

Russian Classics as Intercultural Mediators

Alexandra V. Strukova¹, Olga O. Nesmelova², Natalia A. Vysotskaya³

¹Kazan Federal University, Institute of Philology and Cross-Cultural Communication, Postgraduate Student, ²Kazan Federal University, Institute of Philology and Cross-Cultural Communication, Professor, Chair of the Department of Russian and World Literature, ³Kiev National Linguistics University, Full Professor of European and American literature, Theory and History of World Literature Department (Ukraine)

Abstract

The paper sets out to explore the ways Russian classical literature and its famed creators are put to use by contemporary American ethnic authors with the view of facilitating their characters' search for complex and hybrid transcultural identities. It is argued that while the protagonists of Alice Randall's and Jhumpa Lahiri's novels *Pushkin and the Queen of Spades* and *The Namesake* (an African American and an East Indian-American, respectively) experience problems in their attempts to harmonize their conflicting selves integrating traditional group cultures with larger American one, Russian literature serves as the "third culture" providing space where they can achieve albeit provisional inner balance. Proceeding from current understanding of identity as a process rather than a state, a matter of consent as much as of descent, the paper analyzes the array of narrative and rhetorical strategies used by the authors to attain their goals. In particular, Randall's novel can be read as an attempt to carry on Z.N. Hurston's efforts to combine literary and folklore traditions, with the first one represented by academic "theatre", and the second – by Black rap and hip-hop. Lahiri, in her turn, uses Gogol's *Overcoat* as her primary pretext determining, to a considerable extent, her protagonist's life story.

Key words: Identity, Transculture, Russian classical literature, Cultural hybridity, Mediation

INTRODUCTION

One of the salient features of "modernity at large" is a rapidly growing number of subjects crossing not only national and geographic, but also cultural borders. Therefore, ever greater emphasis in shaping identity is laid on the work of the imagination. In wording his well-known definition of nation as "imagined community", Benedict Anderson shifts the emphasis from seemingly objective to subjective factors, that is, an individual's idea of him/herself as belonging to a certain national community [1]. According to Arjun Appadurai, "the work of the imagination" operates as "a constitutive feature of modern subjectivity" [2, p.3]. It is arguable that not only migration and electronic mediation, as he claims, but also symbolic cultural field has a direct bearing on this process.

The aim of this paper is to explore the ways it works in two novels that saw the light in the USA – African-American Alice Randall's *Pushkin and the Queen of Spades* and East Indian American Jhumpa Lahiri's *The Namesake*. The remarkable feature they share are the characters' names – Pushkin for Randall's black boy and Gogol in case of Lahiri's son of Bengali immigrants. We claim that in addition to each writer's specific reasons for resorting to Russian classical literature, it has also to do with general cultural developments that both globally and locally generate the need to (re)think modern (diasporic) identities that are constantly in the making.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

Today, identity conceived not as a fixed given, but as a site of crossing and interaction between heterogeneous impulses has become the subject of theoretical debate. Scholars tend to view it as a process of continuous self-making, transformation and modification. For Stuart Hall, identity requires reconceptualization as "not an essentialist, but a strategic and positional one" [3, p.3]. He argues that "identities are never unified and, in late modern times, increasingly fragmented and fractured, never singular but multiply constructed across different, often intersecting

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Corresponding Author: Olga O. Nesmelova, Kazan Federal University, Institute of philology and cross-cultural communication, Professor, Chair of the Department of Russian and World Literature. Phone: +79033058837. E-mail: olga.nesmelova@inbox.ru

and antagonistic, discourses, practices and positions” [Ibid., p.4].

A convincing case is currently made for a need “to reconceptualize American literature and culture as itself radically comparative, hybrid and transnational in its origins, constitution and dynamics <.>” [4, p. 589]. The problem is how to do this without canceling or neutralizing the Other’s difference, “thereby confirming the dominant culture’s right “to define other cultural identities [5, p. 14].

When applied to literature, this approach can be exemplified by Werner Sollors’ predilection for “transethnic reading” that shifts into focus the interaction and interpenetration between various social and cultural groups and texts [6, p. 152]. Satya Mohanty questions the otherness of the other, and postulates “rational agency” as one possible common platform where we all meet [7, p. 8]. D. T. Goldberg also chooses to foreground heterogeneity stating that “the point of instituting renewable multicultural conditions is to facilitate and promote incorporative heterogeneity through hybrid interaction and the production of hybrid effect” [8, p.30]. While the theoretical debate is under way, the fiction experiments with its own resources in producing hybrid complexities.

RESULTS

The analysis has demonstrated that Pushkin X and Gogol Ganguli represent genuine “heroes of our times” in terms of incarnating productive hybridity, with heterogeneous cultural components forming fluid and movable modern identities. It is remarkable that it was classical Russian literature with its traditional aura of humanism that was chosen as the zone of encounter/reconciliation of remote and largely dissimilar cultures and as a potent constituent in shaping a global identity

DISCUSSION

If there is one present-day text boldly positioning the idea of hybridity at its core, Alice Randall’s *Pushkin and the Queen of Spades* is just it. The writer seems determined to transcend as many boundaries as possible in her quest for productive and healthy mixture. The narrator expresses her decision to “claim the low and the high and let them be wed” [9, p.225]. Similar “wedding” is envisioned for other antinomies, too – Black and white, younger and older generations, current academic “theorese” and street poetry, America and Russia, reality and textuality, inside and outside. It is along these vectors that some of the borders are located that the protagonist/narrator is crossing, and some of the gaps she is filling. This process propels the

story of a Black university professor of Russian literature whose son, a famous football player appropriately named Pushkin X, is about to marry a Russian strip dancer. The first person non-linear narration told from Windsor Armstrong’s perspective moves forward in bits and pieces obeying the logic not of chronology, but of memory and free association. At the end, Windsor, at first fiercely antagonistic to her son’s choice, has changed enough to be reconciled to it – and to her own past.

The book is lavishly intertextual, with the allusions coming not only from African American culture (these are numerous including Z. N. Hurston, W. DuBois, R. Ellison, P.L.Dunbar), but canonical Western culture, too – Chaucer, Dickens, Virginia Woolf etc.). The novel might be read as an attempt, like so much of Z.N.Hurston’s writings, to wed literary and folk traditions, literary being here the academic metalanguage of contemporary theory, and the folk – rap and hip-hop. Rich, often unusual imagery, daring metaphors materializing abstract notions and puns further enhance the affinity with Zora, as well as the use of similar symbols. Windsor’s story is ostensibly “written” – the narrator even metanarratively reflects over her genre – “What is this thing I am writing: a prayer, a pleading, an explication of the text of my life?” [Ibid., p.157]. However, its written status is belied by characteristics of a speakerly text (language, syntax, and style), with even the first sentence going “I want to say it, too”.

As to Pushkin, the protagonist’s ability to empathize with the 19th c. Russian poet is amazing. Her insightful remarks about his work create an imaginative space between their very disparate worlds. She seems to know Pushkin intimately, with the knowledge only obtained through love. She chooses him as the ultimate model of hyperintellectual black person, draws constant analogies between Pushkin and herself, as if trying on various circumstances of his life and works. In doing so, she merges symbols, myths and idioms from Russian literature/history and African American folk tradition. Of special import is her use of Pushkin’s *Queen of Spades*: she interprets the epigraph to the story – “There are seven words in the first line of the tale. I remembered them because they seemed the annotation of my life: “The Queen of Spades signifies secret ill will.” To read the story was to have literature announce the deal life had dealt me. Lena was my queen of spades, the Queen of Spades was my mother. I read and reread the line. Spades are black people, people like Spady and me. Signify is what a black person, particularly, a black woman, does to communicate: “Don’t be signifying at me”. I didn’t need to wait till Skip Gates wrote “The Signifying Monkey” to know this. I knew this. “Signify” was not a white word in my circle. It was a sharp black woman’s word. It was a word I had all but forgotten until Pushkin, in translation, called it

back to me. Something was signifying to me” [Ibid., p.187]. At the end of the story, when her son and Tanya are happily married, the narrator announces that “the queen of spades is trumped by hearts” – a pun signifying that “one must trust love, if one will trust in anything at all”.

In her “long march” towards a modified identity the narrator proceeds from its current understanding not as a fixed essence to be dug out like a golden nugget, but as, in Stuart Hall’s words, “becoming” rather than “being”, something “multiply constructed across different, often intersecting and antagonistic, discourses, practices and positions” [2, p.4], and it refers primarily to her racial assumptions. Windsor has long accepted her father’s racist language as a “girdle of protective gold” serving to take her safe through life in racism-infected America; “I who have been poisoned and revived, am grateful to his racist signs, lies and attitudes” [9, p.107]. Her family history and her own story made her think of racial relations as having to do primarily with power. Eventually, however, she renounces the discourse of purity for the sake of “hybridity, impurity, intermingling and mongrelization”, to use Salman Rushdie’s words. It occurs to her that “racism has more to do with beauty than with power, and everything to do with a refusal to see, a refusal to recognize, a refusal to be beautiful” [Ibid., p.126]. Her conclusion that “race is not everything”, as well as shifting the focus from “a drop of blood” to “the stories you know, the sounds you feel” is in tune with Anthony Appiah’s consideration of racial identity as only one implement in “a tool kit of options” made available by one’s culture and society to choose from in the course of ongoing identity formation, “a matter of choice as well as heritage” [10, p.96].

In Randall’s novel, “Pushkin” used as the protagonist’s son’s first name operated as only one of the textual codes expressing the need to transcend racial limits for the sake of universal human dimension in the course of self-building.

Unlike this model, in Jhumpa Lahiri’s text it is the ontological category of “name” that becomes the focus of convergence for a whole bunch of issues pertaining to second generation immigrant consciousness. In *The Namesake* name functions as the metaphor for cultural dislocation; differences in naming traditions in Bengal and the USA graphically visualize the cultural gap between nations. The name in the novel is inseparable from an individual’s essential characteristics revitalizing archaic notion of its sacred function – far from being a random combination of sounds, the name bears profound spiritual meaning since in mythological world picture it is identical/homological to the named object.

The authors’ narrative strategies differ, too: Lahiri’s text follows linear structure of traditional Bildungsroman

covering temporally the last third of the past century. Lahiri’s style is marked by simplicity, attention to details, intimacy. The narrative’s traditional nature stresses its kinship to the 19th c. realistic fiction which, as it is easy to guess, is intentional bringing to life the shadow of one of its most brilliant exponents.

So, the question is why the first-born of the Bengali engineer Ashoka Ganguli and his wife Ashima who became Americans in late 1960s “could not be given any other name” (a quotation from Gogol’s *Overcoat* used as epigraph to the novel). On the one hand, the choice of the name is a mediated result of globalization causing the dispersion even of those ethnic groups, which even today are deeply entrenched in traditional life styles. The clash of cultures finds its expression in mutual misunderstanding between fresh immigrants and maternity home staff; for the latter the simplest way out would be naming the boy after some relative. This proposal, though, horrifies the parents: “This sign of respect in America and Europe, this symbol of heritage and lineage, would be ridiculed in India. Within Bengali families, individual names are sacred, inviolable. They are not meant to be inherited or shared” [11, p.28]. Hence, multiple cultural differences between Euro-American and Indian world spaces repeatedly referred to in the novel find singular metaphoric expression in the category of name. Its key function is borne out by the protagonist’s meditations: “Living with a pet name and a good name, in a place where such distinctions do not exist – surely that was emblematic of the greatest confusion of all” [Ibid., p.118].

Still, why Gogol? Here the novel’s second leitmotif comes into play – the East Indians’ infatuation with classical Russian literature. Not only the titles, but also allusions to *The Karamazov Brothers* and *Fathers and Sons*, *War and Peace* and *Anna Karenina* abound in the pages. In the context of this paper, the fact worth noting is the popularity in India of “little man” character borrowed primarily from Russian literature. Another explanation, on the plot level, is that during a railway accident in India Gogol’s volume pressed to the character’s father’s bosom saved his life.

Further twists and turns of the character’s relations with his name mark different stages in his self-definition, in particular, his vacillations between the acceptance of all things American (clothes, food, cultural icons, behavioral patterns) attended by negation of all things Indian, and his return, albeit partial, to traditional cultural practices. Lahiri’s subtleness in dealing with self-identification issue manifests itself in not giving preference to either of binary oppositions. According to the author, facile recipes of “getting back to the roots” promoted by some ethnic writers as a panacea from cultural indeterminacy are hardly

efficient in reality. For a polycultural individual to acquire an adequate self-awareness, more nuanced “chemical” processes of hybridization and synthesis are to take place.

The character’s entering the Department of Architecture at the prestigious Yale University is accompanied by a decisive step: change of name. He does not want to be Gogol in his new life; having substituted the Indian name (Nikhil) for his odious one, he feels that he renounces his past and changes his identity, too. At the end Gogol states that he never managed to get rid of his “accidental” name “defining and distressing him for so many years. He had tried to correct that randomness, that error. And yet it had not been possible to reinvent himself fully, to break from that mismatched name” [Ibid., p.287].

The irony permeates the protagonist’s choice of a “good” name. To begin with, “Nikhil” due to its phonetic resemblance to Russian “Nikolai” sends back to the same Gogol, the mystic liaison with whom the character is desperate to break; and second, its phonetic form inevitably points to Latin “nihil” (“nothing”). It looks like at this stage of his self-identification Gogol/Nikhil who has ruptured the links with traditional ancestor culture but has not succeeded in weaving himself into American mainstream pattern, is really nothing, emptiness in terms of socio-cultural belonging to a certain group. Self-identification, however, is understood in the novel in broader terms – what is at stake, is rather detecting/constructing wellsprings of communion not with one group only, but with humanity. The “third” culture operates as an instrument for quest for them and/or for fashioning them.

The final scene of the novel is the symbolic scene of reading. Having found in his parents’ house offered for sale an old book by Gogol, his thirty-two year old namesake (the age, of course, is no accident) only at that moment sees the inscription made in his father’s hand: “To Gogol Ganguli: The man who gave you his name, from the man who gave you your name” [Ibid., p.288]. This formula not only enshrines basic relationship between man and his name manifested even on sound level; it also emblemizes relationship between generations and cultures – India, America, Russia, fathers and sons, first and second generation immigrants come together in one chain of continuity, in-depth human affinity, non-intermittence of spiritual experience

CONCLUSION

To summarize, Russian classical literature and its famed creators are put to use by contemporary American ethnic authors with the view of facilitating their characters’ search for complex and hybrid transcultural identities. Russian literature serves as the “third culture” providing space where they can achieve albeit provisional inner balance.

CONFLICT OF INTERESTS

The authors confirm that the data do not contain any conflict of interests.

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