
ФИЛОЛОГИЯ
PHILOLOGYDOI: [10.17805/ggz.2018.6.13](https://doi.org/10.17805/ggz.2018.6.13)**Empire's Erotic Conquests: Circassian Women
in Russian Romantic Literature***L. S. Zhigunova**Tulane University, New Orleans, USA*

The article examines the dialectical encounter between imperial Russia and its Caucasian Others in the texts of Russian Romantic writers Aleksandr Pushkin (1799–1837) and Mikhail Lermontov (1814–1841). It aims at deconstructing the colonial discourse and the Orientalized images of Circassian women in nineteenth-century Russian canonical literature through the prism of “secondary Orientalism” and “imperial difference.”

The article demonstrates that the representation of “the native woman” within the Russian colonial discourse as the exotic “other,” sexual, sensual and attractive, clearly stems from the European tradition. Circassian women, as is often the case with colonized subjects, were framed, often simultaneously, as innocents in need of protection, as “primitives” in need of civilizing, and as deviants. The resulting construction of gender difference, and particularly the notion of submissiveness that has marked so much of the colonial literature, during the colonization of the Caucasus helped to construct and maintain the ideological, economic, and political power of colonizing elites. In both Pushkin’s and Lermontov’s writings about the Caucasus, we find a plot of cross-cultural romance between the Russian protagonist and the Circassian female character. Such narratives are typical of colonial texts that represent the conflict between the colonizer and the colonized in terms of cross-cultural or cross-racial affairs. However, in Russian canonical texts such “romances” never culminate in a “happy relationship” or in an inter-cultural marriage.

Keywords: A. S. Pushkin; M. Yu. Lermontov; Circassian women; colonial texts; Orientalism; Russian literature

Эротические завоевания империи: черкесские женщины в русской романтической литературе

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В статье рассматривается диалектика взаимоотношений между имперской Россией и Кавказом в произведениях русских писателей-романтиков Александра Сергеевича Пушкина (1799–1837) и Михаила Юрьевича Лермонтова (1814–1841). Основное внимание в статье уделяется деконструированию колониального дискурса и ориентализированных образов черкесских женщин в русской канонической литературе XIX века через призму «вторичной империи».

В статье анализируются образы черкешенок, представленных в русской литературе как экзотичных, чувственных красавиц, таким образом продолжающих традиции западного ориентализма. В произведениях Пушкина и Лермонтова о Кавказе мы находим сюжет межкультурного романа между русским героем и черкесским женским персонажем. Такие нарративы типичны для колониальных текстов, которые представляют собой конфликт между колонизатором и колонизированным с точки зрения межкультурных или межрасовых отношений. Однако в русских романтических текстах такие «романсы» никогда не заканчиваются «счастливыми отношениями» или межкультурным браком. Черкесский женский персонаж всегда сначала покоряется русскому герою, а потом и вовсе стирается из повествования — ее жизнь обычно заканчивается смертью, либо путем самоубийства, либо от руки «горцев», ее же собственных соотечественников.

Ключевые слова: А. С. Пушкин; М. Ю. Лермонтов; черкесские женщины; колониальные тексты; ориентализм; русская литература

INTRODUCTION

Russia's literary engagement with the Caucasus began in the eighteenth century, reaching its heyday in the nineteenth century during the Romantic period. Much has been written on the connection between Russian literature and empire, and specifically on the way the Caucasus has contributed to the formation of Russian national, as well as imperial consciousness (Layton, 1994; Hokanson, 1994; Ram, 2003). The military conquest of the Caucasus coincided with the rise of Russian Romanticism, a cultural phenomenon that imitated the Western European fas-

cination with the “Orient.” Circassian women and the Circassian beauty myth were first mentioned in the Western Orientalist discourses before they became central to the colonial drama in nineteenth-century Russian literature. This colonial drama, played out in a series of tragic literary encounters between the Russian protagonists and Circassian women, suggested that the ideology of gender and sexuality was also an integral part of the Russian imperialist-nationalist projects of the nineteenth century. The resulting construction of gender difference during the Russian colonization of the Caucasus helped to construct and maintain the ideological, economic, and political power of colonizing elites. The article aims at deconstructing the colonial discourse and the Orientalized images of Circassian women in nineteenth-century Russian canonical literature through the prism of “secondary Orientalism” and “imperial difference,” terms introduced by the decolonial critic Madina Tlostanova. According to Tlostanova, Russia’s complicated colonial-imperial configuration has helped to create a “caricature secondary Orientalism” in Russia’s colonies in the Caucasus and Central Asia:

The very encoding of Caucasus as part of the prototypical Orient — biologically inferior, culturally backwards and forever fixed and fallen out of history, which we can clearly see in the art, memoirs, and particularly in Russian 19th century fiction, signalizes the deep interiorization in the Russian imperial consciousness of the borrowed European discourses, including the Orientalist clichés (Tlostanova, 2008: 1–2).

Two major Russian Romantic texts, Aleksandr Pushkin’s narrative poem *The Prisoner of the Caucasus* (1822) and Mikhail Lermontov’s short story *Bela* from his novel *A Hero of Our Time* (1840) that I analyze in this article present the story of a colonial encounter between the Russian protagonist and the native Circassian woman. On the one hand, the renderings of the Caucasus and the Circassian woman in these texts highlight Russia’s fascination with the Western European Orientalist tradition. On the other hand, they demonstrate the way in which the Western Orientalist discourse has been transmuted in the Russian imperial consciousness. There were major differences in the representation of the Caucasus, and Circassians in particular, in Western and Russian imperialist discourses: Western Europeans stressed similarities (the Caucasian race, the “cradle of civilization,” the affinity between the ancient Greeks and the Caucasians), whereas Russians did not mention those traits. Instead they emphasized the dissimilarities: they

“Asianized” the Caucasus, calling all inhabitants of the region “Asiatics” and applied in a reverse and twisted way the same discourse by which they viewed themselves as Europeanized or Westernized. This constructed contrast helped Russians to confirm their European identity and to see Russian culture as a more superior culture vis-à-vis the culture of Circassians. Tlostanova summarizes this difference between the image of Circassians in the West and in Russia as follows: “...for Russians the Circassian myth was based on complete othering and annihilation, for the West it was based on commodification and exotization. Both regarded the Caucasus people as dispensable lives” (Tlostanova, 2010: 85).

WESTERN AND RUSSIAN VARIANTS OF ORIENTALISM

First, let us consider the differences between Western and Russian variants of Orientalism. Many critics have pointed out that one cannot uncritically apply Edward Said’s model of Orientalism, which is concerned with the modes of representation common to [post]colonialism, to the case of the Russian Empire and its colonies. Focusing on the “Orient’s special place in European Western experience,” Said claims that France and Britain have a “long tradition of Orientalism” manifested in their representations of North Africa and Middle East, and suggests that the Germans and the Russians have it to a lesser extent (Said, 1979: 1). At the heart of Said’s *Orientalism* lies the notion that the discursive production is a production of power, an insight derived from Michel Foucault. To describe or represent means to include or exclude, in other words — to contain. From this standpoint Said approaches Europe’s preoccupation with the East and maintains that the Orient itself is the “imaginative production” of Europe. This imaginative act of representation is a constitutive element in the consolidation and justification of the imperial system. As Said suggests, the West needed to put an “Orientalist effort,” in order to make sense and restructure its relationship with Asia and Islam. According to this model, the Caucasus too had to be invented and re-invented in order to serve various ideological purposes, even nowadays. To an expanding Russia in the nineteenth-century, the North Caucasus “needed first to be known, then invaded and possessed, then re-created by scholars, soldiers, and judges who disinterred forgotten languages, histories, races, and cultures in order to posit them — beyond the modern Orient’s ken — as the true classical Orient that could be used to judge and rule the modern Orient” (ibid: 92). However, this is a simplified version, and the reality was much more complex in the case of Russian Orientalism.

Said's notion of Orientalism has been criticized largely because of its static binary oppositions regarding the inferiority (degeneracy) of the East and the superiority of the West. The Orient, according to Said, was defined as the "contrasting image" of the West. The critics of Orientalism, however, consider the possibility of the coexistence of Orientalist traits alongside counter-hegemonic currents in a single text. Homi Bhabha, for example, in *The Other Question* reconsiders the function of the stereotype in colonial discourse maintaining the view that "it is the force of ambivalence that gives the colonial stereotype its currency: ensures its repeatability in changing historical and discursive conjunctures..." (Bhabha, 1983: 18). By "ambivalence" Bhabha means the contradictory positioning of the "colonized subject" who is simultaneously inside (domesticated) and outside of Western culture, but never occupies a static position, as Said suggests in *Orientalism*. The "colonized subject," according to Bhabha is at the same time familiar and strange, domesticated and wild. This flexibility could only be retained with the help of stereotyping, i.e. describing the "colonized subject" in static terms. The repetition of the colonial stereotype is an attempt to secure the colonized in a fixed position.

Borrowing the concept of "Orientalism" from Edward Said, Austin Jersild in his *Orientalism and Empire: North Caucasus Mountain Peoples and the Georgian Frontier, 1845–1917* explains that the "colonizing power justifies its presence through its supposed role as the restorer of a pristine and Romanticized past" and acknowledges Russia's participation in "European mythmaking" (Jersild, 2002: 6). But he too argues that the Russian imperial experience demonstrates that Said's rigid opposition between East and West does not fully capture the experience of "cultural hybridity that necessarily informs both colonizing and colonized cultures" (Booker, 1997: 19). A similar view on Orientalism as applied to the Russian perception of the Caucasus is expressed by Susan Layton in her book *Russian Literature and Empire: Conquest of the Caucasus from Pushkin to Tolstoy*, which provides a synthesizing analysis of Russian writing about the Caucasus during the nineteenth-century in the context of empire-building. Layton's analysis includes not only Russian canonical texts but also the literary productions of the "little orientalizers" — "largely obscure Russian littérateurs who unreservedly underwrote war against the tribes" (Layton, 1994: 156). By focusing on the Russian perception of the Caucasus as the Orient, and the literature that engaged it as the Russian construction of self, Layton maintains the view that the Caucasus "upstaged its rivals in the oriental domain" (ibid: 1) due to Russia's Asiatic roots and its "semi-Europeanized" identity:

The literary Caucasus was largely the project of Russian men, whose psychological needs it so evidently served. However, both sexes within the romantic era's élite readership could enhance their national esteem by contemplating their internally diversified orient. Effeminate Georgia fed the conceit of Russia's European stature and superiority over Asia. But knowledge of Russia's own Asian roots defied permanent repression, especially when a French consul in Tiflis or a visiting marquis in St. Petersburg was ever ready to castigate the tsars' 'rude and barbarous kingdom'. Under these conditions, Russians converted the Caucasian tribes into gratifying meanings about their own undeniable cultural and intellectual retardation *vis-à-vis* the West (Layton, 1994: 288; italics in the original. — *L. Zh.*).

In another study, Layton directly addresses the question by arguing that Said's model of division between East and West is "ill-suited for inquiry into the role of Asian borderlands in Russian national and imperial consciousness":

In looking across a border, observers from a more powerful domain always construct 'others' to serve their own needs and may never gain insight into the foreigners' culture, nor recognize their right to sovereignty. But in Russian experience, the cognitive boundary between 'us' and the oriental 'others' often grew blurry because Asia interpenetrated Russia so extensively in geographical, historical, and cultural terms (Layton, 1997: 82).

She thus cautions the reader to be wary of Said's tendency to construe "otherness" as something inevitably inferior or alien in the eyes of the perceiver by claiming that Russians partially identified with their "noble savages."

Madina Tlostanova links the distortions in the Russian variant of Orientalism with the fact that Russia has been a "secondary empire of modernity marked with external imperial difference" (Tlostanova, 2010: 64). According to Tlostanova, as a result of "secondary Eurocentrism," in Russia we observe a "secondary Orientalism" that reflects and distorts the Western originals in Russian cultural and mental space:

Orientalist constructs in this case turn out not only more complex but also built on the principle of double mirror reflections, on copying of Western Orientalism with a slight deviation and necessarily, with a carefully hidden, often

unconscious sensibility that Russia itself is a form of mystic and mythic Orient for the West. As a result, both mirrors — the one turned in the direction of the colonies and the one turned by Europe in the direction of Russia — appear to be distorting mirrors that create a specific unstable sensibility of Russian intellectuals, writers, and artists (ibid).

This “unstable sensibility” or the “schizophrenic duality” of Russian imperial writers that was a direct result from the subaltern status of the Russian empire vis-à-vis the West, is evident in their representations and interpretations of the Caucasus and its people as Russia’s Orient. In both, Pushkin and Lermontov’s texts, we find instances of reverence and admiration for Circassians, as well as the glorification of Russia’s imperial might by both writers who supported the subjugation and annihilation of these people. Tlostanova argues that the difference between Western and Russian Orientalism also emanates from the fact that while both of them were the product of secular modernity, in Europe, Orientalism was “a successor of Christian modernity in its xenophobic tendencies and skillful legitimating of violence against the fallen out of history” (ibid: 65). In Russia, Orientalism did not have a previous model upon which to build its continuity, since “before borrowing the Western Orientalism, Russia did not have a developed tradition of othering the East. On the contrary, various links with the East, up to the blood links, were regarded quite favorably” (ibid). As an example of this, the intermarriage alliance between the Russian czar Ivan IV and the Circassian princess Guashaney, can be cited. The Russian-Circassian relations began as early as the sixteenth century with their marriage in 1561. Baptized as Maria, the daughter of the Kabardian prince Temriuk Idar, became the wife of the first “Tsar of all the Russians.” This started the rise of the Cherkassky dynasty that was prominent in the Russian government and the army. Thus, it was only in the nineteenth-century when Russia started the active orientalizing of its own internal others, twisting the European oriental models into colonial constructions that reflected Russian imperial consciousness.

*CIRCASSIAN WOMEN
IN PUSHKIN’S AND LERMONTOV’S WORKS*

The blend of Romanticism with the “exoticism” of the East that created British nineteenth-century Orientalism in the works of such poets as Robert Southey (1774–1843), Thomas Moore (1779–1852), and Lord Byron (1788–1824) had a

major influence on the development of Russian Romantic literature. Many commentators have discussed Russian Byronism and the influence of Byron's works on Pushkin's narrative poems, especially on *The Captive of the Caucasus* (Zhirmunskii / Жирмунский, 1978; first published in 1924). The Caucasus helped to establish a common ground between nineteenth-century Russian and European poets. As an example, in his celebrated Romantic work, *Don Juan* (1819–24), Byron makes a textual reference to Circassian Beauties, as he describes one of them as “a sweet girl,” a “virgin” as a purchase for the Sultan. This description of a Circassian girl in the Constantinople slave market appears in Canto IV verses 112 and 113 of Byron's poem. In Byron's earlier romantic poem *The Giaour* (1813), a Circassian girl named Leila is referred to as a swan, and her whiteness is clearly stressed in the poem — “thus rose fair Leila's whiter neck.” As these excerpts demonstrate, Byron was clearly conscious of the image of the Circassian woman as a commodified body on display — through her idealized beauty, her whiteness of skin and her slave status. Lermontov selected as the epigraph for his poem *Ismail Bey* (1832) a passage from Byron's *The Giaour*: “So moved on earth Circassia's daughter / The loveliest bird of Franguestan!”

Following the Byronic tradition, the Russian Romantics portrayed their Circassian female characters as deeply sexual and passionate, conforming to the ideals of the “Eastern/Southern beauty” (Andrew, 1993: 12). Most importantly, they portrayed them within the imperialist discourse as being physically and emotionally dependent upon [Russian] men and the myth of Romantic love. In both Pushkin's and Lermontov's narratives, the Circassian woman, depicted essentially in terms of her passion and sexuality, represents an embodiment of submissiveness and self-sacrifice. Pushkin's “Circassian maiden” and Lermontov's Bela are characterized by their “self-willed abandonment to sexual ecstasy” (ibid: 16). Both narratives introduce the Circassian woman as being either wordless, or as speaking the language of passion — or being imprisoned or captive, and ultimately dead.

The nineteenth-century Russian critic Vissarion Belinsky called Aleksandr Pushkin the “discoverer of the Caucasus,” and indeed, Pushkin's poem *The Prisoner of the Caucasus* (1822) introduced the broad Russian readership to a region that had been largely unknown to them before. As Susan Layton puts it, the poem “started the production of an imaginative geography which took a fierce hold on the readership” (Layton, 1994: 51). Emphasizing the importance of Pushkin's narrative poem in defining and popularizing the Caucasus, Belinsky also acknowledged the authenticity of the ethnographic material presented in the poem: “the

grandiose image of the Caucasus with its bellicose inhabitants was recreated for the first time in Russian poetry — and only in Pushkin’s poem did the Russian public become acquainted for the first time with the Caucasus...” (quoted in: Ram, 2005: 379). Thus, Belinsky seemed to endorse the notion that the imaginative work is a source of reliable information. This approach that viewed the “literary Caucasus” that had been created by the Russian Romantics, as a realistic portrayal of the land and its people was destined to have an enduring effect not only on the peoples of the Caucasus, but also on Russian culture as a whole. The most powerful myths about the Caucasus that had been produced in Russia during the Orientalist period have persisted even to this day in the minds of both metropolitan and local cultures, resulting in the imperialist tendencies of the former and in the “self-orientalizing” of the latter. These tendencies have also effectively erased the reality of the Russian colonization of the Caucasus and the resistance of the local population by romanticizing the colonial encounter between them.

*ALEKSANDR PUSHKIN’S
‘THE PRISONER OF THE CAUCASUS’*

As I analyze these nineteenth-century texts, I will explore the interplay between the four major themes that dominate these works: the themes of captivity, gender, conquest, and desire. As Bruce Grant points out, the “captivity narrative” played a vital role in nineteenth-century Russian narratives about the Caucasus (Grant, 2009: xiiii). The most famous example of this tradition is Aleksandr Pushkin’s narrative poem *The Prisoner of the Caucasus*. It tells the story of an alienated Russian aristocrat, who, while fleeing the stifling constraints of his culture, is captured by Circassians who hold him as a prisoner in the mountains of the North Caucasus. The Russian captive is then liberated by a young Circassian maiden who has fallen in love with him. Rejected by the Russian aristocrat, who is unable to reciprocate her feelings, the Circassian woman kills herself by jumping into the river. Pushkin was followed by Lermontov, Bestuzhev-Marlinsky, and other Russian imperial writers in treating the themes of captivity, desire, and self-sacrifice. In Lermontov’s version of *The Prisoner of the Caucasus* (1828), we find a similar plot of a captive Russian soldier and his release by a Circassian maiden. In this version, however, she tries to escape with him and when her father’s bullet kills the Russian, she drowns herself in the river. In Lermontov’s *A Hero of Our Time* (1840), on the other hand, it was Bela, the Circassian princess, who is held in captivity by Grigory Pechorin, the Russian officer in the imperial army. This reversal

of roles might have been used by Lermontov as an ironic device, demonstrating that Russians quickly adopted the very practices of kidnapping and hostage taking that they perceived as distinctive to mountaineers. One might also interpret this “reverse captivity” as Lermontov’s own adaptation of the Western harem and of the captivity narratives associated with Circassian women.

Grant suggests that these Russian narratives of captivity are part of a broader colonial art of exchange, and that the ultimate gift of this exchange is the “gift of empire” (ibid: xv). He argues that in Russia, the colonial enterprise, “the taking of lives, lands, and recourses,” was quickly narrated as a form of giving, as “gifts worth receiving” (ibid: xiii). Indeed, *The Captive of the Caucasus* begins with a dedication to General Nikolai Raevsky, and becomes a kind of gift to Pushkin’s friend, implicating the Circassian woman, the only female character in the poem, as an entity that can be exchanged between men (Sandler, 1989: 157). There are at least three instances in the text that underline this connection: Pushkin’s dedication of the poem to his friend Raevsky, the Circassian maiden’s sacrifice of her life for the Russian captive, and the fact that the Circassian maiden is given away in marriage to somebody else by her father. After the dedication, the first part of the poem presents the story of an unnamed Russian soldier who is captured by Circassians and brought into the village. The captive observes the people and the land around him, and, as Sandler points out “his descriptions are as authoritative as those of the narrator” (ibid: 146). The first lines of the poem show Circassians sitting in front of their houses and recollecting battles, horses, and women:

In the aul, on their thresholds,
The idle Circassians sit.
The sons of the Caucasus speak
Of martial alarms, disastrous,
Of the beauty of their horses,
Of the enjoyments of wild bliss;
They recall the former days
Of raids that could not be repulsed,
<...>
And of the caresses of black-eyed women prisoners.

(cited in: Hokanson, 2008: 53)

In this description, Pushkin focuses on Circassian men, portraying them as militant, wild, and cruel, with the women entering the text as “black-eyed prisoners” whose “caresses” they cannot forget. Both Sandler and Andrew emphasize that these women who enter the text as captives and whose role is to provide sexual favors cannot be unimportant. Sandler points out that the Circassian woman who falls in love with the Russian captive and eventually sets him free, is anticipated in this opening description: “it is clear that the Circassian woman is as circumscribed by the conventions of her culture as the literally captured man: she is someone whose value is in her ‘caress’” (Sandler, 1989: 148). Andrew echoes this point by stating:

Consequently, women are introduced into the text as enthusiastic recipients of male pleasure, which is simultaneously forced upon them. Women are presented as existing for the violent pleasure of men, although, in a coded form, it is suggested that they enjoy this. This line, then sets the scene for the sexual politics of the work, and, consequently, the dysphoric resolution of the love plot is immediately pre-determined (Andrew, 1993: 12).

Thus, we see from the very beginning that “sexual politics” or gender politics are central to Pushkin’s poem. The poem sharply differentiates the characters in terms of gender, and the most important characteristic that defines the female character of this poem is sexual passion. Commenting on the figure of Circassian maiden in his review of Pushkin’s poem, prince Vyazemsky wrote in 1822:

We know only one thing about her — that she loved — and we are content. And really, her fate, her virtues, her sufferings, her woman’s joys, her duties — cannot all these things be contained in this feeling? In my opinion, a woman who has loved has fulfilled all that she was destined for in this world, and she has lived in the fullest sense of the world (cited in: Russian Romantic criticism, 1987: 49).

Vyazemsky seemed to capture this point in Pushkin’s poem very well. As noted by Joe Andrew, there is no mention of women in any other roles, for example, as wives, daughters, and sisters in this poem: “by implication women do not really exist in this military patriarchy or, at least, they are not worth mentioning” (Andrew, 1993: 15). In her first appearance, the Circassian maiden nurtures the

nearly dead prisoner back to life by giving him mare's milk. This might suggest her representation as a "mother" figure, except for the fact that the prisoner's gaze sexualizes her instantly. The prisoner notices her "tender voice," "sweet gaze," and the "heat of her cheeks," which, as Andrew suggests, is a euphemism for sexual passion — the maiden is depicted "as *already* sexual and aroused, even *before* their encounter" (ibid: 16; italics in the original. — *L. Zh.*).

The plot of the captive's interaction with the Circassian maiden, as well as the characterization of the captive himself, takes up a significant space in the poem. What is really striking here is the quick transformation of the Circassian maiden — as she continues to care for the Russian prisoner, bringing him food and singing songs to him, she immediately falls in love with him and learns his language. In some sense, she is presented as more superior to the "civilized" Europeans with their "double-standards:" she shows compassion, she is genuine, faithful and forgiving. When the Russian prisoner confesses that he does not love her, she thanks him for not pretending, even though his lack of love for her breaks her heart. Eventually, she prefers to die rather than being sold off in marriage by her father to someone she does not love. Critics have noted that the Circassian maiden is very much a literary figure, essentially following the rules of European sentimentality and the cult of romantic love, and that her speaking is more a reflection of the captive and his personality (Zhirmunskii / Жирмунский, 1978; Sandler, 1989; Layton, 2002; Hokanson, 2008). Remarking on the "profound instability" of the "Circassian maiden," Andrew points out that the clashing stereotypes attached to this image are represented in dual oppositions — "she is a whore while she is a virgin, a mother while a child, speechless and then fluent, heroic while on her knees" (Andrew, 1993: 18). Her image is constantly shifting and unstable, thus, she is "rarely herself, and remains at the level of a projection of male fantasy..." (ibid: 20). This "instability" testifies to the notion that the "Circassian maiden" is a highly imaginative and discursive construct. The constructed duality of the Circassian maiden in Pushkin's poem also demonstrates the "double nature of Russian Orientalism... based on a contradictory mixture of copied Western models and the necessity of corresponding to the Russian imperial rule..." (Tlostanova, 2010: 71).

The issues of gender are clearly at the center of Pushkin's preoccupations. As I have already mentioned, there is a stark differentiation of genders in the poem. There are characteristics that unite the male Circassians and the Russian "captive" as men, while the Circassian maiden is set apart. She has no place in her own militaristic patriarchal society, and she is also rejected by the Russian captive,

therefore she has no place in his world either. As both Sandler and Layton point out, in an act of rhetorical domination, Circassian men are effectively silenced in the poem; they are mute and are made knowable primarily through violent actions (Sandler, 1989: 146; Layton, 1994: 91). The Circassian woman who was mute in the beginning, although she was able to express her sexual desire for the captive, quickly learns Russian, and calls the captive “the czar of my soul,” signaling her full submission to the captive, and to Russian rule. While the Russian captive admires the military prowess of Circassian warriors, he also states that this is a thing of the past. In the epilogue that together with the dedication frames the story of the Russian captive’s encounter with the Circassian woman, Pushkin praises Russia’s military might and endorses the imperial conquest of the Caucasus:

And the violent cry of war fell silent:
All is subject to the Russian sword.
Proud sons of the Caucasus,
You have fought, you have perished terribly;
But our blood did not save you,
Nor charmed armour,
Nor mountains, nor valiant steeds,
Nor the love of wild freedom!
Like the tribe of Baty,
The Caucasus will betray its forefathers,
Will forget the voice of the greedy field of battle,
Will abandon the battle arrows.
To the canyons, where you used to nestle,
A traveller will ride up without fear,
And dark rumours of legend
Will announce your execution.

(cited in: Hokanson, 2008: 250)

The epilogue effectively empties the Caucasus, as it announces a full annihilation of Circassian tribes. Although Pushkin’s dark prediction was made in 1822, Circassians resisted the colonization of their territory until 1864. Many critics have commented on the ambiguities in Pushkin’s writings with regard to how the anti-autocratic feelings could coexist without any difficulty with pro-imperial sentiments. According to Harsha Ram, the poem’s dedication that relates the hero’s By-

ronic flight from European civilization and the epilogue that celebrates the inevitable encroachment of civilization on the world to which the hero has fled is in itself a paradox (Ram, 2005: 390). He suggests that the relationship of the story to its frames is one of “strategic inversion:”

...while the main story presents the Russian as a captive and hence a victim of the mountain-dwellers, the dedication and epilogue together essentially reverse this hierarchy, allowing the poet — and with him the Russian army — to establish poetic and finally military control over the mountain-dwellers’ territory (ibid: 384).

In other words, it was the captive not the captor who was always in control. In gendered terms, the complete submission of the Circassian woman signals the imperial domination through her acceptance of the “gift of civilization.” In Pushkin’s rendering, Russia’s “gift of civilization” or the “gift of empire” that was extended to (or imposed on) the Caucasus becomes an act of generosity and good will. According to Grant, “the prisoner myth operates as an art of emplacement” (Grant, 2009: 97) and reveals an imperial narrative of longing and belonging in the Caucasus. The myth portrays Russians not only as suffering victims, but also as “victims who give and whose generosity invites just respect” (ibid: 98). As opposed to the Circassian warriors, the Russian captive is described as harmless, impotent, and not aggressive; he is preoccupied with his own inner torments and thoughts. As highlighted in this poem, as well as in other stories, the danger for the Circassian woman, in fact, never comes from the Russian man, but from her own countrymen. However, once she falls for the Russian by recognizing his superiority and by accepting the “gift of empire,” she is out of the picture. Therefore, the imperial violence depicted in the epilogue and the Circassian maiden’s suicide is presented as inevitable: “the Caucasus hero almost always expires once his or her central function — the recognition of Russian goodness — is accomplished” (ibid: 108).

*MIKHAIL LERMONTOV’S
NOVEL “A HERO OF OUR TIME”*

The same pattern could be noted in Mikhail Lermontov’s novel *Bela*, which explores the themes of colonial conquest, sexual desire, and captivity through the dialectical encounter between Gregory Pechorin, a Russian officer in the colonial

army, and Bela, a young Circassian princess. Lermontov's work, however, is much more complex in terms of its style and composition. The author employs irony as the main rhetorical device in order to draw attention to the ambiguities of the novel and reflects Lermontov's own double-consciousness as an imperial writer who partially identifies with his Caucasian heroes and renounces the brutality of Russian colonialism.

Lermontov's novel *A Hero of Our Time* (1840) is a hybrid text that combines the conventions of Romanticism with its themes, its types of characters and its genres (the travelogue, the adventure tale) with the elements of the novel of psychological realism. In the preface to his novel the author/narrator states: "The Hero of Our Time... is indeed a portrait, but not of one single person. It is a portrait built up from the vices of our whole generation, in all the fullness of their development" (Lermontov, transl. by Pasternak Slater, 2013: 5). The compositional structure of the novel is quite complex. It consists of several narratives that appear in the following order: "Bela," "Maksim Maksimych," "Introduction to Pechorin's Journal," "Taman," "Princess Mary," and "The Fatalist." Chronologically, however, "Taman" is the "earliest" story in the novel, followed by "Bela" and "Maksim Maksimych," (both written in the genre of travel notes) and "Princess Mary" and "The Fatalist" (written in the genre of diary, or fictional "journal"). As critics have pointed out, one of the distinguishing qualities of *A Hero of Our Time* is the absence of the voice of the author/narrator (with the exception of the Preface to the novel), who controls the narrative and arranges the events in chronological order (Azouqa, 2004: 95). Instead, Lermontov introduces multiple narrators whose authoritative voices control and manipulate the narratives and the representations. Lermontov's narrative, full of tensions, irony, and ambivalence, presents a complex view of imperialism, gender, and identity.

For our purpose, I will turn straight to the representation of the Circassian woman in *Bela*. It is not by chance that this story is written in the form of a traveler's account full of descriptions of sublime landscapes and exotic ethnographies combined with a Romantic adventure tale. Lermontov's traveling narrator is obviously in pursuit of the exotic and the marvelous; he achieves his goal of stimulating his reader's imagination by describing the picturesque exotic scenery and people and by incorporating Maksim Maksimych's tale about Pechorin's abduction of a Circassian princess. Thus, the themes of captivity, conquest, and colonial desire become central to the story but in contrast to Pushkin's *The Prisoner of the Caucasus*, it is the native Circassian woman who is imprisoned by the Russian protago-

nist. From the very beginning, the colonial conquest is depicted in the story in sexual terms. According to Aida Azouqa, the difficult and long journey across a rugged mountainous terrain that forces the traveling narrator and Maksim Maksimych to stop several times before resuming their “journey allegorizes the sluggish and dangerous process of the Russian penetration into the region” (ibid: 104). Lermontov presents Bela’s abduction as a fulfillment of an erotic fantasy of possessing a sensual Circassian woman. As Peter Scotto points out, Pechorin’s abduction of Bela is made legitimate by his desire alone (“Suppose I like her?”), thus giving voice to a pervasive cultural expectation that women in the Caucasus embodied for the Russian male the “irresistible fantasy of sexual adventure without responsibility” (Scotto, 1992: 252).

Pechorin’s encounter with Bela occurs at the wedding in Bela’s house, to which Maksim Maksimych and Pechorin were invited by Bela’s father who is marrying off his oldest daughter. Pechorin is captivated by Bela’s beauty and proceeds with his plans to abduct her with the assistance of her younger brother Azamat. As Pechorin’s captive, Bela at first resists Pechorin’s sexual advances, but later, she decides to succumb to his will. Pechorin, however, wants more than submission: he desires sincere admiration and respect. He achieves this goal by using various strategies to manipulate Bela — he gives her presents, but they do not have much effect on her. Finally, he dresses up as a Circassian man (playing the “other”) and plays out a “scene,” in which he acts as if he is leaving her devastated by his love and granting her freedom:

I leave you as absolute mistress of all my possessions. If you want to, you can go back to your father — you’re free. I am guilty before you, and I have to punish myself. Goodbye. I am going — how do I know where? Very likely it won’t be long before a bullet or a sabre-stroke finds me; when that happens, think of me and forgive me! (Lermontov, transl. by Pasternak Slater, 2013: 23).

This theatrical strategy or deception succeeds, leading to Bela’s complete submission, as she falls in love with Pechorin. After achieving his goal, Pechorin, however, grows bored and disillusioned on discovering that the love of the ‘savage’ beauty “is little better than the love of a titled lady” (ibid: 33). As in the beginning of the novel when Pechorin remarked that the Circassian ladies are not as beautiful as he imagined them, here he again demonstrates his disappointment with

his imaginary “Orient” (ibid: 13). Tlostanova notes, there was a feeling “that the Orient that the Russian Empire was getting through its colonizing efforts was somehow second-rate, not like the bright and exotic one of Europe” (Tlostanova, 2010: 70). In the end, Pechorin displays a profound indifference to Bela’s and her family’s fate. As a direct result of Pechorin’s actions, Bela’s brother is forced to leave his family, her father is murdered, and eventually, Bela herself falls victim to the knife of Kazbich, her countryman and her jealous admirer. Bela undergoes a slow and painful death. Neither Pechorin nor Maksim Maksimych who displays sympathy towards Bela, assume any responsibility for the destruction of her life. In this regard, Tlostanova notes:

Cruelty and eroticism as the main signifiers of the colonized body — the desire to possess and to destroy — were clearly present in Russia as well. But if in the Western mind it has been often depicted in terms of submissive feminine Orient dominated and inseminated by the European colonizer, in the Russian version of early romantic Orientalism this model was impossible, because of the inferiority complex vis-à-vis Europe, which was partially compensated by the caricature secondary Orientalism in Russia’s colonies (ibid: 69).

She further points out that “any erotic relations of the Russian males with the colonized women remained adventures outside the realm of the metropolis morale” (ibid: 81). Both characters, the “Circassian maiden” and Bela, depend physically and emotionally on men, both Russian and Circassian, and on the myth of Romantic love. Thus, on the one hand, the representations of the Circassian woman conform to the universal stereotypes of the exotic, oriental, other, beautiful, passionate, irrational, Romantic, sentimental; on the other hand, as we have seen in Joe Andrew’s analysis above, this congeries of values makes for a very unstable and contradictory image, representing “an instance of male wish-fulfillment” remaining only at the level of the “projection of male fantasy” (Sandler, 1989: 20). One can argue here, borrowing Bhabha’s concept of ambivalence against Said’s model of “orientalism,” that the colonial discourse never fully manages to assert a fixed and stereotypical knowledge of the colonial “other” and that it always contains moments of ambivalence. On the surface, Lermontov’s novel appears to have little depth. One is tempted to draw one-sided simplistic conclusions, but a closer look reveals the complexities and ambiguities of his work that challenge the reader’s perceptions. His glorifications of the mountaineers, as well as his ironic stance

and critical engagement with his time and the metropolitan society complicate the interpretation of ethnic divisions in the novel. It is tempting, but not really feasible to reduce them to clear-cut oppositions such as “superior” and “inferior,” “dominant” and “subordinate,” “civilized” and “savage.”

Bela, as indicated also in its subtitle “From an Officer’s Notes on the Caucasus” mixes two genres, the travelogue and the adventure tale set in the Caucasus. Maksim Maksimych told the story of *Bela* to the traveling narrator who then transcribed it and shared it with readers. Thus, the story is twice removed from the original source(s) — *Bela* and Pechorin — who might have had a different rendering of events, if each had been given the chance to tell their subsequent story. As Lewis Bagby points out, “Lermontov’s genius is that he does not permit us to completely untangle the novel without doing it a disservice” (Bagby, 2002: 15). The layered structure and the complex chronological sequence of the novel, the shifting perspectives and the multiple narrators, including the traveling narrator who admits making some changes and publishing Pechorin’s journal, but not in its entirety, under the current title, make readers question the whole subject of this work. Is it about Pechorin “the hero” and his “time,” or is it about the traveling narrator who presented the hero and his time, as well as *Bela*’s story that is narrated by Maksim Maksimych? Bagby argues that all these factors lead to the instability of the text as a source of reliable information:

As the traveling narrator imposes his subjective temporal experience upon his readers, we begin to suspect that he may have done more to alter the novel’s content than simply reorder its chronology. Proof of this lies in his reworking Kazbich’s song into Russian verse form. <...> We are forced to question the degree to which both the traveler and Maksim Maksimych might have contaminated the novel’s content (ibid: 17).

There are many instances in the text that point to the unreliability of the sources of the presented information. The reader learns about *Bela* from the notes of the traveling narrator to whom Maksim Maksimych told the story orally. The traveling narrator was “forcing” the story when he admitted that he was sure that *Bela*’s story had to have an “unusual” ending, because whatever started in an unusual way ought to have an unusual ending (Lermontov, transl. by Pasternak Slater, 2013: 29). Likewise, the role of Maksim Maksimych as an “expert” on the Caucasus and as a mediator between cultures is questioned multiple times. All of this

suggests that there is yet another way to interpret Lermontov's novel as a whole, and *Bela* in particular as an inversion of the conventions of the Orientalist paradigm; as an ironic play on Orientalist clichés and stereotypes. Lermontov's own Preface to his novel suggests for the readers that the novel should be read ironically: "Our public are still so young and naïve that they can't understand a fable unless they find a moral at the end of it. They can't get a joke, they can't sense irony; in fact they're just ill-educated" (ibid: 5). Lermontov wrote the Preface in response to his critics who had been "quite seriously outraged at having such an immoral person as The Hero of Our Time held up as an example..." (ibid).

There were many critical responses to Lermontov's novel from his contemporaries. To the list of narrators who retold Lermontov's novel, we can also add the nineteenth-century Russian literary critic Vissarion Belinsky who praised the novel in one of his reviews (Belinsky / Белинский, 1954). In his seventy-eight page essay, Belinsky retells the novel in his own words interspersing it with Lermontov's text. Belinsky tried to "save" Pechorin from the negative reviews and harsh criticism of his contemporaries. Analyzing Pechorin's character, Belinsky calls him a "mysterious type," *Bela*, on the other hand, he remarks "is all before you" (ibid: 199). As many critics have noted, the schematic representation of *Bela* could hardly be seen as "all" that there is to this character, nor could it be seen as a realistic portrayal of a Circassian girl, who could have winded up in captivity in a Russian or Cossack fortress. Lermontov himself must have been aware of this when he rehearsed through Maksim Maksimych the long tradition of wholesale ethnographic descriptions of natives, as well as the Orientalist clichés and myths surrounding Circassian women, some of which he debunked in his novel. We get a first glimpse of *Bela* as she enters Maksim Maksimych's tale "literally drawn out from his pseudoethnographic account of an 'Asiatic' wedding, an account that both disappoints Orientalizing fantasy... and trades in tales of the exotic" (Costlow, 2002: 91). Pechorin's first remark at the wedding was: "I had a far better notion of Circassian girls" (Lermontov, transl. by Pasternak Slater, 2013: 13). To which Maksim Maksimych replied: "'You wait!' I grinned back. I had an idea of my own in my mind" (ibid). *Bela* is presented here as an "idea" in Maksim Maksimych's confused mind.

The character of Maksim Maksimych, who is called "the old-time Caucasian army man" (*staryi kavkazets*) reminds us of the figure of the perfect fatherly colonizer, who simultaneously exemplifies and complicates Said's mapping of Orientalism. Maksim Maksimych, as he first appears in the text "puffing on a little sil-

ver-mounted Kabarda pipe” and wearing a “Circassian fur hat” (ibid: 7), stands for those liminal figures, outcasts on the threshold of two cultures, and examples of travelers “gone native.” He positions himself as a mediator between the two cultures, as he translates to Pechorin not only the language but also the customs of the natives. He assumes the position of authority who “knows” the locals. However, one has to question how much is “lost in translation” or has been misinterpreted. He exemplifies ambivalence which, to reiterate, involves both mimetic and discursive duplication, by wearing Circassian dress, by knowing the customs, by performing as if he were one of the Caucasians. Maksim Maksimych embodies an exemplary Russian colonialist who lacks a concrete identity; he belongs neither in Russia, nor in his “adopted” home in the Caucasus. This tension within his self is also manifested in his ambivalent perception of the Circassians and Chechens who constantly frustrate his colonial authority by resisting his power. He praises them, and scolds at the same time: “Our Kabardinians and Chechens, now — they may be robbers and ragamuffins, but still they’re real daredevils. <...> Fine fellows, though!” (ibid: 10) Maksim’s ambivalent attitudes towards Circassians and Chechens extend also to Bela. His compassion toward Bela did not stop him from perceiving her as a savage Other. He did also harbor a colonial desire for her, as he admitted himself after witnessing the episode in which Bela fell completely for Pechorin’s charms: “I was upset, because no woman had ever loved me that much” (ibid: 24). Maksim Maksimych did not put a cross on Bela’s grave after her death, even though he wanted to do it at first, after all, the Russian colonizers did not actively engage in converting the locals to Christianity. Instead he left her grave unmarked, erasing all traces of her existence:

Early next day we buried her outside the fort, by the riverside, near the place where she had last been sitting. White acacia bushes and elder trees have grown up round her little grave now. I should have liked to place a cross, but you know, it wouldn’t have been right — she wasn’t a Christian, after all (ibid: 38).

Bela’s death, thus, symbolizes a wish-fulfillment to empty the land from its people (Azouqa, 2004: 115), and as Scotto explains, her unmarked grave renders her totally “lost to history” (Scotto, 1992: 257).

Through his use of irony, Lermontov effectively distances himself from his Russian characters in the novel, Pechorin, Maksim Maksimych, and the traveling

narrator, and the imperialist mentality expressed by them. As Lermontov presents this story to his readers, it seems that he not only shows that there are too many flaws, omissions, and inconsistencies in the reader's perception of the Caucasus, but he also seems to question the whole imperial discourse that positions the colonizers as more civilized, more knowledgeable, more human than the colonized. On the contrary, as Susan Layton points out, Lermontov seems to emphasize the similarities between all men, (including Kazbich and Azamat) in their treatment of Bela (Layton, 2002: 71). Bela is the object of desire of at least three men in the novel (Pechorin, Kazbich, and Maksim Maksimych). She is also presented as someone who can be stolen, exchanged and won over by gifts. Thus, Lermontov playfully reworks the clichés and stereotypes surrounding the Circassian beauty myth, questioning at the same time the Russian imperialist ideology. This is not to say that Lermontov's novel is free from Orientalist stereotypes. At the same time as it demonstrates the colonizer's willingness to humanize the Other, it operates within a familiar vocabulary of Orientalist images, offering the readers the exotic elements they expect.

CONCLUSION

This article has examined the objectified portrayals of Circassian women in Western/Russian colonial discourses and historiography. Circassian women, as well as other ethnic or native women, have for a long time been objects of study and representations by others, mostly male authors. And the instances in which they did represent themselves — when they told their own stories in their own voices, as part of the oral tradition — have been muted or erased. One of the central ways in which the meaning of gender, race, sexuality, and ethnicity is culturally constructed is through representations — namely spoken or written words and images. These are the modes through which forms of knowledge and feelings, that is, discourses as particular ways of speaking about gender, race, sexuality, and ethnicity are constituted and circulated. Given the peculiar position that the Caucasus occupies in the nineteenth-century Russian literary imagination that has been reflected in the canonical works written by Pushkin and Lermontov, we ought to ask ourselves the following questions: To what extent does the literary canon serve the purpose of the erasure of colonialism from the national memory or of perpetuating the *coloniality* of knowledge and being, and how does it affect the current discourses on culture and cultural differences in Russia and its former and current colonies, specifically in the North Caucasus? As this article has shown, the recent

postcolonial scholarship problematizes the ways in which the nineteenth-century Russian canonical texts are read and interpreted. The postcolonial critics argue that these texts need to be subversively re-read, criticizing the reductive and stereotypical representations of the Other and highlighting the complex, and often violent, history between the Caucasus and the Russian Empire. The Russian imperial tactics and the Caucasus war served only as a romantic backdrop in the works of Pushkin and Lermontov. The discussions of these Romantic works, especially in the school classrooms, require the use of defamiliarization, i.e. stepping outside of the text by introducing counter-narratives that expose the constructed nature of otherness in these texts.

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Submission date: 24.09.2018.

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Дата поступления: 24.09.2018 г.

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Citation:

Zhigunova, L. S. (2018) Empire's Erotic Conquests: Circassian Women in Russian Romantic Literature. *Gorizonty gumanitarnogo znaniia*, no. 6, pp. 178–203. [online] Available at: <http://journals.mosgu.ru/ggz/article/view/927> (accessed dd.mm.yyy). DOI: [10.17805/ggz.2018.6.13](https://doi.org/10.17805/ggz.2018.6.13)

Для цитирования:

Zhigunova L. S. Empire's Erotic Conquests: Circassian Women in Russian Romantic Literature [Электронный ресурс] // Горизонты гуманитарного знания. 2018. № 6. С. 178–203. URL: <http://journals.mosgu.ru/ggz/article/view/927> (дата обращения: дд.мм.гггг). DOI: [10.17805/ggz.2018.6.13](https://doi.org/10.17805/ggz.2018.6.13)