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Central Asia in Contemporary Russian Literature Among Nostalgia, Trauma and Orientalism

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Abstract Central Asia in contemporary Russian literature is represented by two main discourses, Nostalgia discourse and New Orientalism discourse. This article follows a diachronic perspective in an attempt to understand their origins, the characteristics of the Tashkent text and the Tajikistan text in literature, as well as historical and cultural factors which led to the present-day image of Central Asia in Russian culture, from the first Orientalist works through hybridisation processes to the collapse of the USSR and the Post-Soviet trauma. As a sample of contemporary literature, novels by Dina Rubina, Suhbat Aflatuni, Andrey Volos, Yevgeny Chizhov and other writers are analysed.

Keywords Russian Literature. Central Asia. The Other. Nostalgia. New Orientalism.

Summary 1 Introduction. – 2 Notion of Central Asia, Orientalism and New Orientalism, PostColonial Studies and Internal Colonization. Nostalgia and Post-Soviet Identities. – 3 Birth of Central Asian Orientalism in Russian Literature. – 4 Rise and Fall of the Assimilation Discourse. – 5 Nostalgic Utopia and Tashkent Text. – 6 New Orientalism. Tajikistan Text, Trauma and Return of *the Other*. – 7 Conclusion.



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237

1 Introduction

The aim of this article is to provide a brief overview of how Central Asia is represented in Russian literature, with a close look on contemporary authors. This research does not pretend to be exhaustive; single literary works will be taken as samples of general tendencies; analysing the literary production of all contemporary Russian writers linked in some way to Central Asia is beyond my objectives. I will talk about those contemporary novels which are present in the Russian book market and are available to an average (or mass) Russian reader, so marginal literary activities, if such exist, are beyond this research. In an attempt to understand the main factors which led contemporary Russian writers to choose a certain way of representing Central Asia, I will necessarily speak about facts from History as to better understand their impact on culture and literature, though one should be aware that here History serves for merely illustrative purposes, as well as data from Sociology and Culture Studies: mine is a study in Literature.¹

The image of Central Asia in Russian culture and literature through the last 150 years has undergone changes, defined by political events: the Russian conquest of Central Asia, its status as part of the Russian Empire and the Soviet Union and then the creation of independent states. After a preliminary analysis of the most important theoretical issues of this research (such as the notion of Central Asia, Orientalism, the applicability of postcolonial theory, the idea of the internal colonization and the question of post-Soviet identities) I will show that chronologically the first and most persistent discourse in depicting Central Asia is Orientalism, dominating, for example, in the 'Caucasus text' in Russian literature of that epoch.² I will speak also briefly on differences in the representation of the Caucasus and Central Asia in 19th-century Russia. Then the article will proceed to the shift in Central Asia representation during the Soviet times, when literature reflects a gradual turn from Orientalism to Assimilation; a turn favoured by multinational nature of the so-called Soviet literature. Finally I will concentrate on the characteristics of the post-Soviet Russian literature look on Central Asia, which clearly falls into two trends. For one of them I'm proposing the term 'Nostalgia discourse', as I see it akin to a more generic post-Soviet nostalgia for the Soviet utopia and harmony lost; I will try to trace

¹ Those interested in the Post-Soviet space in historical, cultural and sociological dimensions, among other sources, can find a lot of interesting materials in a specialized scientific review, *Ab imperio*, available at the following link: <https://abimperio.net>.

² The long tradition of the Caucasus text in Russian literature is analysed in a great number of studies, to name a few: Shul'zhenko 2017; Grimberg 2000; Gadzhiev 1982; Dudareva 2019; Helle 2009; Dudareva 2019; Helle 2009.

down its features through the analysis of Dina Rubina's and Suhbat Aflatuni's prose. Then I will focus on the second trend, for which I'm proposing the name of 'New Orientalism'. I will show that it results from the recent political transformations and their traumatic experience. As a sample I will analyse Andrey Volos', Yevgeny Chizhov's, Lyudmila Basova's, and Vladimir Medvedev's works.

2 Notion of Central Asia, Orientalism and New Orientalism, Postcolonial Studies and Internal Colonization. Nostalgia and Post-Soviet Identities

The borders of the area understood as Central Asia vary depending on its application for geographical, cultural or geopolitical purposes,³ and can include territories from the Caspian Sea to as far as Lake Baikal and Mongolia, from the Southern Siberia to the northern borders of Pakistan and India. In this article I will use the term 'Central Asia' as an equivalent to the Russian term *Srednyaya Aziya* Средняя Азия (Middle Asia), thus embracing contemporary Turkmenistan, Tajikistan, Kyrgyzstan, Uzbekistan and Central/Southern Kazakhstan. Having much in common since their early history due to geographical affinity, these territories later on have experienced similar political and cultural events: after a series of wars in the middle of 19th century, they were either included directly into the Russian Empire or became its protectorates (as the Khiva Khanate and the Bukhara Emirate), thus marking the start of Russian domination in the region. Then for almost 70 years, from early 1920s to 1991, they made an integral part of the Soviet Union, which exposed them to social and cultural processes, unknown, for example, to Afghanistan or Western China; Central Asia in this meaning still exists in Russian collective mentality as a certain whole, domesticated in the past. Till 1920s this region in Russian was also called Туркестан (Turkestan), so in Literature Studies a peculiar 'Turkestan text' is sometimes distinguished.

To describe the Russian vision of Central Asia I will use the term 'Orientalism' which, after the famous book *Orientalism* first published in 1978 by Edward W. Said, for almost half a century has provoked infinite discussions: the interpretation of Orientalism varies from the positions of Said (though the scholar himself gives, at least, three possible meanings of the term) to that of his ardent adversaries; the truth is that Said did not speak much of Russia, and the question is if his idea of Orientalism as a way to exercise the power of the West

3 For a detailed analysis of this problem see, for example Lolaeva 2009.

over the East is applicable to Russian realities.⁴ While all interested readers can find materials on the theoretical debate over the Said's positions elsewhere, in this article 'Orientalism' is taken in a broad meaning of 'an interest towards Eastern cultures from the positions of *the Other*'.⁵ Understood in this way, the interest towards the East is a specific case of the interest towards a collective *Other*, which takes form in a binary opposition: 'We' (European civilization) vs '*the Other*' (non-European civilizations located in Asia); as Said notes, "Orientalism is a style of thought based upon an ontological and epistemological distinction made between 'the Orient' and (most of the time) 'the Occident'" (Said 1980, 10). In my opinion, this interest may (or may not) include civilizing, imperial, ethnographic or other intentions. Of course, the self-imposed distinction between Europeans and non-Europeans defines a specific European way of describing non-European Eastern cultures. I can't but agree with Hassan Hanafi, who, following Said's ideas, states that Orientalism "expresses the searching subject more than it describes the object of research" (Hanafi 2010, 15). In an attempt to understand the mood of some works of Post-Soviet Russian literature dedicated to Central Asia, I'm also proposing another term, 'New Orientalism', which retains the main characteristics of the classic Orientalism with one significant difference: the cultures described in this way (namely those of the former Soviet Central Asia republics) returned to the status of *the Other* after a seemingly successful assimilation with Russian culture (in this case, deemed European), so this *New Orientalism* is a reaction to the conscious choice of the cultures to dissent from the West and to regain their original heritage and forms of existence.

The ideas of Orientalism inevitably recall the rise and the success of the Postcolonial theory. The input of this theory in describing cultural situations in the former British and French colonies is difficult to negate, but its applicability to the post-Soviet reality is not free of controversies:⁶ while European and American scholars use it extensively to understand various dynamics of the post-Soviet countries, in Russia itself this theory has not had much success.⁷ Ilya Kukulin notes that

⁴ A very interesting analysis of Edward Said's ideas applicability to the 'Caucasus text' in Russian literature can be found in Zakharov 2014.

⁵ Vladimir Medvedev, whose novel *Zahhok I will analyse*, says: "Edward Said damaged the reputation of this term. It would be worth restituting its original meaning: Orientalism is a narration about the East, a study of the East, love to the East" (Medvedev 2018). Unless otherwise indicated, all translations are by the Author.

⁶ The literature on the subject is vast and easily available; just to name a few, see Adams 2008; Chioni 2001; Kukulin 2013; Morozov 2015. Among the recent works of particular interest is Smola, Uffelmann 2016.

⁷ Eleonora Shafranskaya cites an interesting document: an explicitly negative reaction of some Moscow-based scientists against a Seminar in Colonial and Postcolonial

[a]ny attempt to interpret the contemporary cultural situation of Russia, post-Soviet republics and Eastern Europe as postcolonial is regularly rejected by Russian scientists. (Kukulin 2008, 126)⁸

The refusal to apply the postcolonial approach to, say, Central Asian literatures is easy to understand: accepting it would mean to qualify the former Soviet republics as colonies; it is absolutely contrary to the idea of a specific Soviet nation, based on the concept of ‘friendship of nations’. That is why in Russia “the postcolonial discourse [...] is not assimilated; it is considered improper and not adopted [to Russian realities]” (Berg 2005, 119-20).⁹ Vladimir Medvedev holds that contemporary Russian novels about Central Asia have nothing to do with Postcolonialism:

I’m convinced that these novels can’t be qualified as postcolonial, because you won’t find even a trace of postcolonial issues in any of them. Compare *Khurramabad* by Andrey Volos, *Tashkent Novel* by Suhbat Aflatuni or *Interlinear Crib Translation* by Yevgeny Chizhov with a classic postcolonial novel like, say, *Time for a Tiger* by Anthony Burgess, and you will see crucial differences. (Medvedev 2018)

It is evident that in the case of the former USSR the problem is the notion of *colony* which undermines postcolonial discourse. An attempt to resolve it and to underline the difference in the modes of interaction between the centre and the periphery in the British or French colonial empires, on the one hand, and in the Russian Empire and the Soviet Union, on the other, is the theory of *internal colonization* (or *self-colonization*), proposed by Alexander Etkind.¹⁰ Dragan Kujundzic, sharing the ideas of Etkind, agrees that this is the way “by means of which Russia acquires its history” (Kujundzic 2000, 896). The internal colonization, in fact, tries to adapt the Postcolonial Theory to the realities of the Russian and Soviet history, where the absence of great geographical distances between the centre and the periphery made the application of British-African or French-Asian relations model impossible. In case of the mainland Russia and, for example, Central

Studies, see Shafranskaya 2016, 39-40.

⁸ In an obvious attempt to overcome this prejudice, a leading Russian scientific journal *Новое литературное обозрение* dedicated one of its latest issues to the problem, see: “Постсоветское как постколониальное. Специальный выпуск. Часть 1” (Post-Soviet as Postcolonial. Special Issue. Part I) (2020). *Новое литературное обозрение* (New Literary Review), 161(1).

⁹ A discussion between Ekaterina Dyogot and Margaret Dikovitskaya on the pages of *Ab Imperio* journal seems very symptomatic; see Dyogot 2002; Dikovitskaya 2002.

¹⁰ See Etkind 2010, 2011a, 2011b.

Asia, due to assimilation processes, hybrid Russian-local identities were often formed. In the Soviet times they were comprised by the Soviet identity reflected in Soviet multinational literature. The concept of internal colonization, in fact, describes perfectly not only the mechanisms of the assimilation in the Soviet Central Asia, but also the effects the collapse of the Soviet Union produced on these hybrid identities. As “after 1991 the Soviet identity gave place to new national identities” (Puleri 2016, 14), it is comprehensible why the second predominant discourse of the Central Asia representation in contemporary Russian literature is Nostalgia: more than nostalgia for the territories lost (as would be in case of classic colonialism), this is a nostalgia for the identities lost when the new ones have still to be found. Alexandra Kazimirchuk describes the problem:

After the collapse of the USSR, its former republics saw the birth and a subsequent growth of a nostalgia for community, for a certain commitment to the metropole; there began a search for their own identity. (Kazimirchuk 2017, 163)¹¹

Gradually, this ‘local’ nostalgia merged with a much more ponderous discourse in Russian culture: nostalgia about the Soviet Union, provoked by a complex social phenomenon known as ‘post-Soviet trauma’. The number of studies dedicated to the essence and to the effects of post-Soviet trauma is high, and an interested reader will easily find them. I will just note that it is generally considered that the lack of clear strategies for the future development of Russia, defected economy, recent challenges in security and welfare push Russian collective mentality to the image of the Soviet Union as a sort of past utopia opposed to the instability of the present-day world, where “variables include Russia’s image of itself” (Bowring 2000, 240). Russia is also seeking for a national identity, and nostalgia for the Soviet Union is one of the ways to regain it.¹²

Finally, another problem related to the question of identity is what the borders of Russian literature are. As Nina Friess notes,

[t]hanks to the spread of the Russian language with the expansion of the Russian Empire and later the Soviet Union, as well as large waves of migration from Russian-speaking areas during the twentieth century, Russian or Russian language literature no longer originates

¹¹ The very search for identity, peculiar for the Post-Soviet space, is sometimes seen as a serious proof that Postcolonial theory can be applied to post-Soviet realities, see, e.g. Puleri 2018.

¹² This problem is studied, for example, in Bassin 2003. See also a volume, dedicated to the relation of Eurasianism and contemporary Russian national identity: Friess, Kaminskij 2019.

only from the territory of the Russian Federation. (Friess 2019, 149)

In other words, the problem is the following: what Russian literature is and what is *not*. For example, Tamara Ivanova says:

It's difficult to consider certain texts, written in Russian, a part of Russian literature. The problem is not only the writer's vocabulary, Oriental realities or the content of the book, but more a specific syntax, mentality, cultural values, literary strategies characteristic for the Eastern tradition. (Ivanova 2019, 46)

When the postcolonial approach has not found much enthusiasm on the Russian ground, a number of terms are used to characterize contemporary Russian-speaking literature written abroad, such as 'frontier literature' (Madina Tlostanova), 'hybrid literature' (Sergey Tolkachev), 'multicultural literature' (Tlostanova, Tolkachev, Elena Tckhaidze), 'cross-cultural literature' (Zhanna Burtseva), even 'post-Russian literature' (Diana Ziyatdinova); recently the term 'transcultural literature' has been used extensively. All these definitions underline a specific situation when a work of verbal art belongs simultaneously to more than one culture, without making choice in favour of only one national literature. Tatyana Kolmogorova, trying to resolve this controversy, marks all post-Soviet authors writing in Russian as "Russians by profession, because the Russian language is the only language they use in their works" (Kolmogorova 2015, 261). Here I would add that often it is the author himself to label his works as Russian literature (for example, Suhbat Aflatuni from Uzbekistan) or national literature written in Russian (Russian-speaking Andrey Kurkov from Kiev who declares that he's a Ukrainian writer): the choice depends on the personal national self-identification.

3 Birth of Central Asian Orientalism in Russian Literature

The birth of Orientalism in classic Russian literature is related to the cultural discovery of the Caucasus. As Vladimir Zakharov notes,

in the 19th century the Caucasus for Europe and for Russia was associated with the Orient [...]. Orientalist topics became traditional in Russian literature already in the first quarter of the 19th century. (Zakharov 2014, 41)

'Meeting' the Caucasus happens in the epoch of Romanticism, thus provoking a certain romantic Orientalist mood (see *A Hero of Our Time* by Lermontov or *The Prisoner of the Caucasus* by Puškin) in Russian literature. As Pavel Alekseev sustains, the main sources of

Romantic Orientalism in Russia are “Arabian fairy-tales, Sufi poetry and the Quran” (Alekseev 2013, 21). The idea of Central Asia is typologically close to the Caucasus (as another exotic part of the Russian Empire), but it entered Russian collective imagery later, after the Russian-Kokand war in 1850s. In general,

the perception of Central Asia by Russian, ‘Russian-Soviet’ and contemporary Russian mentality changed according to the political and state evolution of Russia itself. (Lolaeva, Ryabov 2009)

The conquest of Central Asia falls in the epoch of Realism, which put the accent away from the Romantic, enchanted narrations and was little if no interested in ‘romancing’ and, therefore, romanticizing the region:

When the Russian troops were conquering Tashkent and subduing the Khanate of Bukhara, the Romanticism had already been burnt out. This exotic periphery was of little use for the Realism, known for its capacity to discover new worlds in the most mundane and routine things. (Abdullaev 2011)

Consequently, the amount of literary works dedicated to Central Asia in the pre-revolutionary Russia is scarce; from a long row of Russian classics of the 1850-1900s only Mikhail Saltykov-Shchedrin recurs to the Central Asian topic in his *Gospoda tashkentsy Господа ташкентцы* (Misters from Tashkent, 1869-73), a satire on Russian bureaucrats, sent to Tashkent to ‘civilize’ the local population.

It is the discourse of civilizing Orientalism that characterizes the initial attitude of Russian culture towards Central Asia. As in the case of the Caucasus discourse, Russian culture is seen more progressive and modern, while Central Asian local culture(s) are deemed underdeveloped and wild. The first professional Russian writer, who dedicated the majority of his production to Central Asia, is Nikolay Karazin (1842-1908).¹³ His orientalist novels, short stories, travel diaries opened the region to a Russian mass readership. In his works the local population is savage, wild, uncontrolled – it is the same ‘child of nature’, as in Romanticistic depictions of the Caucasus, but Karazin’s Central Asia lacks that magic enchantment typical of the Caucasus. What he describes is the territory of *the Other*, and Karazin meticulously provides the reader with various data about life habits, national character, religion and beliefs of the local population, their clothes and typical food – all that definitely strange for a *European* Russian reader. As Eleonora Shafranskaya notes, “Karazin gave a

13 For a detailed analysis of Karazin’s poetics and legacy, see: Shafranskaya 2016.

start for a lot of those stereotypes which afterwards became clichés of the Turkestan East” (Shafranskaya 2016, 37). His works follow the usual strategy of the European writers, depicting *the Other* from the East: “The description of a singular case is represented as a description of typical features of a given culture” (Repina 2012, 16). Let’s mention the fact that Karazin’s works (over 20 volumes, as his complete works edition of 1904-5 counts) were not published in the Soviet Union; they were marked as the expression of the colonial expansion of the Russian Empire, and Karazin’s name was nearly forgotten.

Immediately after Karazin, the Orientalist perception of the region is obvious, for example, in Nikolay Gumilev’s famous poem *Turkestanskije generaly Туркестанские генералы* (Turkestan Generals, 1912) – a sort of ode to the brave conquerors of the wild East, messengers of the illuminated Russia. Tashkent in the pre-revolutionary Russia was a peripheral centre of Russian poetry from Central Asia, which, at least, initially, was perceived as “typical literature written abroad” (Asanova et al. 2016; Ivanova 2000). A number of local newspapers (*Turkestanskiy kuryer Туркестанский курьер*, *Yezhemesyachny zhurnal Ежемесячный журнал*, etc.) regularly published the poems of local Russian-speaking authors,¹⁴ but in the collective Russian imagery Central Asia remained a sort of *terra incognita*.

4 Rise and Fall of the Assimilation Discourse

First Russian civil colonists arrived in Central Asia just after the conquest of the Khanate of Kokand, and the more was the region consolidated with the Empire, the higher was the number of internal migrants. The flows of Russian-speaking immigrants continued throughout Soviet times. This process was reinforced by political and social events: the industrialization (1920-1950s) brought a great number of Russian-speaking specialists to Central Asian cities; the region served as a destination for political exiles and refugees, who escaped from the persecutions of the Regime. Wartime evacuation (1941-45), the Ashkhabad (1948) and the Tashkent (1966) earthquakes contributed to the change of the ethnic balance in the area. The Russian-speaking population quite rapidly gave birth to new generations who acquired life habits and a mentality peculiar for the place and unknown to the Russian mainland, and who considered themselves locals. The assimilation processes couldn’t be unilateral (Russian culture towards Central Asia), and, effectively, gradual russification of Central Asia, more evident with the local intelligentsia, lead to a typi-

¹⁴ For a detailed analysis of the 20th-century Russian poetry in Central Asia see Asanova et al. 2016; Ivanova 2000.

cally Soviet situation where many Uzbeks, Tajiks, Turkmens etc. were bilingual; these was the internal colonization in action.

The Soviet Union adopted the civilizing discourse to its own ideological needs; literature was seen as a conductor of communist ideas, and it corresponded perfectly to the project of Central Asia domestication and helped eliminate the idea of the Other; thus Orientalism gives place to Assimilation discourse. In 1924 *Tashkentskaya organizatsiya proletarskikh pisateley* *Ташкентская организация пролетарских писателей* (Tashkent Organization of Proletarian Writers) was founded; it united writers of local and Russian origin. *The Union of Soviet Writers* organized regular tours to Central Asia. Central Asia was still perceived as an exotic and uncivilized, definitely a *non-Russian* place, but much closer to an average Russian reader than it was earlier. For instance, materials collected in 1930 were used for a number of short stories and essays, let's name P. Pavlenko's *Pustyni Pustyni* (Deserts), Vs. Ivanov's *Rasskaz brigadira Sinit'sina* *Рассказ бригадира Синицына* (The Story of Brigadier Sinit'sin), N. Tikhonov's *Kochevniki* *Кочевники* (Nomades) and others. The most famous example is that of Andrey Platonov, who visited Central Asia twice, in 1930 and 1934, to leave such brilliant short stories as *Dzhan Džan* (1934) or *Takyr Takyr* (1934).

In 1920-30s Central Asia faced the process of national delimitation between the newly created republics:

The process of drawing national boundaries in a region where these borders had never existed before, where bilingualism and multi-layered identities were common, and where divisions of language and ethnicity often fell along the rural/urban divide, created many anomalies. (Morrison 2017)

At the same time, the project of creating a peculiar *Soviet nation*, which would include all the nations of the USSR, began. These events favoured the leading role of the Russian language ('the language of communication between nations') and Russian culture, and accelerated the assimilation processes. The Soviet nation, a melting pot of all nations in the Soviet Union, was served by Soviet literature, meant as a sum of all national literatures. As Susanne Frank notes, this literature was characterized by several features, namely,

the dominance of Russian as lingua franca and the language into which all (relevant) literary texts had to be translated was only one feature, others being dogmatism of one aesthetic doctrine - Socialist Realism - and universalism. (Frank 2016, 193)

As a result of these policies, since 1940-1950s Central Asia in the Russian cultural space is represented by writers who split into two cat-

egories. On the one hand, there are ethnic Russians, mostly living in Central Asia, often born and bred there, therefore assimilating the local mixture of cultures from their childhood. On the other hand, a lot of Uzbeks, Tajiks and other ethnically non-Russian authors write their texts in Russian. The idea of Soviet literature eliminated at the moment any possible discussion whether the works of these writers belonged to Russian literature or to their national literature, though written in Russian; Soviet literature was automatically transcultural: “the mixture of the Russian language and other culture’s paradigms resulted in hybrid texts” (Tolkachev 2017, 194). Some of these writers (representing both streams) gained all-Soviet fame, just to name Chingiz Aytmatov (an ethnic Kyrgyz), who wrote both in Russian and Kyrgyz, with his notorious novels *I dol’she veka dlitsja den’* *И дольше века длится день* (A Day Lasts more than a Hundred Years, 1980) or *Plakha Plakha* (The Place of the Skull, 1987). We can find a vast variety of genres in the Central Asian prose written by ethnic Russians, from philosophical novel to detective stories and science fiction, but the most prolific was the historical novel, which gained wide, all-Soviet popularity. There are, at least, three subgenres in Soviet Central Asian historical novel: novels illustrating the life after the Russian conquest and the subsequent establishment of the Soviet power; novels about the ancient history of the region (these two subgenres are often documental, or tend to be such); and, finally, novels about legendary events and personalities; this third subgenre is close to a fairy tale as if taken from *Arabian nights*.

Among the most prominent novels dedicated to the victory of the revolutionary forces in Central Asia let’s name *Po volchiemu sledu* *По волчьему следу* (Tracing the Wolf, 1958) and *Dzheihun* *Джейхун* (1983) by Mikhail Sheverdin, *Gnyot Gnem* (The Yoke, three volumes published in 1957-60) by Anna Almatinskaya. Quite predictably, these works implement the principles of Socialist Realism in the most consecutive way. Among those depicting the ancient Central Asia I’d mention *Zvezdy nad Samarkandom* *Звезды над Самаркандом* (Stars over Samarkand, 1955-73), a history novel in three volumes by Sergey Borodin; or *Sozvezdie Oriona*. *Avitsenna* *Созвездие Ориона*. *Авиценна* (Orion Constellation. Avicenna, 1978) by Lyudmila Saldadze. An absolute bestseller is a novel written by Leonid Solovyev and dedicated to the adventures of Nasreddin Hodja, a folklore trickster from Central Asian tradition. The first part, *Vozmutitel’ spoko-* *jstviya* *Возмутитель спокойствия* (The Mutineer), was published in 1940, the second - *Ocharovannyj princ* *Очарованный принц* (The Enchanted Prince), in 1956. It is re-edited regularly in the ‘mainland’ Russia after the collapse of the Soviet Union; the latest (by now) Moscow edition dates back to 2016. The popularity of the historical novel may be considered as a testimony of the continuity of the Orientalism discourse: Central Asia is still a mysterious, unknown place, the

territory of *the Other*; though, unlike the initial period, this *Other* is not an enemy but more an object of interest and curiosity.

In December 1991, though, the Soviet era officially came to its end, and Central Asian republics gained their independence. A difficult economic situation and national policies adopted by the local governments provoked a mass migration of Russians and Russian-speaking population since the 1990s. These drastic changes seriously questioned the Soviet idea of the ‘friendship of nations’ and the success of the assimilation processes; the role of the Russian language significantly diminished.¹⁵

Two main discourses characterize post-Soviet Russian literature focussed on Central Asia: on the one hand, its Nostalgia discourse, which manifest itself in the images of the idyllic Soviet past, with the locals and Russians living happily together, as we see, for example, in the novels of Dina Rubina. On the other hand, there is New Orientalism, whose essence coincides with the Karazin’s mood in the epoch of the Central Asia conquest: we see a hostile, mysterious, definitely alien region, where Russians are invaders and outsiders, despite many years of cohabitation with the native population. It often reveals a trauma of the generations of ethnic Russians in Central Asia, whose usual life pattern is “terra incognita - a new place to live - Motherland - crush of the habitual world - saying the last farewell - a new (strange / alien) place” (Remizova 2000). Thus the concept of *the Other* came back to the description and representation of Central Asia. This discourse is represented by the novels of Andrey Volos, Vladimir Medvedev, Lyudmila Basova, and Yevgeny Chizhov.

5 Nostalgic Utopia and Tashkent Text

Tashkent in the second half of the 20th century became one of the centres of hybridization processes in Central Asia, which led to the formation and further development of a peculiar Tashkent text in Russian literature, “it’s a city text born on a cultural frontier” (Shafranskaya 2010, 6). As it happens to the majority of post-Soviet places, their link with the Russian collective imagery is weakening, and this process brings to life a tendency

to preserve the image of this city in scientific studies and literary texts, [...] to ‘preserve’ that cultural layer of the city, which is physically no more recoverable, but will exist in literature and re-

¹⁵ A peculiar case is the so-called ‘Fergana School of Poetry’ in Uzbekistan, formed in early 1990s. Though Russian-speaking, their poetry was clearly oriented on Western avant-garde traditions. See Korchagin 2017.

search as a document of the epoch. (Shafranskaya 2010, 9)

The Tashkent text now is mostly a Nostalgia text, located in the past and in memories; it is clearly retrospective and extremely personal: the author shares his memories with the reader, accompanying him to a secret, utopian place.

The most prolific and renowned author representing this literary vein is Dina Rubina (b. 1953 in Tashkent), who left Tashkent for Moscow in the 1980s and then moved to Israel. As a consequence, in Rubina's works there are two possible depictions of the East: the domesticated East, which "is formed, primarily, through the discourse of everyday life" (Ziyatdinova 2015, 192) – Tashkent and Jewish Israel, and the East of *the Other*, realized through the Orientalist discourse, as in the case of the Arabs. The Tashkent text is recurrent in Rubina's autobiographical works: it is often the city where her protagonists were born or have spent their childhood. In *Ich bin nervoso*, a collection of essays, Rubina says:

I understand now that Tashkent was a microscopic model of that melting pot which American and Israeli sociologists are craving for [...]. Under the Tashkent sun, I was – all we, children, were – a sort of a homogeneous mixture, a sort of clay used to sculpture a man... I'd say a 'colonial man'. (Rubina 2007)

Rubina's novel *Na solnechnoy storone ulitsy Na solnechnoy storone ulitsy* (On the Sunny Side of the Street, 2006) is a sample text implementing Nostalgia for Central Asia. It's a sort of remembrance, as Rubina explicitly says several times through the text: the Tashkent she is showing does not exist anymore, and this literary text is a tribute to the past, to an illusory territory of peace and happiness. The structure of the novel is complex; Tashkent itself is the main protagonist of the book, which the author populates with various characters: Russians, Jews, Uzbeks, whose lives make up the history of the city. The formal protagonist, an artist named Vera Shcheglova, is the alter ego of Rubina, who keeps also a place for herself among the heroes of the novel, sometimes describing the same event from the point of view of Vera and then from the point of view of an imaginary 'little Dina'. The novel exists in several time layers: the city during the Great Patriotic War (1941-45), when the future mother of Vera is evacuated to Tashkent from Leningrad; the 1950s-60s, when Vera's mother is growing and becomes a criminal; the 1960s-90s, Vera's personal and professional growth; all these periods are accompanied by the author's personal recollections and comments on the peculiarities of Tashkent life. These time layers are interlaced and non-chronological; in fact, it is a sort of game with reality, where the only real space is a utopian city disappeared forever with the Soviet Union. The people of Rubina's

imaginary Tashkent all live but in memories, and the novel, formally following the belles-lettres trend, seems a postmodern docufiction.

The Tashkent text reveals itself also in the works of Suhbat Aflatuni, alias of the Tashkent-based writer Evgeny Abdullaev. ‘Suhbat Aflatuni’ in Uzbek literally means ‘Plato’s Dialogues’, and, actually, Aflatuni’s prose follows a philosophical trend and goes much beyond Rubina’s everyday life descriptions. His *Tashkentskiy roman Tashkentskii roman* (A Tashkent Novel), *Muravyiny tsar’ Muravyinyy tsar’* (The Ants’ King), *Dikiy plyazh Dikiy plyazh* (Wild Beach) deal with memories, but these are not personal memories, for Aflatuni tries to reconstruct the historical memory of the region – from the present-day independent Uzbekistan back to the ancient history, to the times of Alexander the Great, Buddhist expansion and the epoch of Zoroaster. “Tashkent in Aflatuni’s prose is the main ghost, a sacred mystery, a city of dreams” (Kazimirchuk 2017, 163), but here we deal not with Rubina’s explicit nostalgia for the forever lost Soviet Tashkent, but with a much more complicated feeling: a strong wish to understand oneself and realize one’s own place in the universe through the cultural history of the region. All people, all nationalities, all religions rooted in Central Asia throughout history, are equal and homogeneous. Using postmodern composition techniques, Aflatuni often refers to the Buddhist idea of reincarnation and makes the same hero live simultaneously in different epochs and in various cultural environments. In a certain sense, Aflatuni continues the tradition of Soviet-time hybridization strategies; he declares that “Central Asia is very scarcely ‘inhabited’ by Russian literature [...] and my task, one of my tasks is to continue this process” (Aflatuni 2016, 6), but if the Soviet case was inspired by State ideology and limited to the synchronic dimension of happy Soviet peoples united in one Soviet nation;

Aflatuni’s personal style is characterized by interference of the past into the present: myth and history in his novels merge together to create a peculiar kind of reality where the author tries to ponder over eternal global problems. (Emelina 2019, 80)

Political, cultural and temporal borders disappear, and Central Asia constitutes an organic part of the Universe, as well as Russia or any other place in the world. Therefore it seems that Aflatuni’s novels eliminate the concept of *the Other*.

6 New Orientalism. Tajikistan Text, Trauma and Return of *the Other*

A discourse, opposite to Rubina’s or Aflatuni’s works, is the discourse of a failed assimilation: it shows Central Asia as an unfriendly or ex-

PLICITLY hostile territory, where traditional habits and a peculiar way of life turned out much stronger and more persistent than the civilizing attempts of Russians. These ideas seem to represent a comeback to Nikolay Karazin's Orientalist positions which marked the introduction of Central Asia into Russian literature 150 years ago. This New Orientalism, though, has lost its initial innocence: local inhabitants are savage not because the Western world has not arrived (and the Russian in this model is a Western, or at least, a non-Oriental culture) but because this is their conscious choice, a kind of rebellion against the West. The most evident example (but not the only one) of this discourse is the Tajikistan text. Created mostly by writers born and long-lived in Tajikistan, it is a reaction to the Civil War (1992-6) and to the social and demographical changes caused by this war. Therefore, the nostalgia, widely present in the Tajikistan text, also cries for the times lost, but the past is not the happy 'melting-pot' utopia of Rubina; here Russians all of a sudden discover that "one of the Soviet ideologemes, 'the friendship of nations', is just a simulacrum, there is nothing like this 'friendship' in the real life" (Shafranskaya 2019, 127). Thus the question which torments the authors is 'why?': why it happened at all and why Russians, living for years back to back with the locals, became *the Other* in their own Motherland? The most famous and renowned representative of the Tajikistan text is Andrey Volos (b. in 1955 in Stalinabad, now Dushanbe) with his notorious novel *Khurramabad Хуррамабад* (2000); let's also name *Sinie zvezdy Evropy, zelenye zvezdy Azii Синие звезды Европы, зеленые звезды Азии* (Blue Stars of Europe, Green Stars of Asia, 2006) by Lyudmila Basova and *Zahhok Заххок* (2013) by Vladimir Medvedev.

Khurramabad by Andrey Volos opens the list of the contemporary Russian novels which dwell on the Tajikistan civil war. The novel, first published as separate short stories in a number of literary journals, was conferred several prestigious literary awards and played an important social role, exposing the problem of the Civil War to a Russian reader not as a fact taken from daily news but as a reality for thousands of compatriots, abandoned by the Government and desperately struggling to survive in a land suddenly turned dangerous and hostile. The novel follows a non-linear structure; as in Rubina's novels, *Khurramabad's* only protagonist is a place - Tajikistan, from its capital Dushanbe to the tiniest *kishlaks* (villages) in the Pamir, where Russians happened to live by some chance. Nostalgia is widely present, the very title *Khurramabad* refers to Tajik-Persian folklore and means something like 'a city of flowers', 'a garden-city'. Still Volos' heroes have no time to indulge themselves into the opiate oblivion, dreaming about the happy times of childhood, as a real Nostalgia discourse suggests. His heroes have to be rough, smart and determined, for their habitual world one day has broken and they have to survive, they *are* to survive and to save their families. Volos shows a gallery

of human types, united in this struggle; each chapter contains one particular story, be it a grandson who is to accompany his old grandmother while she's visiting her husband's tomb; an average Russian man desperately trying to buy a machine-gun (and finally managing to do it) to protect his own house from paramilitary criminals; or an elderly Russian lady, whose solitude (as her children have been settled in mainland Russia for a long time) finds the only consolation in a strange affective relation with a mortally poisonous snake, which becomes a sort of pet for her. The topic running throughout the novel is *the Otherness*. People from *Khurramabad* (as noted above) are striving to understand why years of seemingly harmonious coexistence with the locals and of *seeming* harmony ended in a massacre, in a collective call to expel the Russians from Tajikistan; and neither the external look nor the knowledge of the Tajik language and of the local way of life can save one from the status of *the Other*.¹⁶ An exemplary story here is that of a Russian man named Sergey, who married a Tajik girl from the Kulyab region. He lives in Dushanbe and works in a city grocery market. Sergey changes his name to *Sirojiddin*, switches to the Tajik language and accepts Tajik habits but still feels a stranger. One day, during the outrages in the streets of Dushanbe, Sergey is captured by armed people; they make him pronounce a nursery rhyme to understand his provenance: Sergey speaks Tajik with a strong Kulyab accent, acquired from his wife, so the militants take him for a Kulyab spy and kill him. It would be an ordinary civil war story if not for Sergey's last thoughts: he understands that he's dying but he is happy: he is local, he is not *the Other* anymore, even if the price for the total assimilation is his life.

Basova's novel *Sinie zvezdy Evropy, zelenye zvezdy Azii Синие звезды Европы, зеленые звезды Азии* first publication dates back to 2006 (literary journal *Brega Tavridy Брега Тавриды*, issued in Crimea). Overlooked by literary critics, it drew no attention from the readers. The second journal publication appeared eight years later, in 2014 and was awarded with the prize for the Best Novel of the Year by the literary journal *Sever*, issued in Karelia. At the same time it was published in a book edition, followed by a sequel, *Verblyuzhyya Kolyuchka Верблюжья колючка* (Camelthorn). Basova's prose shows a strong typological resemblance to Rubina's works; it is a stream of personal memories, family stories and tales, a whole which forms a utopian place of stability and happiness left in the past. The difference is that if Rubina stops at this idyllic picture, strictly separated from her post-Tashkent life, Basova goes on describing the outburst of the Civil War and the crash of the imaginary utopia, typical of Russian refugees from Tajikistan. In this way the novel's mood turns from

¹⁶ For a detailed analysis of this problem see Abashin 2003.

nostalgic to traumatic; it is not only the war trauma but also the trauma of an average Russian who became stranger in his own Homeland.

It is worth noting that the New Orientalism reveals itself in other forms as well. For example, Volos' novel *Vozvrashchenie v Pandzhrud* (*Return to Pandzhrud*, 2013), a literary biography of the Central Asian ancient poet Rudaki, may be read as an evergreen story about the relation between Power and Talent, though it continues the 'historical' Orientalist vein of the Soviet times, as is evident from its languidly reeling off narration, a peculiar language used and the attempt to introduce the Russian reader to an unknown and dangerous but still very attractive East. Eleonora Shafranskaya sustains that this novel is not Orientalist at all, motivating this opinion in the following way:

[a]lmost all Russian literature about the East is Orientalist in its nature, but the novel by Volos is purposely non-Orientalist. In his narration we find all the loci and artefacts of Orientalism – *bazaar*, *mazar*, *mosque*, *Arc*, *zindan*, *dervishes*, *bachas*, *rishta*, local cuisine and others – but they are not represented as exotic things, they are an integral part of the Oriental world. (Shafranskaya 2020, 299)

This position, though, is vulnerable: to qualify a novel as Orientalist, who is to perceive typical Eastern realities as exotic: the reader or the author? For an average Russian reader all Eastern realities seem exotic, so we should speak about Orientalist novels. For the author, which in case of Russian literature is almost inevitably born and bred in Central Asia, nothing of these is exotic, so all these novels should be non-Orientalist.

Vladimir Medvedev's *Zahhok Zahhok* combines both these streams: it is a tragic story of the Civil War in Tajikistan and of the destinies of the Russians involved in it, generously ornamented with local folklore, life habits, typical mentality and traditional rites. In fact the very title of the novel is a reference to the medieval Persian poem *Shahnameh* by Ferdowsi, where *Zahhok* is a serpent-like evil demon; in Medvedev's novel a wartime criminal, *Zuhhursho*, inseparable with his domestic python, tries to imitate that mythological creature. *Zahhok*, as *Hurramabad*, is a non-continuous novel: the author gives the word to seven protagonists of different nationalities, gender, social and educational background. So the narration shifts from Oleg, a Tajikistan-born Moscow journalist, to Zarina, a young girl of a Tajik father and a Russian mother, a refugee in a mountain village and betrothed to a mighty criminal mogul; from her to *Vahhob*, a typical representative of the urban russified intelligentsia, forced to take the role of *eshon* (a local saint); from him to *Davron*, a former Soviet officer now in service of paramilitary groups, and so on. In this constantly changing kaleidoscope of thoughts and characters the author

tries to show Tajikistan as it was, from the point of view of both Tajiks and Russians. Like that, *Zahhok* is both a novel about the Trauma and about the strange East, whose original nature, as it turns out, was only suppressed but never eliminated by the Soviet hybridization processes, and it is also “a historical novel about the recent past, with the names of real politicians and with the details of the war of the 1990s” (Shafranskaya 2019, 134).

The above-mentioned novels are written by authors whose relation to Tajikistan or Central Asia is personal; the personal experience is shown as typologically generalizing. Real facts show a strong tendency to contaminate imaginary situations and stories, present in their works; therefore these novels often seem more a human document than a fiction. That is why it is interesting to see the look on the Central Asian region of somebody who has never lived there and has no affective relations with the place. This is the case of Evgeny Chizhov and his novel *Perevod s Podstrochnika* *Перевод с подстрочника* (Interlinear Crib Translation, 2013). The novel received a critical acclaim and got several nominations for Russian literary awards (*Natsbest Haўбест*, *Bol'shaya Kniga* *Большая книга* and others). In a certain sense, it sums up the idea of Central Asia in the imaginary of an average Russian, made up of fragments from mass-media, testimonies, anecdotes etc. The author purposely rejects the idea of showing a real place, and gives way to his imagination, creating a country named *Koshtyrbastan* *Коштырбастан*, governed by a life-long President Gulimov. A Russian-speaking reader with an access to the Russian media space finds immediately an infinite stream of clues which point at Central Asia, from the name of the country and the surname Gulimov which sound very ‘Asian-like’, to numerous descriptions of the nature, life habits and history of *Koshtyrbastan*. Gulimov is a poet, which is a broad hint on contemporary Central Asian leaders, famous for their literary creativity. In this way *Koshtyrbastan* is a deliberate summary of modern-day Russian stereotypes and ideas about what Central Asia is twenty years after the collapse of the Soviet Union.

In Chizhov's book New Orientalism is more than evident, and the central problem of the novel is *Otherness*: what *the Other* is and how a person can overcome this status, assimilating Central Asian cultural conventions, and converting from a foreigner to a local. This is what the protagonist, Moscow poet Oleg Pechigin, is trying to do. His surname is an explicit reference to Pechorin, the ‘hero of our time’ from the homonymous classical novel by Lermontov. Pechorin is sent to Caucasus, Pechigin to Central Asia; in both cases we see the encounter with the East and the problem of the acceptance of *the Other*. Pechigin's counterpart is Timur Kosymov, a native *koshtyr*, who studied with Pechigin in Moscow and after the independence of his republic made a brilliant career in the President's Administration.

Kosymov is a recognizable portrait of the former russified local intelligentsia, who easily accepted Western ways of life during the Soviet times just to lose them with the same ease after 1991. He invites Pechigin to Koshtyrbastan to work on the translation of Gulimov's poetry into Russian: in Moscow Pechigin lacks the real 'eastern' atmosphere and the translation is blocked.

In this way the novel shows Central Asia with the eyes of a stranger, as in the European Romantic tradition; the author "creates the atmosphere of *Arabian nights*" (Sargsyan 2019, 71). Pechigin encounters religious radicals, local singers and sculptors, medieval-like peasants and is struggling to understand the significance and meaning of the President's poetry; the only way to succeed in this task is to overcome his own *Otherness* and assimilate the local habits. In fact, the Soviet State failed in what Chizhov's protagonist is trying to do: to become an integral part of the local community. Since Pechigin originally is a stranger, the novel does not appeal to nostalgia; even more, it is a clear statement of the fact that after a brief period of affinity, Central Asia for Russians turned to be the domain of *the Other*, full of dangers and mysteries, as it was before the 20th century. This gap for the author is too serious: just the moment Pechigin finally feels to be a real native koshtyr, he commits a series of fatal errors which lead him to trial and death; despite his ideas, he *is the Other* and will forever remain such. It is interesting to see that, commenting on the novel, Marine Sargsyan (a young researcher from Saint-Petersburg), says: "Yevgeny Chizhov creates a *truthful* picture of life in an Eastern country" (Sargsyan 2019, 74) – that's another confirmation of what the popular image of the former Soviet Central Asia is nowadays.

7 Conclusion

Due to complex historic events of the 19th and 20th centuries the image of Central Asia in Russian literature has undergone changes and passed from initial Orientalism through Assimilation to the actual situation, when contemporary Russian literature depicts Central Asia mostly in two ways: as a domesticated utopia of hybrid identities (Nostalgia discourse) or as a place of *the Other*, exotic for Russians (New Orientalism discourse). Both trends reflect the reaction of Russian collective imagery to the collapse of the Soviet Union and the subsequent creation of new national identities, not only in former Soviet republics, but also in Russia itself.

The theory of internal colonization describes quite adequately the reasons and the effects of creating hybrid identities, which find their full implementation in Nostalgia text, referred to the past. Still, pure Nostalgia discourse, represented by Dina Rubina's prose, is mainly

limited to personal (or pseudopersonal) memories of the author, and with time it will become more and more peripheral, as the reality of the happy Soviet 'friendship of peoples' is turning into a myth, gone forever. In fact Suhbat Aflatuni's literary production, though formally adjacent to Nostalgia text, expands itself over a much wider temporal dimension; on the one hand, it expands the limits of Nostalgia discourse, but on the other it breaks its tight connection to the Soviet utopia, and gains full features of transcultural literature, linked to Russia mostly by the ties of the Russian language.

New Orientalism initially reflected the traumatic experience of the Soviet Union collapse and the failure of the assimilation discourse. The novels by Andrey Volos, Lyudmila Basova, Vladimir Medvedev represent an attempt to fix the moment of the trauma (the sudden break of hybrid identities, which is also the authors' personal experience) and to ponder over its reasons and consequences. Still New Orientalism, unlike Nostalgia discourse, looks not only into the past but also at the present, and changes respectively. As mental and political distances between Russia and Central Asia continue to grow, Russian collective thinking is gradually accepting the thought that Central Asia is not domesticated anymore; it returned to be the territory of *the Other*, an image which is evident in Evgeny Chizhov's prose, where there is no trace of nostalgia. Considering the current political and social processes in Central Asia, it seems much likely that in future New Orientalism will establish itself as the predominant Central Asian discourse in Russian literature and culture.

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