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Cultural Identity of the North Caucasus in Contemporary Russian Literature (A Study of Alisa Ganieva's Novels)

Abstract

The main aim of the paper is to examine the North Caucasus as a cross-cultural region depicted in the novels *Prazdnichnaya gora* [The Mountain and the Wall] (2012) and *Zhenikh i nevesta* [Bride and Groom] (2015) by the Russian-Dagestani author Alisa Ganieva. This relatively small part of the Russian Federation is inhabited by several large and dozens of smaller nations, each speaking its own language, retaining distinct traditions, and practising different religions. The purpose of the article is to highlight different aspects of Ganieva's literary depiction of the Caucasus, which is metaphorically insulated from Russia. An attentive observer of social change, Ganieva reflects the challenges faced by young people from the region. The research investigates the vexed issue of postcolonial discourse and attempts to determine whether it is present in Ganieva's fiction.

Keywords: Alisa Ganieva, Dagestan, North Caucasus, Russian Orientalism, internal colonialism, cultural identity

The question of identity is an important issue for every modern individual, not only in the post-Soviet context. It may be assumed that the crisis of self-consciousness most strongly affects people who have experienced a colonial past, who lived in the Soviet Union, or in a country ruled by another state. Until the collapse of the USSR in 1991, and in accordance with Lenin's idea of a multinational state, the notion of the Soviet citizen, Soviet culture and Soviet tradition as a single unity was promoted. For some smaller nationalities, the idea of internationalism might even have seemed attractive because, in theory, it guaranteed equal protection of the interests of all ethnic groups. In reality, however, although all the nations of the Soviet Union were officially represented in cultural, administrative and political institutions, the main core of what was called "Soviet" was Russian. In this sense, Soviet policy continued

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the colonial attitude of the Russian Empire towards non-Russian nationalities. Certainly, the indigenous peoples of Yakutia, Buryatia or the Caucasus could not – and did not – become ethnic Russians either in the Russian Empire or in the Soviet Union. At times, as was vividly apparent in the Caucasus, the need to assert their own cultural, linguistic and traditional distinctiveness (*e.g. adat*), or their political ambitions, took precedence.

After the collapse of the Soviet Union and the rise of fifteen independent states, the Russian Federation remained a multinational state. Although ethnic Russians are still the vast majority overall, the situation is different in the North Caucasus region, including Dagestan, where Russians make up less than 4% of the population. The North Caucasus – the southern part of the Russian Federation – is sandwiched between the Black Sea to the west and the Caspian Sea to the east. Dagestan, one of the seven North Caucasus national republics, lies on the shore of the Caspian Sea, and much of its territory is covered by the Caucasus Mountains. Dagestan embodies a modern "Tower of Babel," as it is inhabited by dozens of ethnic groups that speak many languages, profess different religions (with Islam dominant), and cultivate diverse traditions. Dagestanis share values common to the wider Caucasus – including hospitality, respect for elders, ancestor worship, family ties, reverence and honour – but also maintain their own unique local customs.

The inhabitants of mountainous Dagestan, who were long isolated from the rest of the world and resistant to external influences, have over time changed their traditional lifestyle, migrated, and become part of the Russian (and later Soviet) cultural space. Even so, the Caucasus remains the most under-researched and mythologised region of Russia. This can be understood as the result of various historical and political phenomena (the nineteenth-century Caucasian War, the period of Soviet rule, the Chechen wars of the 1990s), social developments (Russification, migration), and cultural factors (Islam, local *adat*). The historical-cultural aspect is closely linked to the romantic image of the Caucasus in Russian literature, which is, an example of the "Orientalisation" of the region in the sense defined by Edward W. Said (Said [1978] 2003). The Caucasus is often perceived as a monolith by Russians (Kappeler [1992] 2001: 180–181), whose knowledge of the region and its diversity is, in fact, quite limited.

Edward W. Said's theory of the "Orientalisation" of the East by Western countries, although not free from errors or simplifications, undoubtedly revolutionised academic thought. His greatest achievement was to identify and expose stereotypes in Western perceptions of the East. Said further developed his concept in *Culture and Imperialism* ([1993] 2003), demonstrating the significant connection between the idea of empire and its culture. Similar research was conducted by the American scholar Susan Layton, who analysed classic Russian literature from the era of the conquest of the Caucasus. In her book *Russian Literature and Empire* ([1994] 2005), she noted that the vast majority of nineteenth-century Russian writers paid homage to the ideas of Russian imperialism, portraying the peoples of the Caucasus in a stereotypical manner as "primitive but noble."

However, Layton emphasises that in looking at the Caucasus – a cultural borderland – Russians could also see a reflection of themselves, as half-Europeans, half-Asians. Ewa M. Thomson, the author of *Imperial Knowledge: Russian Literature and Colonialism* (2000), also devoted a significant part of her research to the Caucasus, sharply criticising the representation of Caucasian nations, for example by Pushkin or by Lermontov in *A Hero of Our Time*. She likewise expressed disapproval of the response of contemporary literary critics, whose reactions also revealed overt Eurocentrism and the "Orientalisation" of the region (Thomson [2000] 2000: 110–120).

The American historian Austin Jersild, in his research on the Russian conquest of the Caucasus in the nineteenth century, explicitly invoked the concept of "Orientalism." Jersild argues that Russian Orientalism resulted from several factors: the Europeanisation of Russia, reform, and colonial expansion (Jersild [2002] 2022: 168). He also rightly notes that, for example, Georgian elites had a significant influence on the formation of Russian imperial ideas and the Orientalist perception of the peoples of the North Caucasus. From the point of view of the imperial elite, the Islamic North Caucasus had nothing to offer except "barbarism" and "fanaticism" (Jersild [2002] 2022: 169–170).

Another researcher whose theoretical findings are important for this study is Alexander Etkind, who, in the periodical *Novoe literaturnoe obozrenie*, examined the cultural legacy of the nineteenth century and the Soviet period from the perspective of postcolonial studies on "internal colonisation" (Etkind 2001; Etkind 2003). He developed this concept in his monumental work *Internal Colonization: Russia's Imperial Experience* (Etkind [2011] 2013).

The author of the term "internal colonialism" is the American sociologist Michael Hechter. In his book *Internal Colonialism: The Celtic Fringe in British National Development 1536–1966* (1975), he argued that colonialism was by no means limited to overseas territories and that "internal colonialism" arose in many Western European countries in the course of state-building. The idea of "internal colonisation" in Russian history has been expanded upon by Alexander Etkind. An internal colony is characterised by cultural expansion, hegemony and assimilation within the real (or imagined) borders of the state. Research on colonisation shows that cultural hegemony and political domination occur together in one of three possible configurations: they either complement one another, compete with one another, or simply occur in parallel (Polak 2020: 217). It is still not easy to define "internal colonisation" because of its ambiguous, metaphorical nature. It may be understood as forced cultural unification, a system of serf law, or a literary metaphor. At times, "internal colonisation" cannot be separated from external colonisation, and this is certainly the case with the Caucasus.

Alisa Ganieva was born in Moscow but raised in her native Dagestan. Critics and literary scholars writing on her work always emphasise the writer's origins. Ganieva herself also underlines her background and shares interesting facts about her family life in numerous interviews (see Ganieva's personal webpage; Belov 2019; Rider 2021) as well as in autobiographical essays (Kula 2023: 87–95). Equally important for researchers is Ganieva's education at the Gorky Literary Institute, after graduating from which she became a professional literary critic[1]. Furthermore, in her literary work, Ganieva demonstrates an excellent knowledge of the realities of the contemporary Caucasus and is able to view it both from within and from without. Although her first language was Avar, she writes in Russian and, moreover, admits that her entire cultural background is Russian. According to her own statement, she does not experience a double identity in this regard (Belov 2019). As a person, she does not seem to share any postcolonial trauma associated with the Caucasus and instead embodies the characteristics of a modern European/

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[1] According to a columnist for *The Times Literary Supplement*, Ganieva's profession has a negative impact on her literary work, as her narrative experiments are unsuccessful and artificial (Randall 2015: 24). In a sort of "style triumphing over content," the author is frequently distracted by literary flourishes, hyperactive fragments, and quotations from fictional sources (Chenciner 2015).

Western woman: she adheres to democratic values, actively opposes violations of civil rights, and fights against discrimination and exclusion[2].

Alisa Ganieva is the author of several books about the contemporary Caucasus, among which it is necessary to mention her literary debut – the story *Salam, Dalgat!* [*Salam tebe, Dalgat!*, 2009] – as well as the novels *Prazdnichnaya gora* [*The Mountain and the Wall*] (2012) and *Zhenikh i nevesta* [*Bride and Groom*] (2015). All of them have been translated into English[3]. As we will see, Ganieva's literary depiction of modern Dagestan, as a symbol of the complex relationship between Russia and the Caucasus, partly contests and partly reinforces the postcolonial heritage.

The main subject of this study is the two above-mentioned novels, which deal with contemporary Dagestan and its inhabitants. The research conducted on the modern cultural identity of the North Caucasus, using the example of Ganieva's novels, is partly based on postcolonial theories, but it is also an attempt to question the assumption that colonisation, including the Russian colonisation of the Caucasus, necessarily represents pure evil, violence and the dominance of the strong over the weak. The study aims to assess how a Russian-Dagestani writer speaks about the contemporary Caucasus: whether her narrative perpetuates the orientalist way in which Russians have historically perceived the region or, on the contrary, articulates the voice of a victim liberated from Russian colonial rule. Perhaps this image may even be seen as objective, free of both the colonial sense of civilisational superiority and the complex of a nation subordinated to Russian power.

It is interesting to examine how the author portrays young people from the Caucasus. How do the characters see themselves, and how are they perceived by others? What narrative techniques are used to depict them? Answering these questions makes it possible to (re)define the "Caucasus identity" presented by Ganieva. In order to achieve this aim, I will try to identify criteria that might determine "Caucasus identity." These may include ethnicity (nationality), language, religion, local traditions, or gender roles. It may also be assumed that "Caucasian self-awareness" consists simply in opposition to everything that is Russian. Is Said's concept of the "Self" and the "Other" still valid in the context of today's North Caucasus? Can it be considered an example of "internal colonialism"?

It has often been noted that *The Mountain and the Wall* is "the first Dagestani novel to be published in English." In analysing Ganieva's fiction, critics point to various aspects: the linguistic layer, Bakhtinian dialogism, or elements of anti-utopia/dystopia. For example, Anni Lappela claims that "the dialogic relationships between dystopian and utopian discourses manifest themselves at different textual levels" (Lappela 2017: 103). Another aspect revealed in the novel is polyphony. According to Natasha Randall, *The Mountain and the Wall* is "a polyphonic text in which countless disembodied voices rant against the mounting tensions, a novel in which plausible individual characters are sacrificed to pervasive quasi-political rhetoric" (Randall 2015: 24). Indeed, Ganieva allows her characters to speak for themselves and avoids a persuasive narrative voice. Some critics also note residual elements of "the exciting and engaging magical realism of Rokhel-Meer [*Prazdnichnaya gora*], the enchanted mountain village" (Chenciner 2015). This important motif is, unfortunately, lost in the English translation of the book.

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[2] Ganieva has repeatedly protested human rights violations and demanded the release of film director Oleh Sencov. She was a guest of the Iowa City Foreign Relations Council (2018), where she gave a lecture on political prisoners in Russia. She participated in the Boris Nemtsov Forum (Warsaw 2019) and gave numerous interviews to Russian and foreign media on the sociopolitical situation in the Caucasus and Russia. After Russia's attack on Ukraine on February 24, 2022, Ganieva left the country and is currently living abroad.

[3] Both novels were translated by the same interpreter, Carol Apollonio, who also translated Ganieva's most recent book, *Oskorblennyye chuvstva* [*Offended Sensibilities*] (2018).

The leitmotif of the novel *The Mountain and the Wall* is a spreading rumour about the construction of a wall that is to separate the Caucasus from Russia. It is not known whose idea it was or what prompted such a move (sudden events, entrenched corruption, Islamic extremist activity, or the rapid growth of xenophobia). It is not even clear who is supposed to be building the wall; nobody has seen it. The rumour has not been confirmed by officials, while the Internet and mobile connections have ceased to function. It is unclear whether it is the Caucasus that wishes to isolate itself from Russia, or Russia that seeks to reject a "foreign body."

"It's something else. They say we're being walled off from Russia – border troops and all that. Like the Berlin Wall" (Ganieva [2012] 2015: 45), reports Shamil, one of the novel's protagonists. Another character cries out in confusion: "I don't know anything! Nothing at all! They're not telling us a thing! One day I hear 'There's a Wall,' the next, 'There's no Wall.' All I know is that everything's in chaos. […] They want to divide everything among themselves and keep the people out of it." (Ganieva [2012] 2015: 48). Who are *they*? They are unnamed "Others." The tense situation heightens internal conflicts in Dagestan, leading to unrest and riots that develop into open inter-ethnic warfare based on religious conflict in the final part of the novel. Various ethnic groups in the republic take to the streets and aggressively assert themselves and their identities. For example, Kumyks accuse Avars and Dargins of discrimination and authoritarianism, calling themselves the most peace-loving nation, unjustly pushed to the margins of history.

> A moment ago, you were saying that Moscow gave us land, and that the Tarkov chiefs, our leaders in the past, had a good relationship with Moscow… But let us think about what that actually means. What is Moscow – who are the Rus? The Rus are Varangians, and the Varangians are Turkic Kipchaks – they wouldn't have a language or a culture if it weren't for us! It was the Turks, together with Attila, who brought literacy, metalworking and the plough to Scandinavia. It was the Turks who gave the Rus their alphabet. Cyril and Methodius were our own blood brothers, who adapted the ancient Turkic runic script into European letters and devised the Glagolitic alphabet, which had forty sounds – exactly the number our language needs.
>
> And Christianity? The patriarchal seat of the Eastern Church was located in Derbent as early as the fourth century, and it was there that Turkic clergy ordained Georgian, Albanian, Syrian, Coptic and Byzantine priests! In the Middle Ages, Desht-i-Kipchak was the largest country in the whole territory of what is now Russia. The Russian ruling elite and nobility were Turks who spoke their native tongue.
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> Take the word *bathhouse* – *banya* – do you know where it comes from? It's *bu-ana*! – our steam room. The Turks ruled in Kyiv for centuries, until the Slavs swarmed over the city in animal skins and the ancient state fell into ruin. Now our kurgans have been destroyed, our steppe ploughed up, our cemeteries desecrated. But we will not lose hope! We will raise the blue and yellow Khazar flag, add the green of Islam, and make a new banner for the free Kipchak Steppe! (Ganieva [2012] 2015: 49–50)

Different nations of the republic make political demands, call for power, and proclaim their own republics (chanting, for example, "Kumykstan" or "Lezgistan"). The peoples of Dagestan begin to perceive injustice and discrimination not as coming from Russians, but from their closest neighbours.

This scenario confirms the claims made by some researchers that Dagestan's intricate ethnic structure in some way prevented the republic from taking radical political steps in the 1990s, while other parts of the North Caucasus revolted (Ware, Kisriev 1999: 96). The diversity of Dagestan, which is its cultural wealth, can at any moment turn into an explosive mixture.

In Ganieva's novel, people begin shouting slogans in languages intelligible only to their own ethnic group. This is how they assert their national identity when they wish to distinguish themselves from others. In general, in everyday situations, they speak Russian – the language that remains the main *lingua franca* in Dagestan and is understood by everyone. The Russian language, although it may be considered a "colonial heritage," is simply a means of communication. What is noteworthy is the fact that it is never "pure" Russian. *The Mountain and the Wall* is full of Arabic, Turkic, Avar, Lezgian, Dargin and Kumyk words and phrases. In the original Russian edition, the publisher included footnotes for the reader, while the English translation required an entire "Glossary of words, phrases, places and people." This shows that it is impossible to speak about Dagestan without taking its local linguistic background into account. This is how people in the Caucasus speak: using many words from indigenous languages. Russian as such is indeed insufficient to express the cultural diversity and distinctiveness of the Caucasus. As Sergey Belyakov observes, through her linguistic experiments, Ganieva was trying to follow Gogol's far more successful example (Belyakov 2013). Yet this local, "Caucasian" version of Russian – the only viable medium of communication – sounds natural.

Polite forms of address and a distinct communication culture are also characteristic of the Caucasus. In Ganieva's novel *The Mountain and the Wall*, the vast majority of characters do not bear Russian names but traditional and popular Caucasian ones, such as Madina, Asya, Gulya, Patya, Kamilla, Shamil, Makhmud and Arip. Apart from a few figures (*e.g.* the Soviet intellectual, writer and teacher Raisa Petrovna), no one uses a patronymic (*Rus. otchestvo*). This Russian convention of using the father's name was imposed, not without difficulty, on the peoples of the Caucasus and other non-Slavic nations during the Soviet period and may be regarded as a form of linguistic colonisation.

Both of Ganieva's novels are crowded with literary characters, although the plot can be quite sparse. Surprisingly, the author presents a rather stereotypical picture of the inhabitants of the Caucasus. Her works are filled with images of the typical Caucasian "men in black," not-very-bright girls whose aim in life is to get married, radical Islamists, and so on. But it seems that such a concentration of stereotypical personalities is intended to toy with the readers' expectations, to provoke them and, paradoxically, to help reveal the real "Caucasus identity."

For example, the protagonist of *The Mountain and the Wall*, Shamil Magomedov, hopes to get a job at a local newspaper thanks to his uncle's intercession. A practice that might be called nepotism is not stigmatised in the Caucasus; in a sense, quite the opposite is true – refusing to help a relative is regarded as a betrayal of the family. Shamil's first task as a young journalist is to interview craftsmen from the village of Kubachi. This place has been famous for hundreds of years for its masters who make weapons, jewellery and silverware. The Kubachi craftsmen are a trademark of Dagestan. The village should be a symbol of pride, resilience and local tradition. But Shamil is shocked to discover that all the valuable handicrafts have long since been sold, stolen or carried off. He realises that nowadays only cheap fakes are being produced and that supposedly "valuable" finds are merely forgeries.

This can be understood as a lack of respect for the tradition that is, as is widely proclaimed, so important for the peoples of the Caucasus. But it may also be a sign of our times and the devaluation of individual, authentic artistry. The scene in Kubachi presents a crisis of what constitutes the region's cultural wealth. After all, material culture in the North Caucasus – along with oral traditions, music and dance – has long been a full-fledged substitute for, for example, a literary tradition. In Ganieva's novels, this culture and traditional way of life fades into oblivion.

Wedding traditions and rituals in the Caucasus are also changing, becoming a burden for young people today. To some extent, the novel *Bride and Groom* dismantles the myth of the traditional wedding as the culmination of family and social life for the peoples of Dagestan, especially young girls. The female protagonist, Patya (the would-be bride), and Marat (the would-be groom), a young lawyer, are both in their twenties and have only one task to perform in their lives: they are expected to start a family and settle down. That is the only way they can fulfil their traditional socio-cultural roles. To reveal young people's thoughts and doubts about marriage, Ganieva uses two narrative levels in her novel – the first-person narrative when Patya's perspective is presented, and the third-person narrative when the story concerns Marat.

At the beginning of the novel *Bride and Groom*, Patya and Marat are living in Moscow without even knowing each other. Patya is staying there under the care of her brother and his Russian wife. It is worth noting that her parents are reluctant to accept the Russian woman into their family, especially since no children have been born of the marriage. For a traditional Dagestani family, not having children is considered a serious failing. Marat, another Moscow resident with Dagestani roots, who is currently dealing with the case of a murdered human rights defender, is simply forced to return to his hometown in Dagestan to get married. The whole situation depicted by Ganieva is quite grotesque: although he does not yet have a fiancée, his parents have already booked a wedding reception. It is significant that the wedding – announced from the very first pages of the novel – never takes place at all.

The Moscow experience of these two young people with Dagestani roots reveals several other issues. In Moscow, Patya and Marat feel at ease; they spend their time just like their Russian peers. They feel liberated from Caucasian conventions and are able to shape their own personal space. Individual identity and self-awareness become real values for them, while collective Caucasian tradition does not enrich but rather diminishes the identity of the modern individual. The novel *Bride and Groom* offers "a vivid portrait of a world where little place remains for private happiness and humane values," as one critic observes (Johnson 2017: 69). Patya and Marat are not ideological or generational rebels, yet they find themselves in a difficult position because, after their return to Dagestan, they wish to live in their own way. "Both are forced to balance their respect for tradition with their cosmopolitan understanding of love and romance, but as much as they try, their individual stories are mere fodder for the dysfunctional social order built on systemic corruption and terror" (Zilberbourg 2019: 8).

This opposition between strong Caucasian tradition on the one hand and personal freedom on the other is a recurring theme in Ganieva's work. One reviewer of *The Mountain and the Wall* notes that "It is a mass-disaster novel as viewed through the eyes of young adults who mostly just want the freedom to dance, listen to music, and engage in courtship behaviour, however clumsy" (Vollmar 2015: 13). Ganieva's protagonists seem in no way different from their peers in other regions of Russia.

However, while in Moscow, Patya and Marat are still perceived as "the Others." Russians treat them as different, as strange "blackasses" who cannot truly feel at home in the capital. Marat recounts his long search for a flat in Moscow because his non-Russian name frightened off potential landlords. Patya recalls her colleagues' unpleasant comments about the Caucasus and the reactions that followed:

> Then someone would unfailingly announce: "You know Patya is from there too", and the colleagues who had been stigmatising our southern lands would cringe and begin to justify themselves: "Don't think I'm some kind of fascist, they're not all like that." Or: "But Patya, you're different, you're like a regular Russian. No one would guess you're from Blackassia, so don't take offence." (Ganieva [2015] 2018: 114)

These examples simply show how persistent stereotypes about the Caucasus are among Russians. It has been demonstrated that "routine violations of the human rights of any 'person of Caucasian nationality' […] have been rising in the post-Soviet period" (Graney 2018: 232). Patya and Marat may not be victims of brutal aggression, but they face everyday discrimination. Ganieva does not dwell on this topic, yet even her brief allusions indicate that the Caucasus continues to be perceived from Moscow as a "foreign body."

This "otherness" is all the more evident because Russians are practically invisible in the Caucasus republics, and this fact makes Ganieva's fictional world truly "Caucasian," "liberated" and distinct from the rest of Russia. It can be assumed that in both of Ganieva's novels the greatest threat to Caucasus identity is the alarming rise of religious extremism. Religion has always been a meaningful part of Caucasus identity, but mainly as an element of cultural tradition[4]. The rise of the Caucasus Emirate in the final part of *The Mountain and the Wall* leads to murder, chaos, riots and terror. Religious extremism destroys cultural remnants: museums are demolished, music and theatre are banned. Above all, Ganieva exposes violence motivated not by nationality, but by religion.

The Islam portrayed by Ganieva has little to do with spirituality or authentic local tradition. Anni Lappela points out that "religion is problematised only when it is related to power and extremism, or to the generation gap" (Lappela 2017: 108). Indeed, religion becomes a political force and an instrument of power. For only a very few people in Ganieva's fiction does it represent a theistic worldview. Interestingly, only the younger generation is prone to radicalisation, while the older generation remains indifferent or simply fearful.

The murder of Rusik-the-Nail in *Bride and Groom* occurs against the backdrop of rising tensions between two mosques. Rusik, described as "weird" (he rides a bicycle, takes dance lessons, and is not interested in women), becomes a highly symbolic victim. His poster reading "I am an agnostic" provokes a violent backlash and becomes the direct cause of his murder. In her fiction, Ganieva warns against religious fanaticism, which has a disastrous effect on the very existence of the Caucasus and its cultural traditions. Maria Lebedeva claims that Ganieva's characters are not interested in living their own lives and therefore seek substitutes in religion or old rituals (Lebedeva 2020: 103), but this does not seem a wholly convincing explanation.

The results of this analysis show that Ganieva depicts a modern Caucasus that has become stuck between its own traditions, Russian influence and new threats. In her works, she presents a polyphony of opinions, different visions of the past and diverse ideas for the future. It is time for the peoples of the Caucasus to make their own individual choices, yet the question of cultural identity cannot be easily resolved. In her fiction, Ganieva warns against religious fanaticism that may have a devastating impact on the peoples of the Caucasus. She shows how easily innocent disagreements over identity (between the nations of Dagestan) or political disputes (stemming from the postcolonial heritage) can be brutally exploited by new "Others." Although it is impossible to ignore the colonial past, a modern Caucasian cultural self-awareness should be shaped by dialogue, tolerance and the right to choose. Sadly, the religious radicalism portrayed by the writer in both her novels leaves no room for individual choice and imposes its own rules.

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[4] "The role of the religious factor in ethnic identity is especially obvious for ethnic minorities who differ from the surrounding population in their religious affiliation. This religious 'otherness' reinforces ethnic self-consciousness and often becomes the main component in ethnic identity. Religious affiliation helps such groups prevent their assimilation into the broader culture and to remain a community" (Kuzmina 2018: 369).

To conclude, it is striking that the question of the Caucasus has almost disappeared from the spotlight of contemporary Russian writers[5]. In the nineteenth-century literary tradition, the Caucasus fascinated many of the greatest writers, who seized the opportunity to bring the region closer to Russia. This fact cannot be denied, even though, under the influence of postcolonial studies, they have been accused of sharing Russia's imperial ambitions. Today Alisa Ganieva (and, to some extent, German Sadulaev) fills this thematic niche and offers Russian readers a view from within. She points to the diversity within the region itself and invites the Russian reader to look more attentively at her small homeland. Ganieva shows that there is no single Caucasian identity. She confronts myths and labels, gathering all the existing stereotypes into her novels. The world depicted in her fiction presents the diversity of contemporary Dagestan, which is open to different paths for the future.

To summarise, in the literary vision of Alisa Ganieva, we can read a prophecy that the separation of the North Caucasus (Dagestan) from Russia might be the final act of decolonisation. Yet it might equally lead to chaos and anarchy. The North Caucasus, having entered the European (Russian) civilisational space on its own terms, has preserved many local traditions and customs. Russification (mainly in the sphere of language), as a form of colonisation, has not destroyed this local diversity. Today, the serious threat may come from radical Islam as a factor of new colonisation. Last but not least, Ganieva argues for the right of the individual to selfhood, and in this sense her fiction is universal and goes beyond specifically Caucasian themes. According to the author of *Bride and Groom*, the image of the modern Caucasian individual is complex and as ambiguous as any human being.

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[5] Except for the wave of works related mostly to the wars in Chechnya (*e.g.* Arkady Babchenko, Zakhar Prilepin, Vladimir Makanin).

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