



“Zuleikha Opens Her Eyes” in (Post-)Colonial Russia

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ABSTRACT This article focuses on post- and decolonial thought in contemporary Russia’s cultural debates by looking at the novel *Zuleikha Opens Her Eyes* by Guzel Yakhina and its reception in the “center” of Russia and in Tatarstan—the region described in the book. The insufficient presence of post- and decolonial perspectives amongst public intellectuals is highlighted, showing how the book, which was described as postcolonial, actually supports Russian (neo-)imperialism. The main argument is that the book erases the problematic aspects of Soviet universalism in terms of ethnic and religious difference and supports the centralizing policies of the contemporary Russian state, which is increasingly fusing with the Orthodox church. Furthermore, it presents the ‘deislamization’ of the protagonist as her ‘emancipation’ and erases the subjectivity of non-Russian women in the Russian Empire, the USSR and contemporary Russia. Situating the novel in the context of decolonial feminist scholarship, the article suggests vectors for further development of cultural debates in a country that is currently waging a colonial war in Ukraine.

KEYWORDS Islam, gender, Russia, Tatarstan, colonialism, decolonization, USSR, Islamic feminism

Introduction

The Russian Federation, which is becoming more and more closed and authoritarian, especially since the beginning of the full-scale invasion of Ukraine, is long known for its powerful propaganda machine represented by government-controlled channels such as *Perviy (The First)*¹. Therefore, any product that exists most likely supports the Russian government’s politics—including any cultural production. For instance, *Obitel’ (Abode)* is one of the series produced for the channel, which is an adaptation of a book by Zakhar Prilepin, who is a known active supporter of the war in Eastern Ukraine². The book touches on the subject of Stalin’s

1 All translations from Russian by the author unless indicated otherwise.

2 Kucherskaya, Maya. “Zuleikha Otkrivaet Glaza” Guzeli Yakhinoy -sil’nyi debuytnyi roman o raskulachennoy tatarke [“Zuleikha Opens Her Eyes” by Guzel Yakhina - a powerful book about a Tatar woman repressed by the state]. “Vedomosti.” Accessed June 28, 2020. <https://www.vedomosti.ru/lifestyle/articles/2015/06/10/595867-zuleikha-otkrivaet-glaza-guzeli-yahinoi---silnii-debyutnii-roman-o-raskulachennoi-tatarke>; Sergeeva, Nadezhda. Guzel’ Yakhina. “Zuleikha Otkrivaet Glaza” [Guzel Yakhina. Zuleikha Opens Her

repressions and was thus often used as a comparison with a more recent cultural product of the same scale, *Zuleikha Otkrivaet Glaza* (*Zuleikha Opens Her Eyes*) by Guzel Yakhina (2015). The book tells the story of a woman from a Tatar village who, at the time of the 1930s Soviet collectivization, is displaced to Siberia—together with other relatively wealthy peasant families (*kulaks*), former aristocrats and intelligentsia.

The first novel of Moscow-based, Kazan-born PR specialist and learned screenwriter Yakhina received outstanding attention almost straight after its publication. Ludmilla Ulitskaya, one of Russia's most famous writers, wrote a preface for the book; "Love and tenderness in hell" says her quote on the cover. The book won two big literary awards and was widely praised by the pro-government Russian media: *Rossiyskaya Gazeta*³ wrote about it, *RIA Novosti* interviewed⁴ Yakhina. The writer toured the country with book presentations⁵ and the website devoted to *The Year of Literature*⁶ was filled with stories about her. Yakhina was also chosen to write a text for *Total'nyi Diktant*, a government project offering citizens to test their mastery of the Russian language⁷. At the same time, both the book and its subsequent TV adaptation caused a lot of controversy in Tatarstan, where the events of the first part of *Zuleikha* take place.

Looking at the book and its reception, this article argues that *Zuleikha* supports Russia's contemporary (neo-)imperialism.⁸ Mentioning problems such as repressions in the USSR, forced displacement, colonial relationship of the center to the periphery as well as the intersection of gender and Islam, the book does not challenge the current status quo; instead, the Russocentrism and suppression of ethnic communities only intensifies. It preserves the image of the USSR which the contemporary Russian regime capitalizes on: the heroic state that won the Second World War and successfully restrained the main enemy, the USA. To support this argument, the article begins with a summary of the literature that demonstrates the colonial character of the Russian Empire, the USSR and their successor, the Russian Federation. The paper also examines how Russian liberal intellectuals are continuously supporting Russian imperialism by denying the existence of local racism and colonialism. The book and its se-

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- Eyes]. "Zvezda." Accessed September 19, 2020. <https://zvezdaspb.ru/index.php?page=8&nput=2662>; Semeshkina, Yanita. *Zuleikha, otkroy nashi glaza* [Zuleikha, open our eyes]. "Russkiy Pioner." Accessed July 6, 2020. http://ruspioner.ru/spetsarchive/m/single/45/single/_job/27582; Trunin, Konstantin. Guzel' Yakhina, "*Zuleikha Otkrivaet Glaza*", 2015 [Guzel' Yakhina, "*Zuleikha Opens Her Eyes*", 2015.] "Blog of literary critic, writer, reviewer." Accessed November 26, 2020. <http://trounin.ru/yakhina15/>.
- 3 Basinskyi, Pavel. *Neveroyano. Ochevidnoye* [Unbelievable, Obvious]. "Rossiyskaya Gazeta." Accessed May 25, 2020. <https://rg.ru/2015/05/25/basinsky.html>. Pulson, Klarissa. *Bolshaya karta dlya malenкои Zuleikhi* [Big map for little Zuleikha]. "Rossiyskaya Gazeta." Accessed on November 17, 2020. <https://rg.ru/2015/11/18/yakhina.html>.
- 4 Kocharova, Anna. Guzel' Yakhina: "*Dlya menya ne bylo vybora, o chem pisat*" [Guzel' Yakhina: "I did not have a choice about what to write"]. "RIA Novosti." Accessed March 24, 2020. <https://ria.ru/20160301/1382525469.html>.
- 5 *Chitatel'skaya konferentsiya po romanu Guzel' Yakhinoy "Zuleikha Otkrivaet Glaza"* [Reader's conference on Guzel' Yakhina's Novel "*Zuleikha Opens Her Eyes*"]. "Regional Library of Sakhalin." Accessed November 20, 2020. <http://libsakh.ru/sobytiya/novosti/novost-polnostju/article/chitatelskaja-konferencija-po-romanu-guzel-jakhinoy-zul/>.
- 6 Guzeva, Alexandra. *Zuleikha kaka semeynaya istoriya Yakhinoy* [Zuleikha as Yakhina's family history]. "God Literaturny." Accessed April 25, 2020. <https://godliteraturny.ru/projects/zuleykha-kak-semeynaya-istoriya-yakhinoy>.
- 7 Reshetnikova, Natalya. *Guzel' otkrivaet azy* [Guzel reveals the foundations]. "Rossiyskaya Gazeta." Accessed January 15, 2021. <https://rg.ru/2018/01/30/reg-sibfo/guzel-iahina-boialas-kogda-pisala-tekst-dlia-totalnogo-diktanta.html>.
- 8 I write (neo-) in brackets to highlight that the current Russian imperialism and colonialism is at the same time new, as it has developed after the fall of the USSR, but is also old, in a sense that it builds on and is a continuation of the politics of the Russian Empire and USSR.

ries as well as the public feedback in the ‘center’ of Russia, in Tatarstan and abroad will be analysed. In the following part the perception and influence of the book will be connected to the status of Tatarstan within the country and to the notion of Russian colonialism in general. Lastly, a gender dimension is added to the analysis of the book and its effects.

Imported Theories, Ignorant Intellectuals

The language of postcolonialism has established itself in analyses of the relationship between the ‘first’ and the ‘third’ world since the 1980s. After the fall of the Soviet Union, scholars from Ukraine and Belarus, the former ‘periphery’ of the Empire, started applying this lens to the policies of the Russian Empire and the USSR⁹. Three decades later, in Russia, the center of the former Empire, post- and decolonial¹⁰ approaches still do not receive much attention of the scholarly community. As Ukrainian researcher Chernetsky writes, since the 1990s postcolonialism has been “the only major contemporary theoretical discourse” (Chernetsky 2007, 12) consistently ignored by Russian social scientists. He provides an example of a 1998 Russian survey of the Western¹¹ discourse on postmodernism, where the most important postcolonial scholars Edward Said and Gayatri Spivak were labelled “a well-known literary scholar of a leftist-anarchist orientation” and a “socially engagée feminist deconstructionist” (Chernetsky 2007, 36). [4]

Even getting into Russian academia, postcolonialism becomes transformed to support imperialism. For instance, the “inner colonization” theory of a well-known public intellectual Alexander Etkind (2003) is negligent of racial, cultural and religious discrimination and perpetuates the homogenizing image of Russia as a “self-colonizing state” (Chernetsky 2007, 46), erasing inequality between Russians and other peoples of the former USSR. Anna Engelhardt believes that similar processes continue in today’s cultural sphere: exhibitions and events about colonialism do not mention Russia,¹² public debates around non-Russian musicians erase their non-Russian identities¹³. It can therefore be argued that the ideas and discourses shared and promoted by liberal public intellectuals reinforce Russian colonialism, racism and xenophobia. [5]

Khahordin, who called Russian scholars “pathfinders” (Khahordin 2015, 1296) in the vast sea of theories bestowed upon them after the fall of the Iron Curtain, believes that Russian [6]

9 Engelhardt, Anna. *The Futures of Russian Decolonization*. “Strelka Mag.” Accessed March 18, 2021. <https://strelkamag.com/en/article/the-futures-of-russian-decolonization?fbclid=IwAR2KJwmBwzaJRH73mUTSRX7q4o8dVbKPSjdlE9nOwW1hbwrP5o0aU2fhjRg>.

10 Even though post- and decolonial theory have different origins and approaches to knowledge production, in the article they are perceived as two interconnected ways of thinking through the relationships of colonial dependence that reveal themselves in culture and literature as well as on day-to-day forms of oppression.

11 Such categories as ‘Western’; ‘third,’ ‘second’ or ‘first world’ are written in parentheses to highlight their constructed nature. They are used to portray the lasting inequalities between these parts of the world as well as limitation of certain discourses. ‘Western’ means produced in the ‘West’ (U.S. and Western Europe) or attached to it symbolically (for instance, LGBTIQ* rights are perceived as a ‘Western’ idea). The ‘first world’ or Global North is a synonym of the ‘West.’ The ‘third world’ or Global South, at the same time, refer to the formerly colonized countries of the Americas, Africa and Asia. The ‘second world’ is a name for the countries that fall into neither of these categories and are part of the former Eastern Block. They can also be referred to as postsocialist countries. A separate part of this category are the countries that were part of the former USSR.

12 Ibid.

13 Sinyaev, Nikolay. “Sledit’ za rukami”: *rabota kolonial’nykh infrastruktur i eyo analiz. Interviu s Annoy Engelhardt* [“To Watch the Hands”: Colonial Infrastructure Operation and Analysis. Interview with Anna Engelhardt]. “Krapiva.” Accessed December 25, 2020. <https://vtoraya.krapiva.org/sledit-za-rukami-25-11-2020>.

academics limited themselves to using the lens of post-communism (not postmodernism or postcolonialism) due to the inequality of the global academic market (Khahordin 2015, 1294). It is true that the “West” has always had the privilege of formulating “high theory,” while the “rest” had to limit themselves to supplying cases for analysis (Tlostanova 2011). However, the ignorance of postcolonialism by Russian intellectuals is connected not only to their marginalized position in global academia but also to their implication in the colonial and (neo-)imperialist politics of the former imperial center. As Shestakova and Engelhardt (2021, 224) have shown, islamophobia and racism have been characteristic of such Soviet dissidents as Brodsky or Sakharov. Post-Soviet liberal intellectuals follow the same logic. Not being fully accepted as ‘Western’ subjects, they use the discourse of ‘whiteness’ to reassert the place of the country in the project of modernity “while simultaneously clinging to Russia’s authenticity” (Zakharov 2015; Krivonos 2018, 1149).

Striving to prove their proximity to whiteness¹⁴, Russian intellectuals, including those usually described as ‘liberals’ or ‘democratic opposition,’ consistently ignore post- and decolonial thought and activism, associated with the problems of the Global South from which they try to distance themselves. Racism and colonialism are presented as problems of the former ‘third’ and ‘first world,’ but not of the former ‘second,’ postsocialist world.¹⁵ Krivonos thinks that this way, the Russian regime tries to challenge the dominant global position of the ‘West,’ “reconstructing the Russian nation as ‘true Europe’ that will carry the ‘white man’s burden’” (Krivonos 2018, 1149). In this discourse, the ‘West’ is portrayed as “washed over by the flood of non-white migrants and indulging in self-destructive ‘political correctness’” (Krivonos 2018, 1149). For instance, when *Black Lives Matter* protests happened in the USA, Russian ‘liberal’ intellectuals described it as a completely foreign problem. They tended to identify with the white part of the local population, compared the protests with the “dawn” of ‘Western’ civilization (Djagalov 2021) and invented a hashtag “Russian Lives Matter,” reinforcing Etkind’s (2003) narrative in which everyone was equally oppressed by the state in the Russian Empire and the USSR and it continues to be so in contemporary Russia. [7]

Russian identity created by the state with the ‘West’ as its “constituting other” (Tolz 1999, 995) is white and “civilized” (Zakharov 2015, 126), “with colour-based references to people’s phenotypical traits and racialisation of people from the Caucasian region and Central Asia as ‘black’” (Roman 2002, 2002; in Krivonos 2018, 1149). As Krivonos writes, “through the development of physical anthropology, state discourses and anti-immigrant movements in the post-Soviet Russia, ‘Russianness’ has been reinscribed into whiteness as part of the ‘civilised,’ ‘modernised’ and ‘racially superior’ West” (Krivonos 2018, 1149). At the same time, such peoples as Ukrainians or Belarusians are constructed as “fraternal,” erasing their subjectivity and difference (Masnenko 2018). From the two Chechen wars to the war in Georgia and the two invasions into Ukraine in 2014 and 2022, Russia is destroying people, animals and land to fulfill its (neo-)imperialist ambitions outside of the country, meanwhile preserving and strengthening colonial structures inside through the centralization of governance. This article demonstrates how a particular cultural product can support these politics. The next [8]

14 Whiteness refers to “a set of conditions that maintain ones privilege of positionality as a ‘neutral’ Soviet/Russian citizen” (Shestakova and Engelhardt (Distributed Cognition Cooperative) 2021, 226).

15 Uzarashvili, Lana. “Ty dolzhna byt’ luchshe, chem oni”: kak rabotaet rasizm v Rossii [“You should be better than them”: how racism works in Russia]. “Sh.e.” Accessed October 20, 2020. <https://she-expert.org/istoriya/ty-dolzha-byt-luchshe-chem-oni-kak-rabotaet-rasizm-v-rossii?fbclid=IwAR2YO2PZ55af5C9mqCzzS9BUu-tKxlvXDP6NCOrGdb65S76HmiJ3kFS21zU>.

chapter introduces the reader to the plot of *Zuleikha Opens Her Eyes* by Guzel Yakhina and links it to the history and present of Tatarstan, where the events take place in the book.

The Domestic ‘Other’

Zuleikha opens her eyes. The sun is beating down, blinding her and cutting her head to pieces. The vague outline of trees all around her are quivering in a sparkling dance of sunbeams.

– Are you feeling unwell? Yusuf is leaning toward her, looking at her face. – Do you not want me to go?

Her son’s eyes are enormous and a thick-green: they are her eyes. Zulaikha’s own eyes are looking at her from her son’s face. She shakes her head and pulls him further into the forest. (Yakhina 2015, 415)

[9]

In one of the final scenes of the book, Zuleikha’s son boards a boat to begin his journey to St. Petersburg to become a painter. This move completes the story of the liberation of a traditional subject. Yusuf continues his mother’s journey from backwardness of a Tatar village to the Soviet/Russian modernity of the former capital and then perhaps further to the West—to Paris. The ‘Westernization’ of Yusuf also happens through a change of his name: Ignatov, the murderer of his father, helps the boy by giving him new documents in which he is no more the son of a Tatar peasant but of the Soviet NKVD commissar Ignatov. Yusuf Valiyev, the son of a traditional Muslim, becomes Iosif Ignatov—a modern secular subject.

[10]

In this narrative, the Soviet project is represented as beneficial to ‘backward’ Tatars. In one of the interviews Yakhina said that she wanted to counterpose “the national” with “the universal”¹⁶. The Soviet ideology, thus, is seen by her as simply “universal” and Stalin, who was responsible for collectivization and deportation of numerous nations, is described as “a wise man, whose eyes look kind, as if he was a father, and makes one feel calm and protected” (Yakhina 2015, 38). This portrayal of Soviet politics ignores their (neo-)imperialist and colonial character and does not leave space for the problematization of the erasure of the national cultures that they have led to. To show how this side of the book also supports the (neo-)imperialism and (neo-)colonialism of the contemporary Russia, the book’s content and reception is connected to the history and present of Tatarstan. The article will not focus on the way Siberia is portrayed in the book, which, however, can be subjected to a separate analysis, as it is hard not to associate it with the images of the colonization of the Americas by European settlers.¹⁷

[11]

As the author and the heroine of the book come from Tatarstan, the focus will be on the position of this region within the colonial matrix of the Russian Empire, the USSR and contemporary Russia. Tatarstan became part of Russia already under the rule of Czar Ivan the Terrible. Gradskova believes that the specificity of the “imperial politics in the Volga-Ural region” (Gradskova 2019, 7) was about Russia aiming more at the integration of nations living in the region through “education and Christianization” (Gradskova 2019, 7). Tatarstan “has

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16 Medvedev, Sergey, Guzel’ Yakhina, et. al. *Obizhennyye Zuleikhoy* [Offended by Zuleikha]. “Radio Svoboda.” Accessed April 30, 2020. <https://www.svoboda.org/a/30568741.html?fbclid=IwAR2YOgm-2YZ6ePuSVcblZAnSoCZqzc38n-7tifeBLaQOUkVE3slVyVLqtk>.

17 Fatykhova, Nuriya. *Zuleikha protiv Zuleikhi* [Zuleikha against Zuleikha]. “Colta.” Accessed July 8, 2020. <https://www.colta.ru/articles/art/24311-spory-o-zuleyhe-i-sovetskiy-imperializm>.

historically had an amenable relationship with Russia's leadership" (Keenan 2013, 74), exercised relative freedom of cultural and religious self-expression and "has long been a model region for religious and ethnic tolerance" (Keenan 2013, 71). However, the "loyalty to the empire [of Tatars] was constantly under suspicion" (Gradskova 2019, 16), as the "Muslim population of the Volga-Ural region was frequently accused of bringing threats of pan-Islamism and pan-Turkism" (Gradskova 2019, 33).

[...] similar to the Western Europeans (Said 1977), Russians saw the population of the Volga-Ural region mainly through an orientalist lens, even if, as Tlostanova rightly notes, this Orient often seemed to be regarded as a less perfect Orient than the Orient of Western colonization (Tlostanova 2008). (Gradskova 2019, 16) [13]

The October revolution was welcomed by Muslim reformists, Jadids, many of whom joined the revolutionary movement (Gradskova 2019). Soon, however, the Soviet state began to suppress both local nationalist movements and Islam. As Jesko Schmoller writes, "the nationality policies adopted after founding the Soviet Union were meant to strengthen people's national consciousness and [...] thus, weaken Islam and divide the Muslim population" (2018, 109). The USSR "worked to produce a unified Soviet society of convinced atheists, conscious Communists, and committed patriots" (Smolkin 2018, 196)—secularism served "as a disciplinary project concerned with effective governance and the formation of rational citizen-subjects" (Smolkin 2018, 9). Socialist culture was supposed to become a new religion (Habeck 2014): "Houses of worship were replaced by cinemas, graveyards – by parks, and socialist holidays were introduced to coincide with commonly observed religious ones." (Luehrmann 2011, 7) [14]

Even though the USSR preserved certain forms of 'national' cultures, it has determined how these would look like. For instance, non-Russian languages were put under threat with "the alphabet officially changed from Arabic to Latin and then Cyrillic in an attempt to bring about a uniform Soviet identity" (Keenan 2013, 74). Russian language and culture, at the same time, became a bonding neutrality that everyone had to accept. "Despite the secularization of the state, the party's commitment to atheism, the vision of radical social transformation through cultural revolution, and several anti-religious and atheist campaigns, Soviet Communism never managed to overcome religion or produce an atheist society" (Smolkin 2018, 3). What it produced was a colonial structure in which 'national republics' represented both their 'traditional' backwardness and the Soviet success in bringing them progress. "Contradictory emphases on both cultural specificity and its erasure produced a simultaneous fascination with and repulsion by the 'different' and 'exotic' 'other' cultures" (Caffee 2013, 14). Soviet colonial violence in today's Tatarstan culminated in repressions against Kazan Tatars when thousands were sent to GULAG in 1929-1932 and 1937-1938. Collectivization and deportations remain an unrecognized crime and unresolved trauma of many peoples of the USSR. Apart from the physical extermination of 'national minorities,' more than 70 years within the framework of the Soviet 'friendship of peoples' also meant losing their language, religion and culture. [15]

Zuleikha Opens Her Eyes (Yakhina 2015) portrays the displacement of Tatars to Siberia uncritically as liberation and enlightenment. The author does not mention the inter-generational trauma of losing the connection to land and culture that such processes always entail. The book also repeats and reinforces the colonial relationship to Tatars within the Empire—they are depicted as 'barbarians' and contrasted with communists, who are portrayed as white [16]

Russians¹⁸. While Zuleikha's Tatar husband is big, hairy and dark, communist Ignatov is white, slim, hairless, with white teeth, beautiful eyes and "strong fingers" (Yakhina 2015, 13). While sex with the Tatar husband is mere suffering, sex with Ignatov becomes a revelation: "Everything that she was taught since childhood went away. And the new that came instead washed away her fears" (Yakhina 2015, 90). In the book, Ignatov and his friend call Tatarstan "Tataria" (Yakhina 2015, 19), a Russian variation of the republic's name nowadays used in a derogatory manner (while other parts of the former USSR—Bashkortostan, Turkmenistan and Kyrgyzstan—are still predominantly called by these 'russified' names). Soviet modernity helps Zuleikha to get away from the backward traditions of her "barbaric" nation. The liberation of the heroine continues with her son's fate as described above.

Another aspect of Zuleikha's liberation is her departure from Islam, which she gradually allows herself not to follow. From time to time, Yakhina mentions how she began to pray more rarely and more hastily, getting used to not having someone "supervising" her from above (Yakhina 2015, 69). Though Islam is frequently mentioned in the book, it is presented only through oppressive rules, rituals and superstitions. Communists, who come from the 'Orthodox' parts of Russia, interchangeably call Tatars "pagans" and "Muslims," equalizing the two (Yakhina 2015, 18). Such portrayal of Islam is especially problematic when one takes into account the "concern in the Russian Federation about 'a new wave of Islamic radicalism' and a 'further expansion of Islamic extremism'" (Yemelianova and Pilkington 2003, 75) that began to grow in the early 1990s and is historically used to justify occupation. [17]

The collapse of the USSR brought a revival of interest in both national culture and religion in Tatarstan (Yemelianova and Pilkington 2003, 75). These developments were described as "two parallel processes – the Islamization of Tatar identity and the Tatarization of Islamic identity" (Yemelianova and Pilkington 2003a, 75). "Islam has become the primary indicator of Tatar-ness; for much of the population, indeed, the two have become practically synonymous" (Yemelianova and Pilkington 2003, 62). Tuna writes that "anti-Muslim sentiments surged in the country against the background of the Chechen conflict in the 1990s and, by the turn of the millennium, the influx of migrant workers from the Caucasus and Central Asia" (Tuna 2020, 28). Fueled by two Chechen wars, the "growth of anti-Muslim prejudice at a national scale in Russia" (Tuna 2020, 28) mixed into the global surge of Islamophobia after the events of 9/11 in the U.S. Russia returned to "the late-Soviet practices of regulation and containment in managing religious communities" (Tuna 2020, 28). [18]

Anti-extremist legislation penetrated the entire life of the country after 2006 and has served not only the political elites or the law enforcement agencies, but has also increasingly been exploited as a universal instrument of repression by local authorities seeking to suppress their opponents, by different groups of bureaucracy as a weapon in disputes and, apparently, by some individuals trying to advance their personal agendas. (Verkhovsky 2010, 37) [19]

At the same time, in Tatarstan Islam became closely linked to the fight for independence. After the fall of the USSR, more than 60 percent of the population of Tatarstan voted for its sovereignty. However, the republic got only limited autonomy within the federal state. For moderate Tatar nationalists, "Islam was a central component of the nation's spiritual revival, but the ultimate goal was still the republic's independence" (Schmoller 2018, 110). Radical nationalists associated with the organisation *Ittifaq* believed Islam was superior to the [20]

18 "Whiteness" is written in parentheses to highlight that race is not a biological, but a cultural category.

nation and needed to be “purified” from all “moderate interpretations” (Schmoller 2018, 111). Putin’s centralizing reforms brought “an end to any hopes for sovereignty that a segment of the Tatar population might have held” (Schmoller 2018, 112). Centralization continues—for instance, in 2018 a language reform was introduced that made studying national languages at school voluntary, causing strong resistance in the republic¹⁹.

According to Schmoller, “the events in Tatarstan in the 1990s and early 2000s [...] helped bring about a switch from an identity primarily based on ethnicity to an identity more strongly informed by religious belonging than previously” (2018, 109). He believes that “the failure of the political sovereignty of Tatarstan made some people call the usefulness of nationalist political activity into question and caused a further shift towards religious identification” (2018, 113). Today, the Tatar identity remains related to Islam and Tatar nationalism continues to exist in both “secular and fundamentalist religious convictions” (Schmoller 2018, 113). Tatars articulate their national identity “primarily in opposition to a Russian ‘other’” (Omel’chenko, Sabirova, et al. 2003, 211) or against *Kriashens* (Christian(ized) Tatars) (Omel’chenko, Sabirova, et al. 2003, 214). In Tatarstan, there is a feeling that Moscow is exaggerating the Islamist menace to further centralize the state and suppress political opponents (Keenan 2013, 76) to prevent them from undermining “centuries of Russian-Tatar cohabitation” (Omel’chenko, Pilkington, et al. 2003, 274). In these conditions, this article argues that *Zuleikha Opens Her Eyes* (Yakhina 2015) is influenced by and supports the politics of the (neo-)imperialist Russian state, where Islam is seen as a threat and Tatars as a backwards ‘Other’ to whom Soviet universalism is ultimately beneficial. The following part supports this argument by describing the difference of the reception of the book in “central Russia”²⁰, in Tatarstan and abroad.

[21]

Multiple Critiques: Metropolitan and (Post-)Colonial

As mentioned previously, the book was met with outstandingly positive reactions from state-affiliated Russian media and from such public figures as the writer Zakhar Prilepin, who said the book contained nothing “politically opportunistic” and “no distortions in any direction.”²¹ The “liberal” part of public intellectuals was less impressed by Zuleikha’s “cinematographic language.”²² Galina Yuzefovich²³, as well as some other reviewers²⁴, criticized its simplic-

[22]

19 *Yazykovoy vopros v Tatarstane [Language question in Tatarstan]*. “Tatcentr.” Accessed November 10, 2020. <https://tatcenter.ru/stories/yazykovoj-vopros-v-tatarstane/>.

20 By cultural discourses from “central Russia,” I mean those originating in Moscow (and sometimes St. Petersburg) and spreading across the country within the centralized media landscape of the Russian Federation.

21 Prilepin, Zakhar. *Post in support of the series and Yakhina*. “Facebook.” Accessed November 22, 2020. <https://www.facebook.com/zaharprilepin/posts/3102603613117272>. *Prilepin: roman “Zuleikha otkrivayet glaza” rekomenduyu vsem! [Prilepin: I recommend the novel “Zuleikha Opens Her Eyes” to everyone!]*. “NSN.” Accessed October 11, 2020. <https://nsn.fm/culture/culture-prilepin-roman-zuleykha-otkrivaet-glaza-rekomenduyu-vsem>.

22 Semeshkina, Yanita. *Zuleikha, otkroy nashi glaza [Zuleikha, open our eyes]*. “Russkiy Pioner.” Accessed July 6, 2020. http://ruspioner.ru/spetsarchive/m/single/45/single/_job/27582.

23 Yuzefovich, Galina. *Sledy Na Vode, Zuleikha i Zavidnoye Chustvo Very Steninoy [Footprints on the water, Zuleikha and Vera Stenina’s Envious Feeling]*. * “Meduza.” Accessed October 29, 2020. <https://meduza.io/feature/2015/05/29/sledy-na-vode-zuleykha-i-zavidnoe-chuvstvo-very-steninoy>.

24 Aristova, Olga. *Lichnoye mnenie: “Zuleikha Otkrivayet Glaza” Guzel’ Yakhinoy [Personal Opinion: “Zuleikha Opens Her Eyes” by Guzel Yakhina]*. * “Kot Brodskogo.” Accessed December 20, 2020. <https://kotbrodskogo.ru/articles/post/104-lichnoe-mnenie-zuleykha>; Chernikova, Liudmila. *Retsenziya na roman Guzel’ Yakhinoy “Zulikha Otkrivaet Glaza” [Review of Guzel Yakhina’s Novel “Zuleikha Opens Her Eyes”]*. “Pishi-Chitay.” Accessed February 10, 2021. <http://write-read.ru/reviews/4874>; Kotyosov, Aleksandr. *Retsenziya na roman Zakhinoy “Zuleikha Otkrivaet Glaza” [Review of the Novel “Zuleikha Opens Her Eyes” by Yakhina]*.

ity and related it to the fact that *Zuleikha* was an example of “women’s literature.” At the same time, they praised the book for depicting “the weak and strong woman,”²⁵ powerful emotions²⁶ and the great love story of the “Tatar Cinderella.”²⁷

Some reviews from the “center” were critical of the book. For the literary critic Valeria Pustovaya (2016), the simplicity of the language and plot was reminiscent of Soviet novels. She, as well as other authors,²⁸ described *Zuleikha*’s success as a political project, since the way the book engages with the topic of Stalin’s repressions matches the narrative promoted by the state: they are “fictionalized, mythologized and [turned] into mass entertainment.”²⁹ Yakhina’s second book, *Deti Moi (My Children)*, was described as continuing the same project: “It tells a story of ‘small’ people having their moments of happiness in the times of Stalin’s terror”³⁰ (Rudalev 2018). One of the reviewers, Kuz’menkov, believes that the positive reception of the book was a proof of the dependency of literary criticism on the market and the state³¹.

A few Russian critics also noticed that the relationship between *Zuleikha* and Ignatov is comparable to the one between Tatarstan and the Russian federal center³². However, this aspect was mostly noticed by Tatars, who criticized the book a lot more. The critics not only treated *Zuleikha* as an attempt to obscure the cruelty of GULAG and capitalize on the topic of Stalinism, but were also aware of the problematic colonial implications of the novel. For

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- “Druzhba Narodov.” Accessed October 10, 2020. <https://proza.ru/2015/10/27/2066>; Medvedeva, Yuliya. *Professor Leybe Otkrivaet Glaza* [Professor Leybe Opens His Eyes]. “Blog Yulii Medvedevoy.” Accessed October 11, 2020. <http://medved.tilda.ws/zuleiha>; Sklyar, Anna. *Guzel’ Yakhina - Zuleikha Otkrivaet Glaza* [Guzel Yakhina - Zuleikha Opens Her Eyes].* “Schyastie Est!” Accessed April 25, 2020. <https://anchiktigra.livejournal.com/2043938.html>; Taran, Tatyana. *Luybov v ekstremalnykh usloviyakh* [Love in extreme circumstances]. “MD Experiment.” Accessed January 12, 2021. <http://md-eksperiment.org/post/20180109-lyubov-v-ekstremalnyh-usloviyah>; Zanevina, Asya. “*Zuleikha otkrivaet glaza*”: *bolshaya istoriya o malen’koy zhenshchine, pokorivshaya chitateley po vsemu miru* [“Zuleikha Opens Her Eyes”: a big story about a little woman that has conquered readers all over the world.” “Foma.” Accessed October 18, 2020. <https://foma.ru/zuleyha-otkryvaet-glaza-bolshaya-kniga-o-malenkoy-zhenshhine-pokorivshaya-chitateley-po-vsemu-miru.html>.
- 25 Yudina, Olga. *Sila i slabost’ zhenschiny v romane Guzel’ Yakhinoy “Zuleikha otkrivaet glaza”* [Power and weakness of a woman in the novel “Zuleikha Opens Her Eyes” by Guzel Yakhina“]. “Russkiy Pioner.” Accessed July 20, 2020. http://ruspioner.ru/project/m/single/45/single/_job/27856.
- 26 Matkovskiy, Sergey. *Otzyv na knigu Guzel’ Yakhinoy “Zuleikha Otkrivaet Glaza”* [Response to the book “Zuleikha Opens Her Eyes” by Guzel Yakhina].* “Russkiy Pioner.” Accessed November 12, 2020. <http://ruspioner.ru/profile/blogpost/9635/view/31693/>.
- 27 *Chitatel’skaya konferentsiya po romanu Guzeli Yakhinoy “Zuleikha Otkrivaet Glaza”* [The Reader’s Conference of Guzel Yakhina’s Novel “Zuleikha Opens Her Eyes.” “Central Library of Nizhny Tagil.” Accessed July 18, 2020. http://www.tagilib.ru/for/_profi/lib/_univer/detail.php?ID=34950.
- 28 Abasheva, Marina, and Vladimir Abashev. *Kniga kak simptom* [Book as a Symptom]. “Novy Mir.” Accessed May 7, 2021. https://magazines.gorky.media/novy/_mi/2016/5/kniga-kak-simptom.html; Pankratov, Viktor. “*Zuleikha Otkrivaet Glaza*” Guzel’ Yakhinoy [Guzel Yakhina’s “Zuleikha Opens Her Eyes”]. “Sygma.” Accessed September 19, 2020. <https://syg.ma/@vkvpank/zulieikha-otkryvaet-ghlaza-guziel-iakhinoy>.
- 29 Shershneva, Tatiana. “*Zuleikha Otkrivaet Glaza*”: *v zone komforta* [“Zuleikha opens her eyes”: in the comfort zone]. “Russkiy Pioner.” Accessed October 6, 2020. http://ruspioner.ru/spetsarchive/m/single/45/single/_job/27575.
- 30 Kolobrodov, Alexey. *Nemtsy Povolzhya, Stalin i angliyskiy gazon* [Volga Germans, Stalin and the English lawn]. “Rara Avis.” Accessed June 14, 2020. http://rara-rara.ru/menu-texts/nemcy/_povolzhya/_stalin/_i/_angliyskiy/_gazon.
- 31 Bekkin, Renat. *Mokraya kuritsa tatarskoy literatury ili kogo predala Zuleikha?* [Wet hen of Tatar literature or whom did Zuleikha betray?]. “Sibirskie Ognii.” Accessed July 20, 2020. <http://www.sibogni.ru/content/mokraya-kurica-tatarskoy-literatury-ili-kogo-predala-zuleyha>. Kuzmenkov, Alexandr. *Marsh Soglasnykh. Roman Guzel’ Yakhinoy “Zuleikha Otkrivaet Glaza”* [March of the consilient. Guzel Yakhina’s Nove; “Zuleikha Opens Her Eyes”]. “Russian Interest.” Accessed December 21, 2020. <http://russianinterest.ru/content/marsh-soglasnyh-roman-guzel-yahinoy-zuleyha-otkryvaet-glaza>.
- 32 Iudkevich, Marina. *Uyutnyi GULAG ili novyi vzlet Tatarstana* [Cozy GULAG and Tatarstan’s new takeoff]. “Idel.Realii.” Accessed September 17, 2020. <https://www.idelreal.org/a/29494377.html>.

them, the story of the death of Zuleikha's husband Murtaza and the change of her son's name was an attempt to praise the erasure of the Tatar nation. Project director at the Heinrich Böll Foundation in Russia, Nuriya Fatykhova, wrote that this storyline in the book is especially problematic as it "ignores the traumas of Stalin's language politics, when millions of people turned into 'natsmen' and were made to use Russian names instead of their own."³³ Many found the usage of the term "red horde" to describe communists as problematic, since the "horde" refers to the Golden Horde to which Tatars trace their lineage³⁴. Critics were also angry with Yakhina's one-sided description of the Tatar household as well as with the inconsistencies in the plot³⁵: Zuleikha mixed up Tatar words, presented knowledge of historical facts and myths that did not match her seemingly 'dark' rural upbringing, and performed rituals prohibited by Islam.

Of course, not all reviews from Tatarstan were negative. Some forgave Yakhina these "minor inconsistencies," as she represented the republic on the country-wide and even on the global level³⁶. However, a significant number of reviews by Tatars as well as by Kazakhs³⁷ problematized the way the book depicted the Soviet project of modernization. There was even more critique once the production of the book-based series started. The series was created by the main state-affiliated channel and starred Chulpan Khamatova, a controversial figure who had long left Tatarstan, converted to Orthodox Christianity and is often supportive of the actions of Kremlin. While in the 'center' the series was received well³⁸, in Tatarstan local actors even refused to participate in the casting for the project³⁹—largely due to the presence of Khamatova in it. After the series was launched, the actress reported receiving insults⁴⁰ and

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- 33 Fatykhova, Nuriya. *Zuleikha protiv Zuleikhi* [Zuleikha against Zuleikha]. "Colta." Accessed July 8, 2020. <https://www.colta.ru/articles/art/24311-spory-o-zuleyhe-i-sovetskiy-imperializm>.
- 34 Achmetzyanov, Salavat. *Zachem Zuleikha otkrivaet glaza: retsenziya potomka tatar, soslannykh na stroitel'stvo Magnitki* [What Does Zuleikha Open Her Eyes for: a Review by a Descendant of Tatars Who Were Exiled to Build Magnitka]. "Realnoe Vremya." Accessed March 12, 2021. <https://realnoevremya.ru/articles/58767-recenziya-potomka-tatar-soslannykh-na-stroitelstvo-magnitki>.
- 35 Achmetzyanov, Salavat. *Zachem Zuleikha otkrivaet glaza: retsenziya potomka tatar, soslannykh na stroitel'stvo Magnitki* [What Does Zuleikha Open Her Eyes for: a Review by a Descendant of Tatars Who Were Exiled to Build Magnitka]. "Realnoe Vremya." Accessed March 12, 2021. <https://realnoevremya.ru/articles/58767-recenziya-potomka-tatar-soslannykh-na-stroitelstvo-magnitki>; Batulla, Rabit. *Chto uvidela Zuleikha, kogda otkrila glaza?* [What did Zuleikha see when she opened her eyes?]. "Kazanskiye Vedomosti." Accessed January 15, 2021. <https://kazved.ru/news/chto-uvide-la-zuleyha-kogda-otkryla-glaza>; Habutdinova, Mileusha. *Esli posmotret' v glaza Zuleikhe...* [If one looks into Zuleikha's eyes...].* "Kaleb." Accessed December 20, 2020. <http://kalebtatar.ru/article/2813>.
- 36 Muhametrahivov, Alfred. "Zuleikha Otkrivaet Glaza" po-tatarski: "Eto ne prezentatsiya perevoda, a vecher zavisti" ["Zuleikha Opens Her Eyes" in Tatar: "It is not a presentation of the translation, but an evening of jealousy." "Business Gazeta." Accessed May 30, 2020. <https://www.business-gazeta.ru/article/312468>; Zaripov, Rustem. *Zuleikha otkrivaet glaza ili Guzel' - eto Prekrasnoye* [Zuleikha Opens Her Eyes or Guzel Means Beautiful]. "Zvezda Povolzhya." Accessed June 20, 2020. <http://rustemzaripov.blogspot.com/2015/12/blog-post.html>.
- 37 Naurzbaeva, Zira. "Zuleikha otkryvaet glaza": roman o modernizatsii? ["Zuleikha Opens Her Eyes": a novel about modernisation?]. "Express K." Accessed September 14, 2020. https://express-k.kz/news/kultura/expert/zuleykha_otkryvaet_glaza_roman_o_modernizatsii-107955.
- 38 Koryakin, Oleg. *Barrikady na Universitetskoy* [Barricades on Universitetskaya]. "Rossiyskaya Gazeta." Accessed October 11, 2020. <https://rg.ru/2018/10/11/reg-pfo/v-centre-kazani-sniali-epizod-filma-zulejha-otkryvaet-glaza.html>.
- 39 Mukhametova, Ruzilya. *Pochemu nekotorye tatarskiye artisty otkazalis' snimatsya v seriale "Zuleikha Otkrivaet Glaza"?* [Why did some Tatar artists refuse to appear in the TV series "Zuleikha Opens Her Eyes"?]. "Sobytiya." Accessed October 11, 2020. <https://sntat.ru/news/culture/03-11-2018/pochemu-nekotorye-tatarskie-artisty-otkazalis-snimatsya-v-seriale-zuleyha-otkryvaet-glaza-5643258>.
- 40 Chulpan Khamatova *soobschila ob oskorblenyakh iz-za seriala o raskulachivanii* [Chulpan Khamatova reported insults due to the series about dispossession]. "RBC Daily." Accessed November 16, 2020. <https://www.rb.c.ru/society/16/04/2020/5e984d7d9a7947dec34eb4e1>.

gave a major interview to a liberal media outlet where she called her critics “barbarians.”⁴¹ The series was also criticized by Muslim clerics in Russia, who demanded an apology for the fact that many of the Tatar prisoners in the GULAG had the “names of historical and current Muftis of Russia”⁴².

The criticisms from Tatarstan were invalidated by most of the media in the ‘center,’ including *Novaya Gazeta*, one of the most important media outlets of the “democratic opposition.”⁴³ The director of the series said that the book, together with the aforementioned Zakhar Prilepin’s *Abode*, is a “milestone” in that it “looks at our history from a completely different perspective”:

Because before it was always a discussion of who was right and who was wrong — white or red, Bolsheviks or kulaks, Russians or Tatars, for example. Certain oppositions. And here is a story about something else. Yes, there was a great historical disaster. [...] How do people live in such a situation? What are they doing?⁴⁴

Continuing this argument, the producer of the series said that they expected a negative reaction from “communists, fundamentalists in Tatarstan and a whole bunch of other people who deny the fact of forced dispossession.”⁴⁵ Art critic Andrey Erofeev expressed a similar idea:

Either they have already forgotten how to open their eyes, or propaganda gouged them out. Look, these are all fundamentalists – the ones who line up against this film. This is such barrack fundamentalist communism, Islamic fundamentalism – these are the people who invent a god for themselves: either Stalin or an Islamic god.⁴⁶

This position, which equalizes Stalinism with adherence to Islam and associates any demonstrations of non-Russian ethnic identity with fundamentalism, is representative of the discourse of many ‘liberals’ in Russia. Not only the supporter of the war in Ukraine Zakhar Prilepin⁴⁷ and islamophobic journalist Anastasia Mironova (who said that she lived with Tatars “and it is all true”)⁴⁸ celebrated the book, but also such important representatives of the

41 Khamatova, Chulpan. “*Nevezhestvo vseгда peremeshano s varvarstvom i agressiei*” [“Ignorance is always mixed with barbarity and aggression”]. “*Novaya Gazeta*.” Accessed November 4, 2020. <https://novyagazeta.ru/articles/2020/04/17/84946-chulpan-hamatova-nevezhestvo-vsegda-peremesheno-s-varvarstvom-i-agressiei>.

42 Fatykhova, Nuriya. *Zuleikha protiv Zuleikhi* [Zuleikha against Zuleikha]. “Colta.” Accessed July 8, 2020. <https://www.colta.ru/articles/art/24311-spory-o-zuleyhe-i-sovetskiy-imperializm>.

43 Maluykova, Larisa. *Vremennno Svobodnye* [Temporary Liberated]. “*Novaya Gazeta*.” Accessed October 13, 2020. <https://novyagazeta.ru/articles/2020/04/04/84704-vremennno-svobodnye>.

44 Medvedev, Sergey, Guzel’ Yakhina, et. al. *Obizhennyye Zuleikhoy* [Offended by Zuleikha]. “Radio Svoboda.” Accessed April 30, 2020. <https://www.svoboda.org/a/30568741.html?fbclid=IwAR2YOgm-2YZ6ePuSVcbltZAnSoCZqzc38n-7tifeBLaQOUkVE3slVyVLqtk>.

45 *Zuleikha otkrivayet ne tol’ko glaza, no i dveri* [Zuleikha opens not only eyes, but doors]. “Biznes Onlain.” Accessed May 18, 2020. <https://www.business-gazeta.ru/article/382595>.

46 Medvedev, Sergey, Guzel’ Yakhina, et. al. *Obizhennyye Zuleikhoy* [Offended by Zuleikha]. “Radio Svoboda.” Accessed April 30, 2020. <https://www.svoboda.org/a/30568741.html?fbclid=IwAR2YOgm-2YZ6ePuSVcbltZAnSoCZqzc38n-7tifeBLaQOUkVE3slVyVLqtk>.

47 *Prilepin: roman “Zuleikha otkrivayet glaza” rekomenduyu vsem!* [Prilepin: I recommend the novel “Zuleikha Opens Her Eyes” to everyone!]. “NSN.” Accessed October 11, 2020. <https://nsn.fm/culture/culture-prilepin-roman-zuleykha-otkryvaet-glaza-rekomenduyu-vsem>.

48 Post by Mironova was deleted: <https://www.facebook.com/ns.mironowa/posts/3702538489821466>.

Russian opposition as singer Andrey Makarevich⁴⁹ or journalist and writer Sergey Medvedev. The latter said in an interview that those Tatars who criticize the series try to create a myth about “happy wealthy peasants,” while in fact both Tatar and Russian villages were equally patriarchal.⁵⁰ This idea seems to echo the approach of Etkind’s *Internal Colonization* (2003), in which all peasants in Russia were similarly oppressed regardless of other aspects of their identity.

In the ‘West,’ the colonial aspect of the book was also not noticed. As Danielle Ross re- [31] marked, this exemplified the general behavior of ‘Western’ critics who are “crowning non-European authors ‘the voice of their people’ on the basis that their books are available in European languages and distributed through major international presses,”⁵¹ thus silencing the actual diversity of indigenous voices. Zuleikha was positively received by *New York Times* and *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*⁵². A reviewer from France called the appearance of the novel “the return of great Russian literature”⁵³. The presentations of the book in Germany happened on state-affiliated platforms such as “Russian House of Science and Culture” in Berlin.⁵⁴ This suggests that Russia has invested some effort into promoting Yakhina abroad. An article from one of these presentations describes a meeting of Yakhina with her readers in Munich. A quote by one of the visitors reflects the dominant ignorance of the erasure and homogenization of non-Russian peoples of the former USSR:

Until now I always mixed up Tatars with those Kazakhs... [a neighbor enters the conversation] Well, because both these and those dance with sabres. And after this meeting I won’t mix them up anymore...⁵⁵ [32]

Even more surprising was the reaction of the British critic of Uzbek origin Hamid Ismailov, [33]

49 Makarevich, Andrey. *Chto zhe za von’ podnyalas’ vokrug fil’ma?* [What kind of stench has gone up around the movie?]. “Ekho Moskvyy.” Accessed November 12, 2020. https://echo.msk.ru/blog/a/_makarevich/2628384-echo/.

50 Medvedev, Sergey, Guzel’ Yakhina, et. al. *Obizhennyye Zuleikhoy* [Offended by Zuleikha]. “Radio Svoboda.” Accessed April 30, 2020. <https://www.svoboda.org/a/30568741.html?fbclid=IwAR2YOgm-2YZ6ePuSVCbtlZAnSoCZqzc38n-7tifeBLaQOUkVE3slVylqtk>.

51 Ross, Danielle. *Back to Stalinism and its tropes? Islam and Europe in Zuleikha Opens her Eyes*. OEAW. Accessed April 24, 2022. https://www.oew.ac.at/sice/sice-blog/back-to-stalinism-and-its-tropes-islam-and-europe-in-zuleikha-opens-her-eyes?fbclid=IwAR2rGYxny3oXWZqcoz8a6vEyszVufwUKFK6gwsnKcNesdA_W1a/_h_WTHGkE.

52 Holm, Kerstin. *Angst vor der eigenen Geschichte* [The fear of one’s own history]. “Frankfurter Allgemeine.” Accessed August 25, 2020. <https://www.faz.net/aktuell/feuilleton/medien/streit-um-serie-suleika-oeffnet-die-augen-16738944.html>; Prose, Francine. *Exiled to Siberia: A First Novel Revisits Stalin’s Great Purge*. “New York Times.” Accessed October 22, 2020. <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/03/01/books/review/guzel-yakhina-zuleikha.html>; Shihatova, Rusina. “V eto godu vo Frantsii zagovorili o vozvrashchenii velikoy russkoy literatury” [“This year in France they started talking about the return of the great Russian literature”]. “Les Media.” Accessed December 20, 2020. <https://les.media/articles/495461-v-etom-godu-vo-frantsii-zagovorili-o-vozhrashchenii-velikoy-russkoy-literatury>.

53 Shihatova, Rusina. “V eto godu vo Frantsii zagovorili o vozvrashchenii velikoy russkoy literatury” [“This year in France they started talking about the return of the great Russian literature”]. “Les Media.” Accessed December 20, 2020. <https://les.media/articles/495461-v-etom-godu-vo-frantsii-zagovorili-o-vozhrashchenii-velikoy-russkoy-literatury>.

54 Usmanova, Chulpan. *Guzel’ Yakhina v Germanii: vecher v Berline i uchastie vo Frankfurtskoy yarmarke* [Guzel Yakhina in Germany: evening in Berlin and participation in the Frankfurt fair]. “Русское Поле.” Accessed October 10, 2020. <http://ruskoepole.de/ru/rubriki/kultura/98-2009-11-26-20-00-40/4097-guzel-yakhina-v-germanii.html>; *Literaturnyi vecher Guzel’ Yakhinoy v Russkom Dome v Berline 10 yanvarya 2020* [Guzel Yakhina Literary Evening at the Russian House in Berlin January 10, 2020]. “DG Berlin.” Accessed November 1, 2020. <https://dg-berlin.eu/afisha/gusel-jachina-10-01-2020/>.

55 Niberlein, Svetlana. “Ya ne povtoryayu opyt zhenskikh sudeb svoey sem’iy” [“I don’t repeat the female fates in my family”]. “Idel. Realii.” Accessed May 22, 2020. <https://www.idelreal.org/a/29019136.html>.

who proposed to compare Yakhina to British postcolonial writers Naipaul, Walcott, Rushdie, Achebe and Thiong'o (2016). It is impossible to say this about a book that keeps on "presenting the Russian protagonist as the universal subject" (Anisimova 2017, 3), thus remaining "true to the tradition of literary Orientalism."⁵⁶ In her justification and even glorification of the Soviet modernization of "backward" nations, Yakhina can be compared to such Soviet "national" writers as Yuri Ryhteu and Fazil Iskander, whom "Moscow was praising as a part of the project of total Russification of non-Russian peoples."⁵⁷ Just as the USSR promoted "national cultural figures by bringing them into the center" (Anisimova 2017, 4), contemporary Russia uses the seemingly Tatar *Zuleikha* to justify its imperialism. The fact that the works of "ethnically diverse writers from the Caucasus and Central Asia, such as Andrei Volos, a Russian writer from Tajikistan, the Dagestani writer Alisa Ganieva, and the Chechen writer German Sadulaev" (Anisimova 2017, 16) have never gained such success as *Zuleikha* also proves the conformist nature of the book.

The reviews that look over a decolonial analysis of the book also exist. Some examples are a short blog post by Danielle Ross⁵⁸, who in the end appeals to the 'Western' scholars who praise anything non-Russian without spending enough time on thorough analysis of the local situation, as well as an article by Nuriya Fatykhova⁵⁹, who focuses on the critique of the Russian liberals. Both articles briefly mention, but do not discuss in detail, the facet of the book which requires more elaboration: the gender aspect of *Zuleikha*. The next chapter looks at the book from an intersectional feminist perspective as a necessary alternative to the positions of the critics from the 'center.'

From Darkness to Light: The Making of a Soviet Woman

As one reviewer observed, *Zuleikha* is a story of "unveiling of the woman of the Orient."⁶⁰ Yakhina confirmed that this narrative was central to her book:

The plot is about a worldview based on mythology. A Tatar peasant called Zuleikha lives in an isolated, dark world, which combines faith in Allah, stories about brownies and spirits and the patriarchy. If not for the circumstances that force her to enter the modern world, she would have gone on to live in what was essentially the Middle Ages.⁶¹

56 Fatykhova, Nuriya. *Zuleikha protiv Zuleikhi* [Zuleikha against Zuleikha]. "Colta." Accessed July 8, 2020. <https://www.colta.ru/articles/art/24311-spory-o-zuleyhe-i-sovetskiy-imperializm>.

Natsmen, natsmenka, natsionalka—words used to describe non-Russian inhabitants of the USSR.

57 Bekkin, Renat. *Mokraya kuritsa tatarskoy literatury ili kogo predala Zuleikha?* [Wet hen of Tatar literature or whom did Zuleikha betray?]. "Sibirskie Ogni." Accessed July 20, 2020. <http://www.sibogni.ru/content/mokraya-kuritsa-tatarskoy-literatury-ili-kogo-predala-zuleyha>.

58 Ross, Danielle. *Back to Stalinism and its tropes? Islam and Europe in Zuleikha Opens her Eyes*. OEAW. Accessed April 24, 2022. https://www.oeaw.ac.at/sice/sice-blog/back-to-stalinism-and-its-tropes-islam-and-europe-in-zuleikha-opens-her-eyes?fbclid=IwAR2rGYxny3oXWZqcoz8a6vEyszVufwUKFK6gwsnKcNEsdA_W1a/_h/_WTHGkE.

59 Fatykhova, Nuriya. *Zuleikha protiv Zuleikhi* [Zuleikha against Zuleikha]. "Colta." Accessed July 8, 2020. <https://www.colta.ru/articles/art/24311-spory-o-zuleyhe-i-sovetskiy-imperializm>.

60 Babitskaya, Varvara. "Zuleikha otkrivaet glaza" *Guzel' Yakhinoy: spetsposeleniye kak spaseniye* ["Zuleikha Opens Her Eyes" by Guzel Yakhina: special settlement as salvation]. "Afisha Daily." Accessed June 20, 2020. <https://daily.afisha.ru/archive/vozduh/books/zuleyha-otkryvaet-glaza-guzel-yahinoy-specposelenie-kak-spasenie/>.

61 Original translation. *Guzeva, Alexandra. Zuleikha kaka semeynaya istoriya Yakhinoy* [Zuleikha as Yakhina's family history]. "God Literatry." Accessed April 25, 2020. <https://godliteratry.ru/projects/zuleykha-kak-semeynaya-istoriya-yakhinoy>.

In this quote we see a colonial fusion of space and time—while Tatarstan represents “the Middle Ages,” the exile of Zuleikha in Siberia is part of “the modern world.” Having been forcefully deported by the Soviets, Zuleikha forgets her dead Tatar husband and falls in love with the Russian man who killed him. Collectivization and exile for her turn into a journey from an “enslaved woman of the Orient” to an emancipated ‘Western’ subject—economically independent and sexually open. This is how the author describes the development of Zuleikha: [37]

The story is about overcoming mythological consciousness. Zuleikha lives in a closed, rather gloomy, but understandable world [...] and suddenly becomes torn out of her surroundings, so to say, transferred from the past to the present...⁶² [38]

Here again Yakhina expresses a colonial understanding of space and time, in which certain locales are positioned at the forefront of the linear axis of progress while other places, like Tatarstan, have to forever catch up. The “progress” her heroine goes through is the process of the erasure of her Tatar background: [39]

At first, she is a downtrodden peasant woman who lives in her own world – in the beginning there is a lot of Tatar ‘colorite’ – then it gradually disappears and in the end is completely absent, because Zuleikha has changed and her worldview as well. She begins to speak Russian, as there are only Russians around her. She starts to love a Russian man, she gives birth to her son, Yusuf, who most of the time speaks Russian.⁶³ [40]

Interestingly, Yakhina does not call the culture that Zuleikha adapts “Soviet”—it is described as “Russian.” Thus, the author unconsciously confirms the colonial nature of the USSR. However, in another interview Yakhina contradicts herself, calling the Soviet project “multi-national:” [41]

I wanted something national to transform into something multinational. The novel is not about a Tatar woman, but women in general. Not about a Russian man, but about men in general.⁶⁴ [42]

The book shows us how coloniality is intertwined with and works through gender. As Slezkine (2017) writes, in all colonial projects the relationship towards women was one of the key elements through which the difference of “civilized” and “barbaric” peoples was constructed. The USSR also shared this approach. Though a big role in the imposition of new authority was given to fighting the practices that oppressed all women, the policies differed in ‘Russian’ and non-‘Russian’ regions. An ethnic minority woman was called *natsionalka*, *natsmenka* (national minority woman) and *vostochnitsa* (woman of the Orient), “indicating the particular importance of the cross-section of gender and national identity” (Gradskova 2019, [43]

62 Ivanycheva, Olga. *Guzel' Yakhina: "Mne ne hotelos' by sorevnovaniya s soboy"* [Guzel Yakhina: “I would not want a competition with myself”]. “Lit-ra.info.” Accessed March 12, 2020. <https://lit-ra.info/intervyu/guzel-yakhina-mne-ne-khotelos-by-sorevnovatsya-s-soboy/>.

63 Sharafiev, Ilnur. *Guzel' Yakhina: "U menya est' chetkoe otnoshenie k figure Stalina i periody ego pravleniya"* [Guzel Yakhina: “I have a clear attitude to the figure of Stalin and the period of his reign”].* “Biznes Onlain.” Accessed November 15, 2020. <https://www.business-gazeta.ru/article/144322>.

64 Mikhailova, Natalya. *Guzel' Yakhina: "Ko mne uzhe obraschayutsya – Zuleikha"* [Guzel Yakhina: “They already address me with Zuleykha”]. “Ulpressa.” Accessed January 12, 2021. <https://ulpressa.ru/2017/01/11/guzel-yahina-ko-mne-uzhe-obrashhayutsya-zuleykha/>.

5). Saying that the book is about women “in general,” Yakhina tries to erase this intersection. However, it is impossible not to see it knowing that “emancipation of the woman of the Orient” became a crucial component of achieving the “victory over backwardness” and “freedom for dominated nationalities” (Gradskova 2019, 2) brought by “the Soviet ‘emancipators’ mainly marked by their Russian and Christian Orthodox origin” (Gradskova 2019, 15).

“Dissertations, books, and articles on the Soviet emancipation of *natsionalka* used to stress the leading role of the Communist Party, and remarks expressing the gratitude of the “emancipated” were also frequent” (Gradskova 2019, 8). This denied the earlier achievements of local women who advocated for equality from an Islamic perspective. According to Gradskova, Muslim intellectuals from the Volga-Ural region were active and included in the global discussions on the future of Muslim nations in the beginning of the twentieth century (Gradskova 2019, 16). One of the most important debates was about gender equality and “the right to education for girls and women” (Gradskova 2019, 38):

In the situation of growing Russification [...] along with the general radicalization of the situation in Russia, the connections between woman’s education, women’s rights, and the future progress of the nation were brought up by the Muslim politicians more frequently. (Gradskova 2019, 42) [45]

In 1911, a Tatar women’s rights activist, Mukhlisa Bubi, opened a school for preparing Muslim women to be teachers, which the Russian authorities later closed down, believing “that giving Muslim girls a modern education represented a danger to the imperial politics in the region” (Gradskova 2019, 42). “The discussions on self-determination, modernization and solutions to the woman’s question became radicalized in the Volga-Ural region in 1917” (Gradskova 2019, 51). Magazines for women “discussed the importance of progress and education and informed readers about new educational initiatives for women” (Gradskova 2019, 51); The First Muslim Women’s Congress was organized in Kazan, which “referred to Muslim law, to sharia, in order to claim women’s equal rights with men’s” (Gradskova 2019, 52). The Soviet state erased the memory of this event, which was described as “attended mainly by the ‘bourgeois intelligentsia’” (Gradskova 2019, 75). Similarly erased were all women who were actively trying to change the policies of Czarist Russia and often took part in the early Soviet reforms (Schurko 2016). [46]

The activists who did not lose their identities but devoted their lives to fighting for women’s rights from a national and Muslim perspective, like Mukhlisa Bubi, “experienced mass arrests, death and, often, total erasure from the official Soviet history documents” (Gradskova 2019, 62). The erasure of local activists from the history of emancipation “was an important condition for unlimited and unchallengeable reproduction of the Soviet narrative on Bolshevik emancipation of the ‘backward’ *natsionalka*” (Gradskova 2019, 62). Women of ‘national minorities’ internalized this discourse: [47]

The Tatar historian Alta Makhmutova remembered that while she was a PhD student in history in the late 1960s she could not believe that in the 1910s the Tatars could have considered the education of women to be very important and that they had created a special Muslim high school for Tatar girls. (Gradskova 2019, 3) [48]

As Gradskova notes, all actors advocating for gender equality, “imperial officers and enlighteners, Muslim intellectuals, and some orientologists,” approached it “through the lens of the [49]

developmental paradigm” (Gradszkova 2019, 44). However, Muslim reformism, jadidism, differed from both the approach of the “imperial enlighteners” and the Soviet “civilizing projects for inorodtsy women.” While the latter saw this as a way to assimilate or diminish the influence of Islam on the non-Russian population, Muslim intellectuals saw improvement of the situation for women as the condition for “progress of the nation” and resistance against Russification and Christianization” (Gradszkova 2019, 44). While Jadids uplifted Muslim women, the Soviet authorities, “closely following European Orientalist scripts, [...] described [them] as subordinate, practically reducing them to slaves” (Gradszkova 2019, 73).

The pamphlet on Tatar women, for example, stated: ‘Similar to other Muslim nations, the Tatar woman is deprived of many freedoms, social life and the possibility of obtaining an education or having independent work is totally closed to her.’ (Gradszkova 2019, 73–74) [50]

As we see, Yakhina repeats this narrative when describing the life of Zuleikha in Tatarstan. The Bolshevik approach to Tatar women positioned them as oppressed mostly due to Islam, which Gradszkova describes as “the common feature of European civilization discourse of the time” (Gradszkova 2019, 74). The same discourse is present today, according to Uzarashvili (2021): Islamophobia, a new kind of racism, is hitting women especially hard. Omel’chenko and Sabirova confirm this thought: [51]

The gender question – or more strictly the positioning of women with regard to men within the Islamic community – is a central tenet of both popular and academic thinking about Islam. For some, images of the ‘veil’, shariat divorce laws, polygyny and the confinement of women are symbols of a harsh and restrictive regime. (Omel’chenko, Pilkington, et al. 2003, 242) [52]

Omel’chenko and Sabirova believe that “Russian sociological literature” has failed “to explore fully the intersection of gender and Islam in Russia” (2003, 242). Their own research has demonstrated that there is a “rising interest in Islamic gender norms as the Tatar population seeks to express its national identity” (2003, 242). According to their study, “notions of being a Muslim woman in Tatarstan consisted primarily in their differentiation from the Russian ‘other’ in terms of perceived moral ‘standards’ as well as domestic practices, with little evidence of any real impact of the idealized ‘Muslim woman’ on everyday gender relations” (2003, 245). As Omel’chenko and Sabirova note, actual gender practices in Tatarstan continue “to borrow heavily from ‘Western’ models of relations between men and women” (2003, 242). Nevertheless, the Russian media demonizes the “revival of religion (first of all Islam) and the growing importance of the local national traditions and customs [by portraying them] as preventing women from fully exercising their rights” (Gradszkova 2019, 4). Zuleikha fits well into this narrative, contrasting Islam and Soviet atheist emancipation. This kind of binary has long been criticized by ‘third world’ feminists, post- and decolonial feminists and feminists of color as an example of “white saviorism” (Zakaria 2021). [53]

In the interviews, Yakhina denied any connection of the book to feminism, as well as the necessity of feminism in general—she perceived it as irrelevant in contemporary Russia, because in “Russia, women have been emancipated for a long time.”⁶⁵ However, in fact her book [54]

65 Lomykina, Natalia. *Vse, chto vam stoit znat' o Guzel' Zakhinoy* [All you need to know about Guzel Yakhina]. “GQ.” Accessed October 15, 2020. <https://www.gq.ru/success/guzel-yahina>.

repeats the rhetoric of some Russian feminists who blame discrimination of women in Muslim regions on Islam and not on the local histories of colonialism and inequality (Solovey 2019). A different position is expressed by Islamic feminism, a line of thought developed in the 1990s by such scholars as Leila Ahmed, Fatima Mernissi and Amina Wadud (Seedat 2013, 26) to prove that Islam is compatible with demands for equality between men and women (Anwar 2018, 7). In Russia, Islamic feminism is represented by, for instance, Natalia Tambieva, the Chief of the Spiritual Administration of Muslims in St. Peterburg, or Liaisian Shafigullina, who studies women's organizing in Tatarstan in the twentieth century and today at Kazan Federal University. Islamic feminism demonstrates that feminism "is the product neither of the East and the West nor of the religious and the secular, but a combination of both" (Anwar 2018, 7). It also shows that it is not necessary to conform to the narrative of *Zuleikha's* inevitable secularization and Russification for the sake of 'progress.'

In her article, Fatykhova mentions a play by Gayaz Iskhāqī which, she believes, Yakhina referred to when writing her book. This play, written in the 1910s to commemorate the Christianisation of Volga Tatars in the nineteenth century, presents a Tatar woman who is forced to marry a Russian man, declared Christian and made to change her name. Unable to cope with this, she attempts to commit suicide. This play was prohibited in the USSR and has still not regained its popularity in the conditions of Russian (neo-)colonialism⁶⁶. In comparison to Iskhāqī's *Zuleikha*, as well as to the "Qūl 'Alī's *Yūsuf kitābī* (The Book of Joseph) mentioned by Ross,⁶⁷ *Zuleikha* of Yakhina portrays the 'Sovietization' and 'Russification' of Tatar women as beneficial for them. As Gradskova has demonstrated:

The realization of the Soviet emancipation of natsionalka from the imperial center, together with silence and the extermination of the ideas and supporters of all the other projects, converted the Soviet emancipation into one more project of imperial domination. (Gradskova 2019, 190–91)

Zuleikha, by supporting this imperial narrative, fits well into the politics of contemporary Russia, which are grounded in the imperialism of both Czarist Russia and the USSR. These politics require criticism, which, as this article has shown, does not come from the liberal intellectual elites. However, there is a segment of Russian society which has long been reflexive of it—namely decolonial feminists, who are also mentioned in the conclusion of this article.

Conclusion: Decolonial Futures

This article attempted to demonstrate that the book *Zuleikha Opens Her Eyes* (Yakhina 2015) supports Russian (neo-)colonialism and (neo-)imperialism. The contemporary Russian state, in an attempt to maintain and enlarge its territory, is aggressively violating the territorial integrity of other counties and at the same time tries to erase its own inner coloniality. In relation to Tatarstan, this means presenting its "historical experience and present religious situation [...] as an emulable embodiment of multi-ethnic and multi-confessional harmony" (Khurmatullin 2010, 103). The image of the harmonious "coexistence of Russians and Tatars"

66 Fatykhova, Nuriya. *Zuleikha protiv Zuleikhi* [Zuleikha against Zuleikha]. "Colta." Accessed July 8, 2020. <https://www.colta.ru/articles/art/24311-spory-o-zuleyhe-i-sovetskiy-imperializm>.

67 Ross, Danielle. *Back to Stalinism and its tropes? Islam and Europe in Zuleikha Opens her Eyes*. OEAW. Accessed April 24, 2022. https://www.oew.ac.at/sice/sice-blog/back-to-stalinism-and-its-tropes-islam-and-europe-in-zuleikha-opens-her-eyes?fbclid=IwAR2rGYxny3oXWZqcoz8a6vEyszVufvUKFK6gwsnKcNEsDA/_W1a/_h/_WTHGkE.

(Omel'chenko, Pilkington, et al. 2003, 274) is strengthened by such cultural projects as the podcast *Brief history of Tatars*⁶⁸ sponsored by the *Tatneft* corporation with Chulpan Khamatova, who played the main role in the *Zuleikha* series. In the podcast, she cites Yakhina and claims that Russians and Tatars historically cannot exist without each other. Both the book and the series present Soviet colonialism and the erasure of national and religious subjectivity as a universal formula of emancipation.

The ideology of the Russian Federation and its attitude towards national minorities, their languages and cultures, is a continuation of the colonialism of Russian Empire and the USSR. Russia's aggressive imperialist expansionism, which in 2022 culminated in a full-scale attack on Ukraine, coexists with the ignorance of the coloniality of Russian history by liberal public intellectuals. The fears about Russia's territorial integrity and the rise of ethnic nationalism are entangled with "the new collective anxieties of Russian society" (Anisimova 2017, 2) connected with 'radical' Islam and 'Western' imperialism: [59]

The collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991 significantly reduced the formal territorial control exercised by Moscow, but the legacies of imperial expansion remain evident in the restive Muslim communities of the North Caucasus and in the large-scale migration of Central Asian Muslims into post-Soviet Russia. (Dannreuther 2010, 9) [60]

As Schmoller and Di Puppo write, "experts assume that by 2050 the Muslim share of the Russian population will amount to more than one third" (2018, 84). However, Russian intellectuals continue to promote "the so-called 'civilizational nationalism,' largely based on the primacy of Orthodox Christianity [and] concerned about the 'Islamic threat'" (Verkhovsky 2010, 31). [61]

The "Islamic threat" is widely used for the justification of expansionist politics [in Syria or Central Asia], quite similarly to the use of "Pan-Islamism" in the past. At the same time, the Russian pro-government press openly criticizes European multiculturalism, and constantly reminds about the "Muslim threat" to European culture. (Gradskova 2019, 187) [62]

Any expression of the Tatar national consciousness by the liberal intellectuals is therefore labeled as religious extremism⁶⁹. Their fears for the territorial integrity of contemporary Russia prove their complicity in its aggressive foreign policy as well as in the racist and colonial attitude towards its own citizens. As Gradskova writes, "the failure of democratic reforms and the economic crises in Russia made the narratives on the 'great Soviet past' attractive once again [...] however, after 1991, 'generosity' and 'sacrifice' were attributed mainly not to the Bolshevik party, Lenin, or Stalin, but to the Russian people (*russki narod*)" (Gradskova 2019, 3–4). Russian liberals help to maintain the status quo when the country is portrayed as "above all the homeland of ethnic Russians" (Tolz 2017) and when they fail to see the problematic aspects of such cultural products as *Zuleikha*. In the same way, after the outbreak of the war in Ukraine they keep denying that the main reason of the war is Russian and Soviet [63]

68 *Kratkaya istoriya tatar* [Short history of Tatars]. "Arzamas." Accessed October 18, 2020. <https://arzamas.academy/courses/65>.

69 Ibid.

colonialism, not just “Putin’s regime”⁷⁰. In order to transform Russian society, other ideas must become more visible—those critical of the Russian and Soviet coloniality. These ideas have long been promoted by decolonial feminist activists. The unprecedented mobilization and enlargement of indigenous grassroots movements in Russia⁷¹ in the aftermath of the war gives hope that their voices will become louder than those of liberal intellectuals, bringing closer the decolonization of Russia.

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70 Most of the public events that reflect on the collective responsibility of Russians in the war do not include non-Russian speakers and represent an imperialist view on the ‘periphery’ from the ‘center.’ For instance, Leonid Volkov, the member of the team of Alexey Navalny, straight after criticizing Putin, started to talk about his fears of Chechen separatism (see a post by a Chechen Telegram channel 1ADAT: <https://t.me/1ADAT/12658>). Such attitudes can be traced back to the positions of the Soviet liberal intelligentsia (Djagalov 2021; Distributed Cognition Cooperative 2021).

71 After the invasion of Russia into Ukraine numerous new national movements have appeared (Buryats against War, Sakha against War etc.) and the existing ones became more visible.

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