была «хоть не тельная, но телись»: нет в личном хозяйстве коровы, а молоко в колхоз сдай, нет кур, а яйцо предоставь. Вот прабабушка и пахала сутками, чтобы после расплаты по долгам с государством осталось хоть что-то на прокорм дочерей.¹⁵⁸

The wordplay with *тельная* and *телись* – evoking a pregnant cow and the act of giving birth – refers to the symbolic assimilation of women into the animal world and suggests the particular burden placed on women in the *kolkhoz*. Indeed, since the administration is also corrupt at the local level, Olya falls victim to systematic rape by the chairman of the *kolkhoz*. The chairman catches Olya in the act of collecting leftovers from the harvest and blackmails her into silence over his abuses, threatening her with capital punishment for stealing from the nation's property.¹⁵⁹ By choosing to focus on a woman's story in his critique of the Soviet regime Chernousov emphasises that current gender issues in Central Asia can be traced back to Soviet colonialism which, like all colonialisms, involved a tight control of women's bodies.

Chernousov's method for challenging these current patriarchal tendencies, as well as wider conceptions of selfhood in Central Asia, somewhat deviates from the posthumanist approach of other contributors of SD. The author implies that before experimenting with utopian ideas of blurring or dissolving all identity markers, it is first important to rescue Central Asia's polyvocality. The artists of Creolex Centr [sic] Almaty express a similar view when they suggest that the Soviet order collapsed different markers of identity into a homogenous category of Soviet personhood: '[п]онятия нации, класса и гендера были лишены в СССР того практического содержания, которым они наполнены там, где существует публичная политика; все реальное разнообразие опытов и позиций было обобщено в абстракции единого «советского народа»'.¹⁶⁰ Bearing in mind the experience of previously failed utopias, Creolex Centr are wary of putting faith in utopian thinking.¹⁶¹ Rather, they stress

¹⁵⁸ Ibid, p. 272.

¹⁵⁹ Ibid, p. 273.

¹⁶⁰ Creolex Centr, 'Истории', p. 111.

¹⁶¹ Ibid., p. 127.

the need of articulating the differences, whether in terms of gender, class, politics, or culture that are still ignored in post-Soviet Central Asia. For this aim, they propose considering Central Asia as *Transoksiana*, a region similar in its creole nature to the Caribbean.¹⁶²

Zhanar Sekerbaeva's 'Химеры города З'

Like Chernousov, SD's contributor Zhanar Sekerbaeva makes a connection between patriarchal and nationalistic conceptions of selfhood, but she challenges these conceptions not through speculative fiction, but through recreating Haraway's vision of a chimeric, monstrous world of fusions between human, animal and machine. Sekerbaeva (born in 1982) is an Almaty-based writer, LGBTQ+ activist and co-founder of the Kazakh feminist organisation Feminita. Like Sultanalieva, she is also studying at the University of Tsukuba, Japan. Her story 'Химеры города З' [Chimeras of Z city] takes place in 2080, in the apocalyptic city of Z, in a world on the verge of an ecological catastrophe, and one where the entire population of Earth is on the way to becoming cybernetic. The ozone layer has been destroyed and the Earth is protected by a temporary artificial layer. All the resources necessary for sustaining human life have been depleted. Migrating to other planets is impossible as they are occupied by 'protoses' [протосы], or other beings with whom humans cannot communicate. Humankind has nowhere to run and 'for the first time in history', all humans have become refugees.¹⁶³ Most of the Earth's population has dematerialised into cybernetic bodies and is about to be moved into space in a massive government operation of 'reloading' [перезагрузка]. The reloading is set to take place three days from the point where narration begins, and one human has to volunteer

¹⁶² Ibid; passim.

¹⁶³ SD, p. 205

to launch the programme at the risk of being left behind in the process. The protagonist Vasumitra is a chimera – one of the few remaining people who still retain their material forms. She runs a ‘farewell café’ [прощальное кафе] where other chimeras can enjoy material pleasures by touching objects, drinking and eating before the great reloading. Most of the chimeras are men who reminisce about the way of life in the 2000s and resist the cybernetic reloading into space. Aidarbek Kumisov, one of the ministers in the World government, alongside the female defence minister Mary Krushchev, is one such dissident chimera. It is through Aidarbek’s character that the author explores the postcolonial dimension of her work.

Like ‘Element 174’, Sekerbaeva’s story is more than merely an apolitical sci-fi tale. Like Sultanalieva, Sekerbaeva is employing the tropes of utopia to question the postcolonial conceptions of identity in post-Soviet Central Asia. More specifically, the author focuses on the nationalistic and patriarchal tendencies common in newly independent, postcolonial societies, tendencies that favour a single, supposedly authentic and traditional national identity and gender system. Aidarbek epitomises the postcolonial national elites propagating a return to tradition. In the past, he used to campaign for the recognition of Kazakh language as the exclusive language in Kazakhstan and for the prohibition of Kazakh women’s right to marry foreigners.¹⁶⁴ We saw in on Chapters One and Two how another Kazakh writer, Lilya Kalas, parodies the post-Soviet Kazakh obsession with national culture and Kazakhstan’s corrupt politicians in her *Фонд последней надежды: постколониальный роман* (2013). Sekerbaeva paints a similar humorous portrait of Aidarbek whose grandfather was a nationalist politician. Aidarbek nostalgically reminisces about the past when his grandfather’s slogans were popular, and dreams about what could have happened if women had not gained more political influence. In his dreams, he is a polygamous, greedy and unscrupulous hedonist:

¹⁶⁴ Ibid., p. 206.

Еще чуть-чуть, и полигамию аташки¹⁶⁵ утвердили бы законодательно, еще чуть-чуть, и у него могла бы появиться восьмая жена, еще чуть-чуть, и взятка за тендер была бы у него в кармане, еще чуть-чуть, и жизнь стала бы вечным опьяняющим кумысом, а Айдарбек – биомассой, открытой всем наслаждениям.¹⁶⁶

The narrator explains that the 2000s were a time governed by powerful patriarchal stereotypes and convictions, some of which persist in the world of 2080. People could not imagine an alternative world, ‘они не могли помыслить мир, отношения, чувства иначе’.¹⁶⁷ Central Asian male leaders ‘even created an idolatry cult to patriarchy’ and decided to put up a statue in one of the Central Asian countries, causing arguments between them as to which country should host the statue. A consensus was only reached when a shaman from Mongolia advised the five leaders to name the statue using parts of their names and name it ‘КатТанБекАлиГлы’.¹⁶⁸ This lexical amalgam echoes Sultanalieva’s play on words with the male gods in ‘Мошеиисухаммед’. In both stories, the authors parody the cult of masculinity, whether embodied by politicians or prophets.

With his fellow like-minded male rebels, Aidarbek once attempted to escape to a new planet in order to avoid the reloading programme. Anticipating this move, feminist engineers programmed all spaceships to return to Earth in case the passengers gave a wrong answer in the computer game All New Gender [sic]. The only way the passengers could answer the question about their gender correctly was by stating that they did not belong to any gender. All male passengers answered incorrectly, leading to the failure of their escape plan.¹⁶⁹ Here Sekerbaeva is making a direct reference to cyberfeminism, more specifically to the Australian art collective VNS Matrix and their humorously subversive tactics. In 1994, VNS matrix developed a CD-Rom ‘All New Gen’ (a reference to both new genders and generations), not

¹⁶⁵ In Kazakhstan, ‘ata’ is a form of polite address for uncles. Here, аташки denotes ‘uncles’, i.e. men, or fathers.

¹⁶⁶ *SD*, p. 206.

¹⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 208.

¹⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 209.

¹⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 207.

so much a computer game but a conceptual and parodic appropriation of a Nintendo video game and science fiction narratives.¹⁷⁰ Upon logging into the game, the player is asked: ‘What is your gender? Male, Female, Neither’. The only right answer is ‘Neither’—with anything else sending the player into a loop that ends the game. The game is devised as ‘a terrain of propaganda, subversion and transgression’ and features female ‘cybersluts’, ‘guerillas’ and ‘anarcho-cyberterrorists’ who infiltrate the cyberspace ‘Big Daddy Mainframe’ – ‘a transplanetary military-industrial-imperial date environment’.¹⁷¹ VNS Matrix knowingly plays with cyber-discourse and combines it with theories of sexual difference to appropriate originally derogatory terms of mainstream popular culture such as ‘bitch’ and ‘slut’.¹⁷²

Sekerbaeva’s story is strongly influenced by cyberfeminism, a movement in turn inspired by the theories of Donna Haraway. Cyberfeminism emerged in the early nineties, at a time of rapid technological progress, the rise of the Internet, and a speculative bubble of stock prices referred to as the ‘Dotcom bubble’. In this period, from 1995 until 2000, the Internet sector grew over 1000% of its public equity and many investors believed that a ‘new era’ was upon them.¹⁷³ The term ‘cyberfeminism’ was coined simultaneously by the British cultural theorist Sadie Plant and VNS Matrix in 1991. The optimism associated with technological progress prompted cyberfeminists to embrace the utopian bent of digital culture to defy the existing boundaries of identity and embrace the postmodernist potential for radical openness. Cyberspace and technology were viewed as utopian spaces where social constructs such as gender, race and class could be questioned, and the body could be linked with machines. As one of the founders of VNS Matrix Virginia Barratt explains in hindsight, the collective’s job

¹⁷⁰ Susanna Paasonen, ‘Thinking Through the Cybernetic Body: Cybernetics and Feminism’, in *Figures of Fantasy: Internet, Women, and Cyberdiscourse* (New York: Peter Lang, 2005), pp. 171-230, p.209.

¹⁷¹ VNS Matrix, ‘All New Gen’, *VNS Matrix*, 2016 <<https://vnsmatrix.net/all-new-gen/>> [accessed 17 February 2019].

¹⁷² Paasonen, ‘Thinking’, p. 209.

¹⁷³ Christian Wollscheid, ‘Rise and Burst of the Dotcom Bubble: Causes, Characteristics, Examples’ (Seminar Paper in Business Economics, Technical University of Applied Sciences Mittelhessen, 11 July 2012).

‘as female-identified people, and as feminists, was to overthrow the gatekeepers in order to access a powerful new technology which had huge implications for domination and control by the patriarchy and by capitalist systems’.¹⁷⁴ At the same time, feminism also had to evolve in order to accommodate technological transformations. As Faith Wilding argued at the time:

If feminism is to be adequate to its cyberpotential then it must mutate to keep up with the shifting complexities of social realities and life conditions as they are changed by the profound impact communications technologies and techno science have on all our lives.¹⁷⁵

Cyberfeminists were not oblivious to the fact that the digital world, and the cultures emerging from it, contained as many gendered power dynamics as the real world; indeed the term ‘cyberfeminist’ itself is partially a critique of the misogynistic overtones of cyberpunk literature in the 80s.¹⁷⁶ Nonetheless, cyberfeminists at the time believed in the cyberspace’s feminist potential, as the novelist Beryl Fletcher put it, cyberspace could ‘stretch imagination and language to the limit; it is a vast library of information, a gossip session, and a politically charged emotional landscape’.¹⁷⁷ The cyberfeminist movement weakened after the dot.com bubble burst, and the utopian bent of the movement suffered as it became evident that the problems of the digital world were becoming inseparable from the problems of the real world. However, the disappointment in the web’s emancipatory potential notwithstanding, the identity theories developed during the movement are even more pertinent in the current context of our increasing dependence on web technologies and social media websites. As evidenced in SD, the radical ideals of redefining identities inherent within cyberfeminism are seen as equally

¹⁷⁴ Claire L. Evans, “‘We Are the Future Cunt’”: CyberFeminism in the 90s’, *Motherboard*, 2014 <https://motherboard.vice.com/en_us/article/4x37gb/we-are-the-future-cunt-cyberfeminism-in-the-90s> [accessed 13 November 2018].

¹⁷⁵ Faith Wilding, ‘Where Is the Feminism in Cyberfeminism’, *N.Paradoxa*, 2 (1998), p. 10 <https://www.ktpress.co.uk/pdf/vol2_npara_6_13_Wilding.pdf?>,

¹⁷⁶ Evans, “‘We Are the Future Cunt’”.

¹⁷⁷ Beryl Fletcher, ‘Cyberfiction: A Fictional Journey into Cyberspace – or How I became a Cyberfeminist’, in *CyberFeminism: Connectivity, Critique and Creativity*, ed. by Susan Hawthorne and Renate Klein (North Melbourne: Spinifex Press, 1999), p. 351.

useful by queer-feminists in the post-Soviet space.

Despite the dystopian element of an impending apocalypse, the story's setting is utopian and can be read as the author's vision of what Earth would look like if Donna's Haraway's ideals were to be realised, albeit too late. In fact, the story makes direct references to Haraway's theories. The narrator explains that the World government's decision to move to cyberspace was influenced by the long struggles of cyberfeminist and ecologic activists guided by Haraway's ideas:

Всё началось с манифеста Донны Харауэй, провозгласившей устранение гендера и других границ между людьми. Ее поддержали феминистки всего мира. То, что говорила Харауэй, касалось самого важного, – с чем люди не были готовы согласиться даже в век технологической сингулярности, когда каждый-каждая-каждые-каждое были синхронизированы с технологиями, будь то смартфон, компьютер или чип в голове, помогающий пострадавшим в несчастных случаях.¹⁷⁸

The age of 'technological singularity' that the author is describing here is one where Haraway's suggestion that 'we are all cyborgs' has advanced into (or regressed, depending on one's point of view) a world where people are technological beings whose identities cannot be determined through traditional markers of gender, class or race.¹⁷⁹ The concept of technological singularity was developed by eminent twentieth-century scientist John Von Neumann, and later Vernor Vinge and Ray Kurzweil, and refers to the hypothesis that 'the accelerating progress of technology and changes in the mode of human life' will lead to a reality where the machines would be far superior to humans and 'human affairs, as we know them, could not continue'.¹⁸⁰ Incidentally, science fiction writer and mathematician Vernon Vinge was also one

¹⁷⁸ *SD.*, p. 204.

¹⁷⁹ It has to be noted that Haraway's cyborg theory should not be misread as an advocacy of technoutopias.

¹⁸⁰ Stanislaw Ulam, 'Tribute to John von Neumann', *Bulletin of the American Mathematical Society*, 64.3 (1958), 1-49 (p. 5). See also Vernon Vinge, 'The Coming Technological Singularity: How to Survive in the Post-Human Era', in *NASA. Lewis Research Center, Vision 21: Interdisciplinary Science and Engineering in the Era of Cyberspace* (San Diego State Univ.; Dept. of Mathematical Sciences, 1993), pp. 11-12 <<https://ntrs.nasa.gov/search.jsp?R=19940022856>>; Ray Kurzweil, *The Singularity Is Near: When Humans Transcend Biology* (New York: Penguin Group, 2005).

of the first people to present a fully-fleshed concept of cyberspace in his novella *True Names* (1981).¹⁸¹ The utopia of cybernetic existence in Sekerbaeva's story radically alters the existing modes of human life. The cybernetic existence which she envisages involves 'a constant movement' where all previous markers of identity disappear, it no longer matters 'как себя категоризирует существи, как именуует, каким прошлым обладает'.¹⁸² The protagonist Vasumitra, even when not yet a cybernetic being, belongs to the new generation of technological singularity with a non-distinct identity. Her appearance makes it impossible to ascertain her gender, ethnic belonging or social status.¹⁸³ We learn that such side-effects of technological singularity on human identity were especially resisted by men and all other humans unwilling to let go of their bodies. The narrator's position in this opposition is clearly on the side of cyberbodies, with bodies being described as a burden, 'набором изменчивости, движения, постоянного производства клеток'.¹⁸⁴

Alongside cybernetic embodiment, Earth in 2080 also embraces Haraway's ideal of companion species. For Vasumitra, a being most close to her is her cat Dotcom (Figure 18). The cat's name likely pays tribute to cyberfeminism by referring to the 'dot.com bubble', a period which, as stated earlier, saw the rise of cyberfeminism. Dotcom and Vasumitra, like all humans and animals of the story's utopic world, communicate not through words, but through gaze and telepathy. Such a model of interspecies communication fulfils both Haraway's ideal of companion species and *respecere* and Derrida's call for ethical relations between humans and animals prompted by his encounter with his cat. In Sekerbaeva's fictional world, humans are no longer considered as superior rational beings at the top of the hierarchy of Earth's living beings. This becomes evident by the World government's concern over trusting a human to

¹⁸¹ Paul Saffo, 'Consensual Realities in Cyberspace', in *Computers Under Attack: Intruders, Worms, and Viruses*, ed. by Peter J. Denning (New York: ACM 1990), pp. 416-420 (p. 417).

¹⁸² *SD*, p. 208.

¹⁸³ *Ibid*, p. 203.

¹⁸⁴ *Ibid*, p. 204.

successfully complete the final stage of the reloading. ‘Можно ли вообще доверить самый значительный момент в процессе перезагрузки человеку?’ – they wonder.¹⁸⁵ The animals similarly scoff at the idea that humans could be in charge. Seeing the minister of defence dancing drunkenly on a table, Dotcom jokes with her friend, a German shepherd Shepi, ‘Ты представляешь, что это ОНИ нас одомашнили!’¹⁸⁶ Shepi’s incredulity over the fact that humans somehow managed to domesticate pets prompts Shepi into historical revisionism and she informs Dotcom that it all happened the other way round: ‘Нет, это МЫ приручили человека, научили говорить сигналами, кивками, а потом появилась речь, и люди стали лгать, что им нравится те, кто на самом деле не нравится. В коммуникации тело никогда не обманывает’.¹⁸⁷

In Shepi’s account of history, humans are misguided creatures who required centuries before reverting back to the superior forms of communication through corporeal signs associated with animalism. Thus, what was once considered animalistic, and therefore inferior, was embraced in the utopian technological age as desirable. Nonetheless, the communication between humans and animals has not yet been perfected, as evidenced by the sardonic Shepi’s annoyance at receiving humans’ gifts of cuddly toys in the shape of sheep.¹⁸⁸ Yet, Sekerbaeva shows that as Haraway theorises, ‘it is possible to distinguish between “companion species” and infantilizing narratives of interspecies kinship relations, such as the sentimentalized portrayal of loyal dogs so common in film and literature’ and to depict them not merely in their roles as companion animals, but as characters in their own right.¹⁸⁹

¹⁸⁵ Ibid, p. 209.

¹⁸⁶ Ibid, p. 212.

¹⁸⁷ Ibid., p. 212.

¹⁸⁸ Ibid., p. 208.

¹⁸⁹ Bidisha Banerjee, ‘Kinship between “Companion Species”’: A Posthuman Refiguration of the Immigrant Condition in Shaun Tan’s *The Arrival*, *Journal of Postcolonial Writing*, 52 (2016), 399-414, p. 412.

Figure 18. *Vasumitra and Dotcom*



Sekerbaeva's story thus presents a posthuman vision of the world, a vision which, as Judith M. Halberstam and Ira Livingston explain, does not necessitate the obsolescence of the human, or represent a clear-cut evolution or devolution of the human.¹⁹⁰ Rather, the posthuman 'participates in re-distributions of difference and identity':

The human functions to domesticate and hierarchize difference within the human (whether according to race, class, gender) and to absolutize difference between the human and the nonhuman. The posthuman does not reduce difference-from-others to difference-from-self, but rather emerges in the pattern of resonance and interference between the two.¹⁹¹

This dissolution of hierarchical and binary structures such as human/animal, language/body, male/female similarly entails the suppression of colonial drives and the binary of self/world. Accordingly, even if it is too late to save the Earth from an ecological catastrophe, the planet's refugees plan to emigrate to outer space without harming it. The government has ensured that

¹⁹⁰ Judith M. Halberstam and Ira Livingston, *Posthuman Bodies* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1995), p. 10.

¹⁹¹ Halberstam and Livingston, *Posthuman Bodies*, p. 10.

if the mission fails, the debris from the failed reloading will not harm the outside world.¹⁹² Sekerbaeva's characters are struggling to make the best out of the world caught between the promise of a utopia and an imminence of a dystopia triggered by past mistakes, they are the posthuman bodies attempting 'to articulate a present laden with the debris of inert pasts'.¹⁹³ Rather than belonging to linear history, 'they are of the past and future lived as present crisis'.¹⁹⁴

Conclusion

The past and future lived as present crisis fittingly summarises the core concern of SD. As we have seen, the contributors attempt to come to terms with current and future effects of the failed utopia of the Soviet project, whether in terms of the repressed polyvocality of the region, or the impending environmental disasters. In order to stress the urgency of rethinking identity issues in Central Asia, the authors create utopian and dystopian visions both of which provide a stark contrast with the current identity politics in the post-Soviet region. By building on some of the key notions in posthumanism, including cyborg identities, cybernetic embodiment and companion species, SD attempts to imagine a post-Soviet Central Asian identity which is polyvocal and respectful of the region's diverse cultural heritage, politics, gender composition and ecology. While SD's utopian approach might at times come across as excessively radical, it loses some of its sensationalist factor when we consider the radical nature of conservative

¹⁹² SD, p. 215.

¹⁹³ Halberstam and Livingston, *Posthuman Bodies*, p. 10.

¹⁹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 10.

identity discourses in Central Asia, as was most recently demonstrated by furious local responses to the controversial women's march in Bishkek (8 March 2019).¹⁹⁵

¹⁹⁵ As discussed in the beginning of the chapter.

Conclusion

In my discussion of post-Soviet women's writing, I have argued that there exists a continuation of colonial dynamics between Russia and the countries in the Caucasus and Central Asia, albeit through different and new politico-economic, socio-cultural relationships. Women's writing from the region reveals these various facets of the post-Soviet condition, highlighting that current tendencies in post-Soviet societies in the region are to a large extent post-colonial, whilst at the same time specific relative to Western colonial models. Russophone authors point to the idiosyncrasy of the post-Soviet 'unhomely' determined by the peculiarities of Soviet colonialism, such as the Soviet State's preoccupation with the self/collective dichotomy. They also reveal that due to the persistent 'secondary Orientalism' specific to the post-Soviet context, women from the two regions face a triple fracturing of their self-identification in view of the disorienting whirlpool of local (nationalist), Western, and Russo-(post)Soviet politico-cultural influences, as evident in NGO and diaspora narratives. Also particular to the post-Soviet context is the manner in which conceptions of futuristic and utopian identity discourses are rooted in the distinctive connection between utopian thinking and the Soviet project.

While revealing the influences of the Soviet past and the neo-colonial present on post-Soviet identity formations, all women writers invariably challenge Soviet, local(national) and international notions and stereotypes of identity, especially gender identity. Through adopting trickster personae, diaspora writers, among them Bibish and Abgaryan, resist being labelled as backward, oppressed women who have found liberation in Russian culture, and deconstruct Orientalist stereotypes by holding up the mirror to Russia's anxieties over its 'Eurasian' identity. Their fictions suggest that the concepts of agency and strategic tactics of adaptation

and survival should be more readily extended to female migrants both in the post-Soviet sphere and beyond. Women authors who have worked in the post-Soviet aid sector similarly reject social roles based on a stereotypical interpretation of the non-West through assimilation or negation. In their humorous and satirical narratives, they critique both Western feminism and local nationalism and their (self)Orientalising discourses on gender. Activists and writers of the pan-Asian collective SHTAB rethink post-Soviet nationalistic conceptions of gender identity by putting a spotlight on the LGBTQ+ community which is doubly oppressed due to the colonial association of the 'colonised' with sub-humanity. Rather than predictably reproving this association, they altogether question the notions of humanity by creatively engaging with cybernetic, cyborg and other hybrid identities. Similarly, in their unhomey narratives which echo magic realism's disordering of singular visions, women writers radically reimagine domestic spaces by injecting them with disorienting, mystical and uncanny visions to oppose both the stifling Soviet order and post-Soviet nationalisms.

Thus, another common pattern that emerges from Russophone writings is that women authors from the Caucasus and Central Asia emphatically eschew self-identification as victims without agency, whether in the face of colonialism or nationalism. They emphasise that neither should they be seen as unsuspecting targets of 'Western' feminist influences. In so doing, they are able to evoke in original ways the distinctive aspects of post-Soviet experiences within wider postcolonial experiences.

Central Asia and the Caucasus cannot be considered as typical colonies, and neither is Russia a typical ex-colonial metropolis. This is not to suggest that Russia is an internal colony, an idea that, as I hope to have shown, exoticises Russo-Soviet imperialism and perpetuates Russian Orientalist and colonial discourses, both in academia and in Russian foreign policy. Rather, the specificity of Russian Orientalism lies in the fact that it is secondarily derived from Western Orientalism, meaning that the former is always complicated by Russia's historically

problematic self-definition vis-a-vis the West. The resulting insecurities have in many ways heightened the Russo-Soviet state's demonstrations of Russian cultural and political superiority at the expense of colonial policies in the Caucasus and Central Asia. This phenomenon determined the ambiguity of Soviet policies such as *druzhba narodov*, both patronising and enabling, especially in relation to the native intelligentsia in the two regions, and it has also determined the lived reality of many post-Soviet subjects.

Due to the resulting high degree of Sovietisation/russification of the republics' cultural elites, some post-Soviet authors, like Azeri writer Rena Yuzbashi, still voice the idea that Russia protected its younger siblings from the West and feel proud to be making a contribution to Russian culture through their Russophone writings. Armenian author Narine Armenian, who shares these feelings, similarly constructs a shared Russo-Armenian defiant subaltern identity vis-à-vis the West in her portrayal of her experiences working with Western tourists. Other authors, like Uzbek writer Bibish, and Kazakh author Olga Breininger, more readily denounce Russian colonialism in their countries, despite acknowledging their fondness for Russian culture and acknowledging the successes of Soviet multi-ethnic policies, for example the peaceful multiculturalism of Karaganda, Kazakhstan. Yet others, such as Armenian author Maryam Petrosyan, Kazakh author Lilya Kalas and Tajik author Eleonora Kasymova, evoke biting, yet emotionally neutral visions of Russian colonial dominance and embrace the postcolonial cultural diversity determined by Soviet policies, both constructive (e.g. Soviet promotion of multi-ethnicity) and destructive (the dislocated existence imposed on non-Russian minorities by deportations). Their approach extends to their use of Russian language which they regard as part of their cultural identity without granting it symbolic privilege over native languages. While Georgian authors altogether reject Russian language as 'colonial' and evidence most explicit pro-European outlooks, they are preoccupied with the same concerns as

other Russophone, and in fact Russian authors – overcoming the colonial trauma and surviving the difficult post-Soviet transition.

Indeed, while the decolonisation of Western Empires was not detrimental to the socio-economic structures of the former colonial centres, the dissolution of the Soviet Union and the traumatic transition period (involving the economic shock-therapy, increased crime and social unrest, the masculinity crisis and so on) left Russia and the ex-Soviet republics in a comparably fragile state. My findings show that owing to this phenomenon, the experience of alienation and displacement that marks the post-colonial condition is especially pronounced in the post-Soviet sphere, including Russia. If the Soviet superpower was one large ‘communal apartment’ (Slezkine), post-Soviet nations in the Caucasus and Central Asia now find themselves in a position of metaphorical homelessness on the global geopolitical stage, a condition echoed in post-Soviet women’s writing. The latter is dominated by the search of a psychospiritual homeland and the specifically post-Soviet unhomely moments which reveal their authors’ and protagonists’ ambivalent identities.

Building on Freud’s and Bhabha’s theories, my analysis of these narratives has proposed a conceptual model for a cross-cultural analysis of trauma in the post-Soviet sphere. It has established that Russophone authors’ private negotiations of selfhood are always influenced by wider political considerations as they struggle to dissociate their individual identity from the collective. Women’s evocations of the unhomely in the two regions are unique not only within the broader postcolonial evocations of alienation, but also, potentially, within the post-Soviet context due to the peculiarly widespread experiences of displacement across the Caucasus and Central Asia. In this regard, it is important to examine whether unhomely interlinked metaphors of homes, nature (especially trees and plants) and childhood occur in writings beyond this region.

To further enrich our understanding of how these societies cope with trauma, one could explore not only the suppression of political memories linked with violence and displacement, as I have done in this thesis, but also the traumas arising from cultural *mankurtisation*, especially in Central Asia. Here one would expect writings in native languages to offer a closer engagement with the theme of cultural loss than Russophone writings which do not prioritise this issue. For example, in her novella *Бескемпир* (2012),¹ Kazakh author Zira Naurzbaeva, who writes in both Kazakh and Russian, draws a parallel between the tragic suppression of nomadic customs and traditions in Soviet Central Asia and the clash of white American colonisers with American Indians. Moreover, the study of ‘native’ language literatures is a worthwhile task in itself and opens up original perspectives on these regions’ constructions of modernity. For example, unlike Russophone authors, Naurzbaeva, who has written academic studies on Kazakh mythology, music and their repression in the Soviet era,² frequently engages with Turkic and proto-Turkic mythology in her fiction and points out its matriarchal orientation.

While Russia has severely suffered since the collapse of the Soviet Union, the country still seeks a military, economic and cultural upper hand on the Caucasus and Central Asia, and promotes initiatives (the Eurasian Economic Union, the Eurasian Research Institute, the Russian Prize etc.) that contribute to maintaining this hierarchy. The cultural and economic dependence on Russia in post-Soviet societies from the Caucasus and Central Asia is most evident in the works of Russophone emigre writers who have settled in Moscow in hope of better economic opportunities and greater potential for disseminating their works. The reception of these authors in Russian culture points to the persistence of Orientalist attitudes to

¹ Zira Naurzbaeva, *Бескемпир* (2012), available at <<http://otuken.kz/бескемпир/>> [accessed 10 May 2019]

² See for instance Zira Naurzbaeva, *Вечное небо казахов* (Almaty: Сага, 2013). Naurzbaeva’s works can be found at <<http://otuken.kz/topics/zira1/>> [accessed 10 May 2019]

the peoples in the southern ‘periphery’ of the former Soviet empire. Especially now, when Russia is facing increased competition from Turkey in terms of its influence over Central Asia, the country remains anxious to maintain its role as the ‘older brother’ in the post-Soviet space, ensuring a persistence of the discourse of the civilising mission. At the same time, however, migrant women’s writing points to Russia’s persistent anxieties over its ‘Eurasian’ identity and this is precisely the Achilles’ heel which they exploit as part of their tricksterism to suggest the arbitrary nature of Russian Orientalist stereotypes. These authors’ tricksterism involves seeming over-identification with the clichés on primordial ethnicities and an adoption of ludic and foolish personae. However, there are many forms that tricksterism can take, and the concept can be fruitfully applied to other, potentially more subversive fictions, to examine the various ways in which non-Russian or ethnic minority Russophone authors in Russia adapt, adopt or resist the demands of the Russian literary market.

Russian official discourse on the East’s backwardness is not limited to these countries’ gender orders and construes their very modernity as ‘underdeveloped’. Especially due to ‘secondary Orientalism’, post-Soviet nations have to negotiate the double neo-colonial dynamics in relation to not only Russia, but also the West, a conundrum most evident in the post-Soviet aid sector and the narratives inspired by it. In Lilya Kalas’s *Фонд*, interactions between the Russian superior Oleg and his Burkut (Kazakh) colleagues reveal both Russia’s persistent Orientalist attitudes towards the supposedly backward Central Asia, and the local employees’ internalisation of such views. In Tajik author Kasymova’s *Tajik*, these self-Orientalising tendencies are most notably evidenced by Tajik women activists’ approaches to gender, which they understand through the lens of the Soviet civilising mission and Western feminism. What emerges is the divergence of the post-Soviet gender problematic from western postcolonial dynamics due to the especially pronounced multiplicity of the modernising and colonising agents in in the two regions. This specifically complex, post-Soviet/colonial

whirlpool of influences limits NGOs' positive impact, for example, by fostering an ideological divide between urban and rural women's communities.

And yet, rather than falling in the trap of denouncing the aid-sector as the 'Trojan Horse' of the West or, alternatively, as a white knight coming to the rescue of the 'developing' world, as is common in many NGO narratives, women writers in both regions problematise the stereotypical discourses on NGO activities. Echoing Achille Mbembe's notion of mockery from within, they blur the 'coloniser'/colonised binary and satirise the complicity between foreign neo-colonial forces, local corrupt elites and their subjects, refocusing our attention from the politics of oppression to the practices of strategic compliance and ironic subversion – in other words – 'conviviality'.

While the neo-colonial dynamics between Russia, the West, and the ex-Soviet region are showing no signs of loss of importance in the political realm, a more peculiar picture is emerging in the cultural sphere of post-Soviet Central Asia where a young generation of creative artists are making promising attempts at transcending the colonial experience through their utopian imagination. By building on some of the key notions in posthumanism, including cyborg identities, cybernetic embodiment and companion species, the authors conceptualise inclusive, liberal and eco-conscious models of identity, and aim to restore the repressed polyvocality of the region. However, their attempts differ from, and indeed oppose, the current nationalistic tendencies that seek to recover the so-called traditions of a mythical, pre-colonial golden era. Rather, the authors draw creative inspiration from recent history. Their strategies of going back to the past in order to move to the future, in other words, of reimagining the Soviet colonial project and its generally thwarted utopian potential, allow for a more active engagement with the Soviet experience and a more reflective approach to the present. Acknowledging the special connection between the Soviet project and utopian thinking allows these authors' post-Soviet decolonial imagination to stand as a strikingly original and forward-

thinking model not only within post-Soviet, but also global sci-fi literature which still displays remarkable rigidity in the imagination of truly inclusive outer space utopias. Unlike Russophone sci-fi, the latter offers little radical engagement with the concepts of nations, families, parenthood and other social relations.

In many ways then, Russophone women authors challenge the association of their literatures with 'marginality' and 'subalternity'. They equally suggest that the prefix 'post' in the term postcolonial is beginning to change its meaning in post-Soviet Caucasus and Central Asia from denoting neo-colonial 'in-dependence' to signifying the increasingly sovereign decolonial epistemologies of the region.

My discussion has revealed the postcolonial dynamics in the current cultural, social and political developments in the post-Soviet world, spanning over a wide array of topics including immigration, NGOs, gender, criticism of the Soviet order, nostalgia for the Soviet past, religion and neo-colonialism. As such, the project produced new perspectives of neo-colonial developments both in the post-Soviet space and beyond, in the hope of advancing knowledge not only in Literary Studies but also Postcolonialism, History, Politics, Social Sciences and Cultural Anthropology. Comparative readings of literary works in this project have gestured toward the sheer number of possible connections that can be explored between post-Soviet and post-colonial experiences at the intersections of these disciplines, suggesting that future scholarship could only benefit from further considerations of Russian Studies as an expanding, transcultural field.

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