

# The Janus-faced Empire Distorting Orientalist Discourses: Gender, Race and Religion in the Russian/(post)Soviet Constructions of the "Orient"

MADINA TLOSTANOVA

In April 2006 at the international conference on the dialogue of Islam and Latinity in Baku (Azerbaijan) Alain Touraine told me that in his opinion this was not a real Islamic country. When I asked why, it turned out that the first and obvious indicator for him were the Azeri women who walked around unveiled, fashionably dressed in Western manner and obviously wanting to look sexually attractive. I commented as a way of explanation that in the Soviet colonies modernization was highly circular and Touraine's reaction was quick and sincere when he said: "Good !" But later I realized that there was a mixed sentiment behind — on the one hand, it was good for the French intellectual that the country was not openly Islamic in its presentation, on the other hand, there was an element of disappointment, because this Orient somehow did not come to Touraine's (exoticist) expectations. While the Azeri women still could not escape being interpreted through the Orientalist lens...

A long time has passed since E. Said wrote his famous book on orientalism (Said 1978), there emerged many adherents and opponents of Said's position. It would be ridiculous to deny its importance but at the same time it is crucial to realize its contextuality and avoid imposing Said's orientalist conception on all other cultural and epistemic locales of modernity. Thus, it refers to Russia and its many former and present colonies where instead of the western forms of orientalism we find secondary orientalism which is the direct result of the secondary eurocentrism — and old and incurable Russian disease. Both of them reflect and distort the western originals in the Russian cultural and mental space. Orientalist constructs in this case turn out not only more complex but also built on the principle of double mirror reflections, on the copying of western orientalism with a slight deviation and necessarily, with a carefully hidden, often unconscious feeling that Russia itself is a form of a mystic and mythic Orient for the West. As a result, both mirrors — the one turned in the direction of the colonies and the one tuned by Europe in the direction of Russia itself — appear to be distorting mirrors that create a specific unstable sensibility of Russian intellectuals, writers, artists. It can be defined as balancing between the role of object and that of the subject in the epistemic and existential sense. This complication of orientalist discourses in Russia and its colonies is connected with its complicated imperial-colonial configuration in modernity.

For the quasi-Western subaltern Russian and Soviet empire the secondary eurocentrism and the imperial (and not just colonial) difference with the more successful capitalist empires of modernity (the British empire, France, Germany) steps forward in the shaping of subjectivity of both the colonizer and the colonized. On the global scale this imperial difference mutates into the colonial one as Russia becomes an example of the external imperial difference. The Russian imperial discourses demonstrate the double-faced nature of this empire which feel itself a colony in the presence of the West, at the same time acting as a half-hearted and caricature "civilizer" in its own non-European colonies (Tlostanova 2003).

Taking into account the specific conditions of Russia as an intellectually colonized subaltern empire with the stressed imperial difference, let us see how the Western Orientalist discourses have been reshaped and transmuted in the second modernity as specific ways of representation and interpretation of the non-European Russian colonies of Caucasus and Central Asia that have played and continue to play today the part of the mysterious, repulsive? Scary and seductive Orient. The very encoding of Caucasus as part of the prototypical Orient — biologically

inferior, culturally backwards and forever fixed and fallen out of history, which we can clearly see in the art, memoirs, and particularly in Russian 19<sup>th</sup> century fiction, signals the deep interiorization in the Russian imperial consciousness of the borrowed European discourses, including the Orientalist clichés. The latter were often overtly libidinous, but if in the Western mind it has been often depicted in terms of submissive feminine Orient being dominated and inseminated by the European colonizer, in the Russian version of early romantic Orientalism this model would be impossible, because of the inferiority complex vis-à-vis Europe, which was partially compensated by the caricature secondary Orientalism in Russia's colonies. Above all, it was connected with the general orientalizing of the Russians themselves on the global scale<sup>1</sup>.

The Orientalist discourses in Russia itself could not possibly be simple or straightforward, being based on the interplay of colonial and imperial differences. The Western image of Russia as a double-faced combination of Asian and Germanic characteristics, where the aggressive and despotic demonized elements of Orient prevailed over the exotic and eroticized ones, was internalized and reinterpreted within the Russian intellectual tradition, which is particularly obvious in the so called Russian religious philosophy of the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, that used Western Orientalism unconsciously, as one of its frames. But re-interpreting the Orientalist clichés positively, with the good intention of redeeming Russia, these philosophers still based their arguments on the Western categories, notions and assumptions and in fact contributed a lot to the continuing orientalizing of their own country. These philosophers attempting to protest against the barbarian and exoticist image of Russia in the European mind, in fact were looking for nothing but recognition of their country by the West and the Western acceptance of the Russian leading role in the future progress of humanity, that was justified by presumable exceptional spirituality, linked with the Orthodox Christianity (Berdyayev 2002). It is symptomatic for the subaltern empire, which even claiming the global spiritual and transcendental superiority, is still looking for the approval and love of the West.

## -II-

If in Europe Orientalism was a tool for the positive self-semiotization as opposed to the fallen out of time, irrational, devious Orient, in Russia the configuration was a bit different. On the one hand, a representative of the Russian elite clearly coded himself or herself as a European, albeit a second-rate one. On the other hand, it looked as if the Orient that the Russian empire got through its colonizing efforts, was also somehow second-rate, not like the one of Europe. The same way as the officers of the Russian army complained that the war in Caucasus was not interesting or educational enough as a war in Europe could be, when it referred to the Orient they constructed out of Caucasus and later — Central Asia, it also turned out to be inferior and the gap between the Orientalist European fantasy and the reality of Caucasus or Central Asian conquest was only too obvious for the colonizers. The women were not beautiful, submissive and exotic enough, the luxury was lacking or not sufficient, the entertainments and pleasures were not cultivated and refined as the ones in the European Orient, the local men did not correspond to the Orientalist stereotype of colonial male weakness and femininity. In short, Caucasus as an uncomfortable, relatively small space covered with steep and high mountains and populated with proud and skillful warriors was far from the Orientalist tale drawn in Europe and imported into Russia<sup>2</sup>. Hence it had to be edited on the way and made fit the stereotype.

Thus, the Orient in the eyes of Russian elites of the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> – early 20<sup>th</sup> century, was doubling and consequently, there were two possible ways of its interpretation. The first consisted in forgetting about the second-rate Russian Asia and turning to the real and alien (for Russians) “Orient” as it happened with the famous Russian Orientalist painter V. Vereschagin who after Central Asia went to India and the Middle East. The enchantment with the Orient, the primitivist and exoticist tendencies in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century Russian literature and art were also expressed not just in looking for their own “Asiatic” roots (often imagined and stylized), but also in the interest in real (first-rate, European) orient – India, China, Egypt, Muslim Africa.

Often the negative characteristics associated with Orientalism were projected by the Russians onto the interpretation of other empires deeds while the native material was not coded in the Orientalist terms. Vereschagin “defended” Samarkand from the revolting local people but turned overnight into the defender of Indian peasants against the British colonialists. Here we find the familiar logic of the black legend – justifying one empire at the expense of the other. The Russian poets of the so called Silver Age were also fascinated with the mysteries of Egyptian culture, the eroticism of a giraffe by the lake Chad, the Zanzibar maidens and other such “masquerade junk” to use Anna Akhmatova’s words. And yet it was a different and more complex interpretation of the Orient in comparison with the 19<sup>th</sup> century.

The second possible way for interpreting the Orient was editing Russia’s own East making it fit the generally accepted orientalist stereotype. The only way to do it for the Russians was to cling themselves even more to the false European identity which was precisely what the Russian elites did throughout almost the whole 19<sup>th</sup> century, compensating their inferiority, both with respect to Europe and the newly acquired colonies with the exaggerated assertion of Europeism, Whiteness and civilizing discourses. In this case racism acted not as an conscious accompanying factor for economy and ideology, but rather as an unavoidable element of the whole package of modernity that Russia attempted to borrow but failed to properly conceptualize.

A famous Russian poet Alexander Pushkin in his *Journey to Erzerum* called himself a Frank (as opposed to the Asiatic Turks) and plunged into the description of typical eroticized Orientalist experiences copied from the Western sources — from the exotic baths to the necessary trip to a harem (Pushkin 1934). Ironically, being himself a descendant of a non-White ancestor, he manifested an unreflected upon net of eurocentric discriminatory discourses in which race already played a crucial role not as a purity of blood or a color of skin, but as a set of European cultural, ideological and epistemic categories. Since it was a borrowed discourse its logic was also distorted from the start and came to associate the “wrong” ethnicity, religion or culture with the often imagined wrong physical characteristics, even if they were not there from the start. Russia interpreted race post factum as many other European discourses, but in the end used it also in order to reassert its own dubious racial status within the global configuration. When Pushkin wrote his poem “To the Kalmyk woman” (Pushkin 2006), he defined her almost entirely negatively, as William Shakespeare did in his famous sonnet, mocking the conventional ideal of feminine beauty, only in this case it was a clearly racially marked juxtaposition, based on the cultural training that teaches the eye not only how but also what to see, as Robyn Wiegman states in her discussion of the economies of visibility (Wiegman 1995: 22)<sup>3</sup>. The Kalmyk woman is pictured as an inferior, uncultured but sexually attractive (if only for half an hour) creature who does not speak French, does not read Shakespeare, does not dance European dances or copy English manners. She is defined entirely within the racial stereotype which does not individualize her at all: her eyes are predictably narrow, her nose is flat, her forehead is wide and her beauty is savage. However, the reality of the Russian conquest of the non-European spaces often resisted this borrowed European racial matrix, even if the Russian mind was zombified by the Western European principles of classification of the humankind and was automatically looking for ready-made signs of corporeal difference that signified a more fundamental divide. That is why in 1837 a certain lieutenant N. Simanovsky commented on the surprising whiteness of the captured Cherkess princess (Simanovsky 1999). Since in his reference system she belonged to the “savages” she had to be non-White.

Traces of this mutant Orientalist discourses we can find in the majority of Russian 19<sup>th</sup> century romantic works — from A. Pushkin, M. Lermontov, early L. Tolstoy to the sexual orientalist tales of A. Bestuzhev-Marlinsky, where the interpretation of the colonized women went in accordance with European exoticist stereotypes, though in milder forms than in case of African slaves or Amerindians. Here we also find the typical notions of the extremely early puberty, heightened sexuality and relative social freedom of the Caucasus young girls which helped justify the pedophilic inclinations of the Russian officers. The Caucasus “savage” women were notoriously compared to animals and denied any rationality, spirituality or humanity for that matter. While the voices of the orientalized themselves remained largely undocumented or neglected, because for the Russian colonizers, as well as for their Western counterparts, subjectivity per se remained white, to paraphrase F. Fanon’s *Black Skin, White Masks* (Fanon 1967: 109-110).

Yet an important difference with the “European porno-tropic tradition” (McClintock) was the more pronounced exoticist and not demonizing bend in the Russian case, the ornamental stylized element and the general inclination of Russian literature towards the spiritual, compassionate and tolerant features. A good example of this is M. Lermontov’s novelette “Bela” from the *Hero of our Time* where the objectification of the indigenous Bela by Pechorin is balanced with Maxim Maximych’s strive to see her as a human being, not an exotic sexual beast.

In general, we will not typically find in the Russian 19<sup>th</sup> century tradition any expression of open Orientalist sensuality and eroticism in both fiction or fine arts. Take, for example, Orest Kiprensky’s 1813 portrait of the Kalmyk woman Bayausta which in all its Orientalist fairytale overtones, completely lacks the sexual element, or the much later 1873 Vassily Vereschagin’s stereotypical ethnographic depiction of a veiled Uzbek woman as a walking manifestation of Oriental impenetrability. By contrast, much more overtly erotic Orientalist features mark the portrait of the Cherkess exile to the Ottoman empire by a French Orientalist painter Jean-Leon Gerome.

And yet, in the wider cultural imaginary the sexual Orientalism obviously flourished already at that time, albeit poorly documented, which is indirectly proven by the later constructions of the demonized Orient, that the Bolsheviks took readymade and used in order to oppose it to the image of the wonderful new life of the liberated people of the East or of the mountains. It refers, for example, to the popular negative myths of presumable proliferation of sexual “deviations” among the Central Asians, such as lesbianism, male homosexuality, and the general pedophilic tendencies, evidenced by the under-age marriages (Northrop 2004: 41).

### -III-

The next stage in the evolving of Russian Orientalism can be defined as a scientific one. As always, it came later than in Europe or America, where knowing the Orient, studying and observing it in quasi-scientific terms based on comparatist racial hierarchies and biological taxonomies, became an important aid which went hand in hand with the colonization itself. Russia, in contrast with that, acted reactively in the sense that it started studying when it was already too late and did not fully realize the importance of knowing for owning. Moreover, the very tools of studying had to be also borrowed from the West and it naturally happened with a time lag and with the usual trans-mutations. By the time the scholarly apparatus was ready to create a “scientific” description of the Caucasus habitus, this world was already almost entirely destroyed. In the colonization of Central Asia which happened several decades later, the general approach remained that of a reluctant civilizing, more inclining to the physical annihilation or pushing the locals off their lands and populating these territories with the Slavic colonists. Yet the very end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century was finally marked with the first efforts of the Russian colonial administration to use science in order to colonize more successfully. This included the creation of racial and ethnic taxonomies which was a difficult task because here the ethnic understanding of the national did not previously exist and the people coded themselves differently — through religion, social status, clan system, gender hierarchies, but not ethnicity or nationality. And as in case of many other societies, it was precisely the Western modernization, mediated through and by the Russian and later Soviet empires, that brought with it such initially foreign to these territories concepts as ethnic and linguistic nationalism, religious and linguistic purism and intolerance, the racialization and ethnization, the artificial divisions into the major ethnicities and minorities, into “Arians” and “Mongolians”, etc. The Russian imperial ideologues realized that in reality the convenient, pure in blood classifications of people living in Central Asia never existed and saw as their goal to create the ethnic nations which would be easier to work with, making classifications along the scale of humanity, and more importantly, juxtaposing the Russians as more civilized, developed and White to these newly created ethnicities. It was also easier to keep under control the separate nations artificially opposed to each other and lacking the possibility of unification on Islamic, pan-Turkic or Pan-Caucasian terms. So the quite imagined communities of Central Asian ethnic nations had to be quickly turned into reality. This work was started by the Russian empire and successfully finished by the Soviet one.

The Bolsheviks, even if they brought with them mostly an unreflected upon set of Orientalist clichés, were more resolute than the Czarist empire and attempted to change the previous model of the women’s non-participation to a new one. If before there was something close to the situation described by Oyewùmi for Yoruba culture, where the European colonizers regarded only men as objects of their ideological, economic or religious projects ignoring the women altogether (Oyewùmi 1997: 122), then after the 1918 the situation changed drastically and put women squarely in the center of the Soviet modernizing efforts. In many ways it was a forced measure which was connected with the failure of all previous efforts to modernize Central Asia within the Soviet paradigm, and with the fear of the success of the alternative forces and models of modernizing, both external (in this case coming from Afghanistan and Ata Turk’s Turkey) and internal (coming from the Jadids).

Gender questions stood in the center of Soviet Orientalism, which was based on familiar imported from the West progressivism, scientific pretensions, Eurocentric clichés, a set of negative stereotypes in the interpretation of non-Western cultures — from the presumable lack of hygiene and various diseases, to the mental retardation and savageness. A good example in this respect was a series of experts’ efforts to define what made a woman an Uzbek or a Tadzhic in a biological sense, to link “backwardness with biology” (Cavanaugh 2001). As Douglass Northrop points out in his informative *Veiled Empire*, they lent support to the view that national-cultural distinctions in Central Asia were objectively real and empirically measurable (Northrop 2004: 52). Such was the case of a physician Iasevich, who published in the mid 1920s a meticulous study “On the Question of the Constitutional and Anthropological Type of the Uzbek Woman of Khorazm” (Northrop 2004: 53), proving that the women of then still imagined Uzbek community were to be identified with unique biological features. In complete accordance with the racist notions that ruled the scientific taxonomies of the time, Iasevich compared the physical characteristics of the Khorazm women with Russian and various European national types taken as the norm. His use of voyeuristic photographs of the naked women was strikingly similar to that of Arthur Munby’s peculiar imperial voyerism and collector’s mentality analyzed by Ann McClintock’s in the *Imperial Leather* (McClintock 1995: 75—131). The sexualized Orientalizing nature of such studies was quite obvious, but here the scientific authority was used also to cover up the elaborate imperial violence: since women remained to be the most secluded and opaque stratum of Central Asian society, the imperial penetration into their life and violation of their privacy — peeping under the paranji with a scientific excuse — turned out to be an effective form of oppression that fashioned itself as liberation.

The paradoxical logic of gender enslaving through the rhetoric of emancipation, so typical for the Soviet empire, was best of all expressed in the two parallel campaigns in Caucasus and Central Asia — the “Coat for the Mountain Woman” and the “hujum”, in the center of which there stood efforts to bring women to the public space and involve them in the collective mass production, thus making a real proletariat out of them, instead of the surrogate one as these women were interpreted by the early Soviet ideologues. The first campaign ironically attempted to cover the woman’s body more, albeit with a European and urban style coat, in order to make her socially active and not confined to the domestic sphere, to let her go to school, to work and to elections. The second used as its anti-fetish the special kind of Central Asian veil — paranji and chachvon — and aimed at uncovering the woman’s body and once again, dressing it in the European style. In both cases the impetus behind was similar to Iasevich photographs, based on interfering into the woman’s most intimate world which was in itself a manifestation of imperial violence in the control of sexuality and subjectivity.

The iconic image of the liberated Soviet Eastern or mountain women, particularly those who became the party activists or champions of the new Soviet feminist life styles (laying asphalt, jumping with a parachute, being a crane-operator or a scientist, etc.), acted as one of the powerful myths of the Soviet gender discourses that has persisted until today in the minds of many gender activists, who still believe that the liberated Soviet women were more emancipated than their non-Soviet equivalents. In reality the Soviet “liberation” often came to the nominal change of clothes and no less nominal Russian-Soviet style education, that colonized rather than liberated the minds, left them ignorant about their own cultural tradition or history, epistemic or linguistic legacy, and effectively zombified both men and women, creating a specific self-orientalizing inferiority complex,

compensated with heroic efforts to modernize as quickly as possible, thus infecting the colonies with the typical Russian disease. At the same time the women of the similar cultural and religious background who did not go through the forced Soviet modernization, while preserving certain tokens of traditional culture, often turned out freer in their thinking and subjectivity than the forcefully emancipated Soviet subjects. This was connected with alternative hybrid ways of fusing modernization with the local epistemic and religious traditions, such as the Jadids (Tokhtakhodzhaeva et al. 1995: 38—46).

This self-orientalization of the local people became probably one of the major “successes” of the Russian/Soviet colonization, which made the colonial subjects internalize the once foreign values and standards. A large number of scholars have described a typical apprehensive attitude of the non-White colonized people to the color of skin, based on their interiorization of Whiteness as a synonym of beauty and/or femininity. Less known is the fact that the same logic worked in the Soviet empire which fashioned itself as racially unprejudiced<sup>4</sup>.

With the coming of the Bolsheviks Orientalism flourished in its positivist forms, being closely linked to the nation building and the unresolved contradictions of Soviet federalism, as well as to the racial and gender hierarchies, which were masked under the slogan of proletarian internationalism in the country that successfully fashioned itself to the world as an “affirmative action empire” (Martin 2001)<sup>5</sup>. One of the fundamental weaknesses of the Soviet empire which finally led to its collapse was that the Soviet ideology contradicted itself in creating the nationalities in the periphery on the one hand (including the literacies, the sense of ethnic-territorial belonging, etc.) and on the other hand, regarding the national traditions something to be eventually erased. In many ways it resembled the miseries of modern neo-liberal multiculturalism that also strives to confine difference to safe and predictable, packageable, museum forms. In these conditions the woman that was freshly made Uzbek, Azeri or Adygean, was soon to be regarded as retarded, oppressed and downtrodden because of her belonging to this very freshly made ethnic tradition. It was difficult to construct a positive identity out of this contradictory mixture. The extreme hypocrisy of the Soviet discourses combined the external lack of racist ideologies and their internal persistence. To make the colonized equal in education, appearance or social status was inherently dangerous: very soon it became obvious for the Soviet leaders that the racial prejudice of the Russian/Soviet colonizers, according to which the Asians or peoples of the Caucasus by definition could not become equal (even if given equal rights and freedoms, even if modernized) and had to remain inferior in all senses because of their objectively inferior status, collapsed with the first blows of Soviet modernization. The Soviet empire thus got into a trap that it inadvertently put for itself. A modernized native threatened to become more accomplished than the Russian, even within the rules of this distorted quasi-Marxist progressivist logic, he or she could reach equal or even better results. This was a sad discovery for the Soviet Empire which had to hastily change its national policy to more chauvinistic discourse of the “elder brother” in order to ensure the impossibility of a real equality, to put the invisible but effective stoppages at the social and career growth of the colonized and, simultaneously, to invent new signs of ethnic-national identities that would be both ethnic and Soviet and would ensure that the colonized stayed within the theatricality of Soviet multiculturalism<sup>6</sup>.

#### -IV-

In the complex mixture of Soviet Orientalizing ideologies, one of the clear examples of the false modernizing rhetoric was the question of veiling, which was used as a key stereotype of patriarchal oppression, a “macabre medieval cloth”. In reality, as a number of other Orientalist stereotypes, this was not an ancient tradition, but rather a historically late reaction to modernity and its discourses.

The veiling practices denounced in Soviet propaganda as ancient, in fact were established only with the Russian colonization (in the last third of the 19<sup>th</sup> century) and used as a means of dividing the proper pious (Central Asian) women — usually upper class and urban, from the easily sexually accessible and “sinful” (Europeanized, modernized) Russians. Thus, the clothes were meant

to protect the upper class, culturally “valuable” women in the difficult conditions of external invasion rather than to simply restrict their freedom. A well known Western Orientalist myth of the White (European) woman as an innocent, submissive and sexually passive being, which on top of that is in constant threat coming from the non-White and non-European males, and hence has to be defended from them, was transformed in the non-European colonies of Russia almost into its opposite. Except for the Russian romantic fiction mentioned above, there was no developed image of the colonized woman, typical for the Western Orientalist tradition and pictured as a sexually accessible and deviant creature which could be opposed to the White European, standing for the Christian or later, Victorian values. One of the reasons for that was obviously Islam, more in its cultural than purely religious forms, and the degree of modernization. In Central Asia and Caucasus up to today it is the local woman that manifests purity, sexual passivity and piety, while a more modernized Russian one or an emancipated local, often stand for the stereotype of aggressive sexual promiscuity. What we find here is the peculiar reversal of roles and a projection of the negative gender characteristics onto the Europeans and Russians as their caricature followers. Paranjis in this case were precisely a way of positive marking of the native morality as opposed to the alien new one, while today in the absence of paraji there are other, subtler ways of marking the difference in appearance and behavior that act as a “virtual hijab”, to use Mekhti’s metaphor (Mekhti 2005), and create specific negotiated identities in-between tradition and modernization. However, in the ground of this seemingly different configuration there lied the same ideology of modernization with its essentialized racial and cultural differences. Because symbolically the Russian (i.e. more European) woman or the modernized local today was and is forgiven her dissoluteness precisely on the grounds of her being Russian (i.e. superior) and/or more modernized<sup>7</sup>.

As is known, within the modern colonial gender system economic discrimination has gone hand in hand with sexual and other forms of discrimination. In the Russian and particularly Soviet empire the division of labor was also racist and misogynist (e.g. in Central Asia it was the local women and children who worked at the cotton and tobacco plantations in horrible conditions and mostly for free). Probably this most downtrodden group of colonial women have never become the object of the sexual exploitation on the part of the colonizers on any massive scale, as it happened in the West, precisely because of their oppression beyond any limits, of their extremely subhuman status, so that this seeming deviation from the Western model only proved in the end the rule of modernity itself.

-V-

The artificial superfluous nature of Soviet ideology, and its deeper close links with the project of modernity/coloniality, became particularly obvious in the gendered forms of orientalizing, connected with the above mentioned interplay of the colonial and imperial differences. Contrary to its official image, biological generalizations, cultural constructions, and racial and religious prejudices flourished here unrestrained and the project of creation of the Soviet woman who would be racially, ethnically, culturally, religiously unmarked, continued to come into clash with the Soviet multicultural ideologies. The resulting anxieties and identity crisis of the colonial women “under the experiment” has not been sufficiently studied yet. The Soviet Union can be viewed in that respect as a bad theater where the play of modernity was staged with distortions, with a seemingly diverging ideological filling, but with the old familiar core, where the provincial Russian actors played the roles of Europeans, the people from Caucasus impersonated the Amerindians, the Central Asia stood for the Orient. The production in this theater left much to be desired, the bad directors could not control the show, but the most crucial blow came after the play was finally over and the last illusory boundary between this theater and real life was erased. The bigger world unfortunately turned out equally artificial, equally lifeless, depraved and depraving. It seemed that after the collapse of the Soviet power, one could expect the revival of indigenous epistemologies, alternative models of being and also different gender discourses. However, this never happened. 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 the self-deprecating intellectual dependency on the Western

modernity. It is a result of the external imperial difference with its secondary Eurocentrism as the constitutive element that spreads over the colonized as well as the colonizers. On a more global scale, having gotten rid of the dictator-theater director, the ex-Soviet marionettes immediately got under the power of a different and more influential owner — the Western modernity in its neo-liberal forms. This logic was described by an Estonian poet Kaplinski in relation to all post-socialist intellectuals in surprisingly gendered terms. Kaplinski claims that before we were all in the position of wives in the Soviet harem and today we are the call girls in the universal brothel of the marketable culture (Kaplinski 1998). In the sphere of gender discourses and studies this refers, among other things, to the necessity of corresponding to the Western gender theories and assumptions, to hiddenly Orientalist stereotypes, thus re-orientalizing ourselves in peculiar ways by, on the one hand, playing the role of the eternal Other (a native informant or a native instrument of feminist imperialism (Shu-mei Shih et al. 2005: 145) or studying our own ex-colonial space, using the Western area studies or feminist tools<sup>8</sup>. In sum, identity is not being de-essentialized, but quite the opposite, it is being re-essentialized again and again. Svetlana Shakirova — a Central Asian gender activist, director of the gender center in Almaty (Kazakhstan) and a supervisor of the Central Asian Gender Net, shrewdly points out: “The proliferation of such themes as the kidnapping of brides in Kyrgyzia, the sexual women traffic in Central Asia, the self-immolation of women in Uzbekistan, the arranged by parents marriages in Tadjhikistan and prostitution in Kazakhstan — what is this all if not following the Orientalist clichés?” (Shakirova 2006)

The dependency of local gender discourses on the West is not surprising if we take into account that all of these works are based on Western grants and supported by Western NGOs who determine the methodology and the results of such studies. What is at work here is what an African feminist Obioma Nnaemeka called “the politics of poverty” and the politics of the belly” (Shu-mei Shih et al. 2005: 159) which makes the work for NGOs the only safe harbor and often the only material means of existence for many local women who act as a “cheap labor force in the international market of analytical services” (Shakirova 2006). In the post-Soviet years the continuing orientalizing is linked not just with the continuing global role of these locales as the Orient in the Western eyes. Paradoxically, in the post-Soviet independent Central Asia or Southern Caucasus the ethnic-national tradition artificially created by the efforts of the Czarist and later Soviet empires, acts as the new enslaver of women. Instead of creating an alternative frame, the nation-state simply replaces the Soviet ideological filling with the ethnic-national one, but the project of the women liberation itself as its integral part, is left intact and unchanged — it continues to be Eurocentric and avoids any hint at traditionalism, particularly Islamic. This tendency looks progressive in Western terms, within the naturalized universalist notions and scholarly categories, it negates or ignores the “achievements” of the Soviet gender project, preferring to see these locales as a tabula rasa which remained outside of history and modernity waiting for the (correct) Western liberation to come, and once again, strives to link the nation-building with further women emancipation done along a seemingly different (non-Soviet) path. But this is being done within specific clearly marked boundaries and forms, proscribed by the state, which creates a new (though not massive) wave of protest because in reality the women subjectivity in these spaces is a hybrid, trans-cultural and trans-value product, which cannot be fixed within the primitive dichotomy of the paranji versus the mini-skirt. As a result, we have a complex configuration of re-orientalizing on various levels — from the West and Western mainstream gender discourses, from their 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. In this situation the very sustaining of Central-Asian or Caucasus gender projects becomes a difficult task. It is then not surprising that Shakirova openly states that there is a pronounced orientalization and missionary zeal in the ways the Central Asian gender NGOs are treated within the international gender nets. They clearly become the exotic Others to dilute the “norm” (Shakirova 2006).

In order to overcome the persistent Orientalism — both coming from the West and the internal self-orientalizing stance — it is necessary to de-colonize the thinking itself, to get rid of the absolute Western scholarly paradigms and myths, to practice what R. Wiegman calls the “politics of disloyalty” (Wiegman 1995: 2) to the modern methodologies, and what Walter Mignolo calls an



“epistemic disobedience” (Mignolo 2007), and to establish egalitarian coalitions and dialogue with other racialized colonized gendered subjects, instead of continuing to play the role of the scholarly Orient for the West. The resulting gender discourse coming from the open colonial wounds (Anzaldúa 1999: 25), would be an independent and critical feminism based on careful differentiating and empathic grasping of particular values and sensibilities born in particular historical and cultural contexts of Caucasus and Central Asia, including the indigenous epistemology. In case of these locales there is a danger that having gotten rid of the hijab as a result of Soviet feminism, the women of these locales often find themselves today in the clasp of much more hierarchical regime – not of veiling, but of silencing and leveling of their opinions and selves, promoted by Western epistemology and Western mainstream feminism as its integral part. But even in these conditions of continuing orientalizing on various levels, it is still possible to preserve and cultivate a certain degree of freedom and self-reflection, a conscious rejection of the dominant ego-politics of knowledge and attempts to build a geo- and body-politic of the new border thinking which can help elaborate an other dynamic of action, a specific trans-cultural language which would eventually lead to more symmetrical and dialogic relations between Western and non-Western cultures and epistemologies.

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<sup>1</sup> Thus, lord Curzon called the colonization of Central Asia by Russia in the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, which created a constant anxiety in the imperial ideologues of Great Britain, “an annexation of Asiatics by Asiatics” (Curzon 1967: 392) to draw a clear line between the Western style colonialism based on specifically interpreted racial characteristics, and the Russian mimicking one. Moreover, if we look at the typical descriptions of the Russian or wider, Slavic, character made by Herder, Kant, Hegel or Marx, we will see that mostly it was depicted as inferior to European, often as feminine, soft and submissive. Thus, Herder portrayed the Slavs as musical and peaceful people unable to make war (Bacic 1983: 19). Since there was abundant historical evidence that Russians were bellicose, it became necessary to find an ethnic-racial explanation for this inconsistency. Hence appeared the so called Normanist school that insisted on the belonging of the first Russians to the Germanic branch of the White race, elevating their racial status by playing down their Slavic element. No matter how influential until now, this theory could not possibly save Russia from its inferior status in the eyes of Europe and hence from its overt and hidden orientalizing. Hegel, writing on the universal history openly discussed the Slavs as a-historical peoples: “This entire body of peoples remained excluded from our consideration, because hitherto it has not appeared as an independent element in the series of phases that Reason assumed in the World” (Hegel 1956: 350). He also added that they come only late into the series of historical states and form and perpetuate the connection with Asia.

<sup>2</sup> Even as late as the 1983 when I came to the famous Soviet children pioneer camp “Artek” the Russian teenagers having found out that I was from Caucasus, immediately started asking me questions like: Can you ride a horse? Have you brought you dagger with you? They were longing for their portion of the orientalist exotic tale of the Caucasus along with the ones they got from other inhabitants of “exotic” places who were in “Artek” (Africa, Latin America). Interestingly enough, the kids decidedly did not make any gender differentiation, expecting me to behave in a tomboy manner not because I was emancipated but on the opposite, because I was from Caucasus.

<sup>3</sup> A similar cultural training is to be found in the well known Timur's case. When the Soviet (Russian) anthropologist Gerasimov attempted to reconstruct Tamerlan's features using his skull, after the exhumation in the 1941, the resulting face was not Asiatic at all. But for Gerasimov it looked too European for the infamous (in his eyes) oriental warrior and thus had to be "edited" to make him look corresponding to the racial stereotypes of the Soviet scholars.

<sup>4</sup> Thus, in Caucasus female beauty has been always linked with Whiteness of the face. What is at work here is a peculiar interiorization of the orientalist discourses in a desperate attempt to prove their belonging to the Arians or Europeans. On the other hand, Cherkess or Circassian women in the mid 19<sup>th</sup> century acted in Europe and America as the manifestations of the Whitest people, the purest species of the White race (due to the popular theory that Caucasian race originated in Caucasus). However this did not prevent the American entrepreneurs to buy these Whitest women at the Constantinople slave markets in order to exhibit them live in the traveling freak shows and circuses.

<sup>5</sup> This kind of propaganda was extremely efficient as we can see in the example of an African-American poet Langston Hughes who traveled in Central Asia in 1934 and was "impressed" with the lack of racism and the successes of women emancipation that he described in laudatory terms in his Soviet-published pamphlet *A Negro Looks at Soviet Central Asia* (Hughes 1934).

<sup>6</sup> Thus the new Uzbek national dress was designed as a compromise between the European urban style clothes and the invented ethnic tradition. Within the Soviet temporal matrix it was further on juxtaposed to the negative emblem of the "medieval" or sometimes "bourgeois" survival — the old national dress. The ethnic fashion in the USSR incorporated the contradictory interplay of reconfigured Orientalist stereotypes and modernization discourses that in most cases were quite unconsciously internalized by the people. The new Uzbek dress was modern and yet ethnically marked and worked as an ideologically marketable symbol of Soviet cultural diversity, sold to the world. The final goal in this case seemed to be an eventual complete visual erasing of the colonial status — neutral Europeanized clothes of the Soviet emancipated educated woman. But the question remains: was the empire really ready to accept such a complete erasing?

<sup>7</sup> Northern Caucasus was particularly ridiculous in its treatment of gender and modernity problematic in the early Soviet years. In the mid 1920s the representatives of the local elites freshly educated in the Soviet circular manner and extremely loyal to the empire found it important to have a Russian or Jewish wife in order to receive a symbolic communion of Soviet modernity in the most purely biological sense, by acquiring a more prestigious (and White) sexual partner. If changing of the old local wife was impossible, then she had to be transformed to correspond the requirements of the Russian/Soviet modernization — from the changing of her name to the changing of clothes and life styles.

<sup>8</sup> Thus area studies and Western style ethnography lie in the basis of a very interesting book published by a Northern Caucasus scholar Madina Tekuyeva *Man and Woman in Adygean Culture: Tradition and Modernity* (Tekuyeva 2006), where one has to read in-between the lines to fight the methodological constructions that do not fit the described material. There are very few Russian post-soviet gender studies of the ex-colonies. It is not just the question of lacking finances but also the change of the colonizer's role to a different one, a new role in which most of the Russian intellectuals do not feel comfortable. The few exceptions become, once again, the watered-down copies of Western feminist studies with carefully hidden subjectivity of the researchers. On the other hand, today, in Russia itself the soviet ersatz internationalism rapidly gives way to the open racist ideologies that reassert the sub-human status of the racialized and gendered internal others.