

A Post-Soviet Feminist Odyssey: De-terminating Identity and Transcending Abjection

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Abstract. This article addresses the issue of feminist identity shaping by tracing the author's personal narrative encompassing life in both the metropole and subaltern territories in the Soviet Union and post-Soviet era. Being a half-Russian, half-Muslim ethnic minority, the author uses autoethnography and personal narrative as a method and 'a mode of thought, communication and apprehension of reality' (De Fina and Georgakopoulou, 2012:15). It is argued that identity performance, border thinking, otherness as well as re- and dis-identification as feminist concepts are subject to multiple reconsiderations in collisions with bigotry and abjection. The article demonstrates some cognitive and emotive processes that the author experienced alongside the colonial mode of thinking that manifested itself in different periods of her life.

Keywords: postcolonialism, postsocialism, border thinking, Caucasus, Soviet colonialism, Chechnya

'Narratives of the self are tailored according to their purpose' (Jones-Gailani, 2020:65). I am sitting in Moscow in December 2022 and ponder over the purpose of my narrative. This year, with its war between Russia and Ukraine, rekindled memories of another war and my personal odyssey through borders and territories, from the Global South to the Global North, if we may say so about the territory of the same country.

My story is the story of one family whose life was connected with the Soviet Union and the Russian Federation, as well as with Ukraine and the Chechen Republic. The collapse of the Soviet Union led to the collapse of families. The history of our family was akin to the microcosm of society. These multiple stories of our family had long been in my memory, however I did my utmost to forget about them and bring them back to life only during rare family gatherings with the older members of our family. All of a sudden I realized that there was more than one 'lived experience' in my life and more than one 'observer' in me. Writing 'about the multiple identities and perspectives that make up a human life' (Cremin, 2018:4) is one of the goals in this paper. Multiple identities or pulsing identities give voice to life narratives at different times, echoing and mirroring external events and giving way to

something that has been oppressed in its author for a long time. This process makes it similar to a narrator who sees the world through multiple lenses depending on the context and circumstances that revive the narrative.

I am a half-Russian, half-Muslim ethnic minority, who was born in 1974 in the USSR and grew up in the North Caucasus but left it in 1994 because of the First Chechen war (1994-96) and went first 1000 km to the north and then to the capital city of the Russian Federation. This is where I came across nationalism, bigotry and xenophobia. Being 'other' – a Russian - in a national republic, I again encountered this 'otherness' when I went to the Russian part of my country where I was not perceived as a truly Russian. Wherever you go, you are out of place, longing for assimilation, and have to be malleable to discard of 'otherness'. Therefore, my intent in this article is to contribute, if possible, 'to the building an alternative world in which no one will be an other' (Tlostanova et al., 2016:217).

I will give a testimony to the events that my family and I witnessed, thus reconsidering my identity. Cremin claims that 'autoethnography in the twenty-first century goes further to recognise diversity within the individual, and more than that, diversity that comes from the passing of time' (Cremin, 2018:5). However, identity formation and shaping are not linear processes and 'many feminist, queer and anti-racist thinkers have developed complex models of identification, drawing together relationality, intersectionality, hybridity and affect in resisting simplistic binaries' (Tlostanova et al., 2016:213).

I have never returned to the North Caucasus since the war. Albeit memories are painful, I feel obliged to narrate this region and the people living there. A part of the hypothetical East/Oriental land, geographically the North Caucasus is a part of southern Europe. Similarly to Easter/Central Europe, which 'has a tradition of seeing itself as a bridge, a threshold between Europe and the Orient, between East and West, while also carving its own East and West within the region' (Mudure, 2007:143), the North Caucasus can be considered a bridge between North and South/East Russia. At the same time it is a 'twilight zone' or 'grey' zone (Norimatsu, 2012:286), which does not receive much attention and even in Russia not many people are aware of the existence of several national republics on its territory. King and Menon argue that 'the region's republics are unfamiliar to outsiders (and, indeed, to average Russians): Adygea, Karachay-Cherkessia, Kabardino-Balkaria, North Ossetia, Ingushetia, Chechnya, and Dagestan. Its population of six to nine million--estimates vary--is divided among a variety of

ethnic and linguistic groups, including ethnic Russians, who account for a significant percentage of the population in some areas' (King and Menon, 2010:1)

Crossing the borders ushered the advent of a new period in my life, simultaneously putting my previous identity 'on a silent mode'. This dual identity development or, metaphorically speaking, a 'palimpsest' of identities, was a means of adjustment to the new life and fostering emotional attachment as well as a sense of belonging in a new place. According to Cassano, this happens on the border, where 'our own identity terminates [termina] and is determined: it acquires its own form, acknowledges to be limited by something else which is, in turn, limited by us. The term "border" de-termines' (Cassano et al., 2012:35).

Childhood. Ukraine.

I was born in the Soviet Union, in the North Caucasus, in the Chechen-Ingush Republic, which was one of the 20 autonomous republics in the Soviet Union. I am a postcolonial, post-Soviet feminist author and teacher, whose life is rooted in 'the South of the poor North' (Tlostanova, 2011:1). My family's history reflected the history of the country and of the south of the Soviet country. My grandfather was from Berdyansk, a town in the south of Ukraine which was called 'Osipenko' in 1939-58 (after the Soviet woman pilot Polina Osipenko), and my grandmother came from Krasnodar, a town in Russia, 255 km from Berdyansk. They had married in 1919 before Ukraine became a part of the USSR in 1922. In the 1930s they moved 600 km to the south, to Gudermes, a small town on the territory of the Chechen Republic, where, I assume, they were looking for jobs.

Here I would like to return to Berdyansk in Ukraine as the place where my elder sister and my grandmother used to come back to regularly during 1974-84. We spent every summer in our grandfather's house, who had died by that time. The house was occupied by his niece and her large family. For me, as a Soviet child, this was my huge home country, our homeland. My first encounter with language and ethnic diversity happened there, in Ukraine, in 1980, when my relatives gave a room for rent to a family from the western part of Ukraine. I was six years old and watched the kids from this family playing with a toy watch, which was a rare thing in the time of the consumer goods deficit. However, what surprised me more than the toy watch was the fact that the children were speaking Ukrainian: *desyat godyn p'yat khvilin* (ten hours five minutes, as they say about the time in Ukrainian, or five minutes past ten). Even though I had grown up in a national republic and heard people speaking languages other than Russian on a daily basis, the fact that a Slavonic girl spoke another language shook me to the core. In

hindsight, I think this living alongside people speaking different languages and being citizens of one country was the first – efficient – lesson of tolerance and diversity. For me, as a child, the Slavonic people in the Soviet Union were not supposed to be different in their language and culture. Numerous peoples in the Caucasus were different from us in that they were Muslims. It is no wonder they were speaking their own languages. However, Christians living in the same country and speaking their own language were an unusual phenomenon for me at that time. Forty-two years have passed since, but I still recall that episode and the way I was mesmerized by that scene. It was so brave of them. The reason for my astonishment was rooted in the ‘inversion of social and cultural differences’ (Etkind et al., 2012:14) among East Slavic peoples, which was a peculiar feature of official Soviet imperial rhetoric. Hence, ethnic and cultural differences among them were downplayed or rejected, especially in imperial-era literary works (Etkind et al, 2012).

Childhood and adolescence. 1974-1993. Chechen-Ingush republic.

The legacy of the Orientalist approach to the Caucasus was and is that the region is seemingly ‘a twilight zone’ for both Russia and the West. Tlostanova argues that ‘the future of the Caucasus people was not really of any interest to the West then or today. They have remained the stiffened emblems of Orientalist fantasies, the dehumanized arguments in the rivalry between Russian autocracy and Western liberalism’ (Tlostanova, 2014:107). Similarly, it is of little interest to the local metropole. The history of ethnic minorities and the life in the North Caucasus do not get much publicity in Russia, even though its seven national republics have the population of approximately 8 million people (as of 2010) or five and a half per cent of total population in Russia.

The state language in the republic was Russian. We did not study the Chechen or Ingush languages, although they were not forbidden. Local folklore, literature, art, and history of the North Caucasus as a colonized territory were not taught at schools. This ‘homogenization of the empire’ (Etkind et al., 2012) was intentionally imposed by the metropole. The niche for local culture was predominantly allocated for folklore genre and was marginalized as somewhat archaic. According to Khodarkovsky, this asymmetry of relationships between the metropole and its subalterns is the main characteristic of colonialism (Khodarkovsky, 2012). He claims that ‘the conquerors believed that their role was "civilizing". It was in this role that

Russia found itself, moving further and further south and east over the centuries' (Khodarkovsky, 2012:112).

However, there were two drama theatres in Grozny – Russian and Chechen-Ingush, where performances were staged in the corresponding languages. They still exist in Grozny, notwithstanding the fact that there are almost no Russian actors in the Russian theatre. The Chechen and Ingush republics are among the five regions in Russia with the smallest Russian population. According to official statistics, there are less than one and a half per cent of Russian population in these regions, even though in the 1970s Russians comprised thirty per cent of population, right before the perestroika – almost twenty-five per cent.

Our home was a welcoming place for women and men of different nationalities, because my mother and grandmother had a vast network of friends and acquaintances. These women were of different lifestyles and trajectories. What I disagree with is the opinion of the local women as an average Third World woman who 'leads an essentially truncated life based on her feminine gender (read: sexually constrained) and her being "Third World" (read: ignorant, poor, uneducated, tradition-bound, domestic, family-oriented, victimized, etc.)' (Mohanty, 2003:22). Among our women friends were locals who defined their career paths and their private lives independently from their parents and husbands.

My most vivid reminiscences of life in Chechnya relate to two stories of resistance rooted in the colonial oppression of locals by the Russian Empire. The first story is about a monument to Alexey Yermolov, a Russian imperial general of the 19th century. 'During his tenure as commander-in-chief in the Caucasus, Yermolov (by that time promoted to the rank of full artillery general) was responsible for robust Russian military policies in Caucasus, where his name became a byword for brutality' (Wikipedia). His monument was exploded several times by unknown people. Since it was located near our house and my grandmothers had witnessed the accidents, they told me the story. This was one of my earliest memories of childhood.

Another rebellious act of vandalism occurred in the Arts Museum in Grozny in 1970, when my mother worked there as chief curator. The museum arranged an exhibition of Franz Roubaud, a Russian-German artist of French origin, who created numerous paintings of the Caucasus. His oeuvre includes depictions of battlefields, everyday scenes of local life as well as Orientalist paintings such as "The Captive". One of the most controversial paintings by Roubaud was 'Capture of Imam Shamil by Russian Troops in 1859', which at that time was not openly exhibited because it had been attacked and cut by some Chechen visitors as a sign of protest against the Russian imperial conquest of Chechnya. The decision to exhibit it again was a fatal flaw and the painting was cut again in front of everyone.

When perestroika began in the late 1980s and the Soviet Union collapsed in 1991 the situation in the republic started to worsen. The war did not start unexpectedly. At first banditry ramped up, and all civilians were endangered. Lieven asserts that ‘in Chechnya, Russia finds itself faced with a modern state's nightmare: a region on its immediate frontier which is simultaneously a chaotic failed state, a haven for banditry and organized crime, a threat to Russian control of adjacent regions, and a base for Islamic terrorist actions in Russia’ (Lieven, 2000: 145). Women were in great danger and three of our close friends suffered during this pre-war period. One woman was chased and nearly raped, the other one was kidnapped, and we never found her, and the third one – my elderly teacher of English – was almost executed by insurgents. Fortunately, something stopped them from shooting her at the last moment. The risks for women increased during the war, however even in previous peaceful life women experienced constant sexual objectification, with permanent interest from males, who could approach you in the street, not letting you walk by. This made you an object of sexual appeal, and the effect it may have is that during your life you always feel *visible*. You cannot become ‘invisible’ when you want to, which makes you feel hunted. The repercussions of this attitude continued to reverberate throughout my adult life.

Originally an indigenous nationalist movement, the Chechen conflict was co-opted by the international jihadist movement and aimed at using Chechnya as a launching ground to attack Russia (Garner, 2013). Even though both sides of the war acted as criminals at times, with some cases documented and others – not, the insurgents’ regime was beyond any law and genocide was thriving. I left Grozny for good in 1993 whereas our four elderly relatives decided to stay there. They went through both wars, suffered during bombing and the siege of Grozny, were starving there and were eventually thrown out of their house by armed insurgents.

The second Chechen War admittedly ended in 2009, but thirteen years later it is still a war that is not much discussed. ‘A survey of recent Russian military literature suggests that Chechnya has been Russia's forgotten war as far as serious military analysis is concerned’ (Mathers, 1999:113). Or as Reznikova asserts, ‘We can consider Russian discourse about Chechnya after 1999 as a laboratory of exclusion from the space of life’ (Reznikova, 2014:35). Casualties during the two wars are not yet exactly known, but some estimate them to be approximately 250,000 people. Among them there were people of different nationalities, including Russians, Greeks, Georgians, Chechens, Ingushes, Armenians and many others living in the Chechen-Ingush republic.

The catastrophe did not happen long ago. It begs the question: What did Russian and Western societies do to stop the massacre? Did anyone help the refugees? Was there any information

on what was happening in the region, which is in fact part of Southern Europe? Why do some wars attract resentment and condemnation globally while others go unnoticed? As Butler claims, 'We might think of war as dividing populations into those who are grievable and those who are not. An ungrievable life is one that cannot be mourned because it has never lived, that is, it has never counted as a life at all' (2009:38). Those who are 'ungrievable' are reduced to bodies and denied vulnerability (Solovey, 2019). And not only in Russian media and social discourse but also in the West.

Adult life. 1993-present time. Russia. Rostov-on-Don and Moscow.

Fleeing from the war brought me and my mother to Rostov-on-Don, a large city 1600 kilometres north of Grozny, between Grozny and Moscow. There we managed to buy a tiny and shabby flat in an old house, which was in huge contrast to what we had had in Grozny. Unfortunately, the flats and houses in Grozny did not cost much at that time.

The beginning of the 1990s was not an easy time for all the people living in Russia. Relocation to the Russian/Northern part of the country posed many hardships. For example, in a Muslim republic alcoholism was unusual. When we moved, we realized that alcohol addiction is much more frequent, particularly in the neighborhood where we bought a flat. Our 'otherness' was evident in many things, even in the way we cooked and were hospitable to our neighbors. Even the climate with snowy winters was a shock because living in Grozny we did not see much snow. Another unusual thing was that now we could not live in the centre of the city and had to use public transport which was always packed back then and quite often it was merely inaccessible.

Besides, bigotry and xenophobia were ubiquitous. When people found out that we are from Chechnya the questions they usually asked was 'You aren't terrorists, are you?'. Even though this was admittedly a joke, the message was clear. They treated us with suspicion. Another issue was my passport with 'Grozny' specified as the place of birth. Several times I was told that authorities would not give me a foreign passport for travelling. When I asked why the reply was 'Some born in Grozny will not get a foreign passport'. So, we were stigmatized because of our place of birth and living. I was ashamed to show my passport because of this and only recently (almost thirty years later) started to say proudly where I had been born. Even though we relocated to the metropole, we still experienced 'marginalization and stigmatization of subalterns' (Reznikova, 2014:37), when a mere place of birth or living created a whole group people stigmatized in hegemonial discourse.

The same xenophobia attitude was exercised by our university teachers. We were segregated into two groups: the teenagers from ‘noble Rostov families’ and students who came from some provincial towns near Rostov and from other regions. The former were the *crème de la crème* with the best teachers and challenging internships, which the latter supposedly did not deserve. Your test could be graded lower than it was supposed to. Once I was told that I had cheated it. ‘What makes you think so?’, I asked. The teacher responded: ‘There are no mistakes in it. You cannot make no mistakes, students coming from provincial backwater do not know English that well’.

Another issue was my non-quite-Slavic appearance. My hair is dark and perhaps the features of my face are non-Slavic. I was called ‘*chernomazaya*’, an obscene word similar to ‘a blackie’. This is an interesting phenomenon because I am actually White. Thus, there is a new type of racism in Russia. ‘Diasporic nations often find themselves in the situation of symbolic Blacks’ (Tlostanova, 2014:99). I was often stopped in the street by the police to check my passport when I was walking. The question they usually asked was: ‘Where did you come from?’ The same happened to my friends who were from Dagestan or Chechnya.

Inquiries about nationality also came from neighbors. Such questions as ‘Are you from Moldova?’ or ‘Are you Greek?’ signaled that people first of all had curiosity borderline anxiety trying to determine my nationality. Secondly, they always called southern countries, not Western-European though, to label me based on their biases, for example, that all Greeks have dark hair or all Moldovans have non-Slavic faces. As Quijano asserts, the process of the new world power becoming Eurocentric led to the imposition of such ‘racial’ criteria on the new global social classification of the people. ‘So, in the first place, new social identities were produced all over the world: ‘whites’, ‘Indians’, ‘Negroes’, ‘yellows’, ‘olives’, using physiognomic traits of the peoples as external manifestations of their ‘racial’ nature’ (Quijano, 2007:173).

Finishing this paper in May 2023, thirty years after I left my hometown, I still think that the possibility – albeit hypothetical - of returning to the place where you were born is a *sine qua non* of your identity formation. Odysseus, mentioned in the title of this paper, returned to Ithaca at the end. Your metaphorical Ithaca may transform, gradually undergoing change, but it should exist not as a newly built location after it had been levelled to the ground. Not as a geographical name on a map, not as a mirage, or *fata morgana*, in your reminiscences, but as a place which maintains continuity of lived experience in your life. I assume this helps to navigate through the toughest challenges and find light in the darkest times, when we have to re-imagine our

future putting the Goliath of colonial wars, bigotry, chauvinism and xenophobia against the David of personal goodwill, open-mindedness, solidarity, and alliance with other people.

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