

# Postcolonial post-Soviet trajectories

and intersectional coalitions

by **Madina Tlostanova**

**W**ith the collapse of the Soviet Union, many nations and ethnicities artificially collected under the umbrella of the Soviet empire – the so-called Second World of the Cold War era – have started their centrifugal movement away from the metropolis in quest of other vassals, partners, and zones of belonging and influence. This process has been going on for over two decades. Today, not only the CIS but also Russia itself with its remaining colonies (e.g., the Northern Caucasus) seems to have lost all of its cultural bonds, except for linguistic ones. There are no values or goals left to link the millions who had the misfortune of being born in this huge and uncontrollable territory. Yet a number of scholars still insist on the existence of some common post-Soviet imaginary, most probably doomed to be erased, museumized, and/or commercialized with the stage exit of the last generation of people formed in the USSR. This imaginary is grounded in a specific spatial history, generating unhomed subjects forced to survive in the doomed spatial-temporal localities of post-dependence: “the prison-bitched country where no repentance ever took place and people submissively forgave and forgot their humiliation”, according to Alexei German<sup>1</sup> and the portrayal in his disturbing film *Khrustalyov, My Car* (1998).

Post-Soviet centrifugal processes take place with varied success as courses change from the neoliberal West to Russia (often

involuntarily), and sometimes in yet another direction of de-Westernization. The European ex-colonies of the USSR are able to join Europe, albeit as poor cousins, whereas the situation of non-European ex-colonies is complicated by racial and religious othering. Made into the honorary Second World in the Soviet

era, today these people are rapidly slipping into the position of the global South, with its own human hierarchy, where the best places of the world proletariat have already been taken by the ex-colonies of the modern Western empires. Consequently, the non-European Soviet ex-colonies have no choice but to reproduce their doubly colonized status, or to build coalitions with de-Westernizing China, Malaysia, the Arab Emirates, or Turkey. The latter option does not automatically guarantee a better attitude on the part of the coalition partners, but it at least leaves behind the old Orientalism and progressivism that stalled relations with both Russia and the West. It is important to take into account the gaps between the official politics of the post-Soviet states and their neocolonial leaders, and the grass-roots social movements that are connected with common people’s efforts to survive, and that lead to the mass migration and diasporic existence of millions of dispensable lives.

In this context it is important to take into account the *politics of location in knowledge production*, in Adrienne Rich’s words,<sup>2</sup> the situated knowledges, as Donna Haraway

## abstract

The article considers the centrifugal trajectories of the postsocialist world in the direction of the secondary Europe and the global South as seen through the prism of gender relations and at the intersection of the postsocialist and the postcolonial. The author focuses on the importance and specificity of geopolitical positioning in postsocialist gendered discourses using Central Asia and the Caucasus as graphic examples. Some attention is given to the analysis of border tricksterism as it is expressed in gender theorizing coming from the non-European post-Soviet ex-colonies, and to the issue of the continuous invisibility of these theories and practices for the larger feminist frame – both Western and non-Western – which continues to hinder successful coalitions.

**KEY WORDS:** postcolonial condition, post-Soviet women, intersectionality, feminist coalitions, geopolitics of knowledge.



Scene from  
Alexei German's  
film *Khrustalyov,  
My Car*.

would have it,<sup>3</sup> the “small stories, situated in specific local contexts” according to Nina Lykke,<sup>4</sup> or the *pluriversality* in the formulation of the decolonial option.<sup>5</sup> Pluriversality is a coexistence of many interacting and intersecting non-abstract universals grounded in the geopolitics and body politics of knowledge, being, and perception, in a conscious effort to reconnect theory and theorists with experience, with those who are discriminated against, to reinstate the experiential nature of knowledge and the origin of all theory in the human lifeworld and experience.

The decolonial option stresses our inescapable localization in the colonial matrix of power that cannot be observed from the outside – from the convenient vantage point of God or Reason – as the products of the colonial matrix promoted through its enunciators. They present their option as an abstract universal, hiding its locality and appropriating diversity in the form of its control by universal epistemology as demonstrated in numerous multicultural projects. In the pluriversal world where many worlds coexist and interact, countless options communicate with one another instead of promoting one abstract universal good for all. These options intersect, sometimes inside our bodies and selves, and each locus of intersection is an option. Decolonial pluriversality is parallel to intersectionality, but operates on a different level: its target is not the constellation of race, gender, class, and other power asymmetries, but rather the aberration of the universal as such.

### The geopolitics of knowledge and the post-Soviet women

Geopolitical positioning has long been an important element of intersectionality as exemplified in women of color and transnational feminisms. Nina Lykke points out that the analysis of geopolitical positioning “requires a self-reflexive stance on global/

local locations not only in relation to crude and rather abstract categories such as East-West/North-South [...] it is necessary to engage in much more detailed reflections on unequal relations between nations, regions, mother tongues, and so on and to analyze the ways in which they generate various kinds of problematic methodological particularisms or universalisms in research”.<sup>6</sup>

**THIS OBSERVATION** is particularly true in relation to the experience of the post-Soviet women who are today either aspiring, in the endless catching-up logic, the status of the second-rate gendered subjects of the First World, or sliding from the position of the honorary Second World to that of the global South, marked by the secondary colonial difference and acting as the subalterns of the subaltern empire Russia, multiplying the numbers of dispensable lives unable and unwilling to fully share the postcolonial stance. From the specific Soviet modernity with its own colonialism, we shift to the situation of global, neoliberal colonialism, equalizing in a way the ex-colonizers with the ex-subalterns, casting us all out from modernity and making the postsocialist subject silent and invisible,<sup>7</sup> yet able to retain the internal power asymmetries and discriminations not always visible to the external observer. For instance, the post-Soviet racial taxonomy and normalized epistemic asymmetry still tags everyone with Asian or Caucasus blood as underdeveloped and arrested “savages” unfit to theorize any experience including our own (particularly if this experience includes an obvious racial and gender discrimination on the part of the Russian state and the Russian majority in power) and dictates that the non-European, post-Soviet gender theorists occupy the position of native informants and diligent pupils of their Russian and/or European teachers.

An Egyptian writer and gender activist, Nawal el Saadawi, detected a similar syndrome in a Wellesley conference on women



Azerbaijani Soviet poster.



Shah-i-Zinda, Samarkand, local girls displaying Central Asian hijab fashion.

PHOTO: ARIAN ZWIEGERS/FLICKR

and development: “The well-meaning US organizers . . . had no idea how maternalistic and condescending they sounded, in both words and attitudes, when they read papers or talked at the participants, telling them how to behave . . . . For the US organizers, power was not the issue, because they had it, and thought it normal for us not to participate . . . .” The organizers had the capacity to turn the Third World women’s protests into “personal defects”.<sup>8</sup> Something similar is to be found in the post-Soviet space with its silences and omissions, unspoken resentment and continued scorn between Russian and non-Russian, secondary European and non-European gendered subjects. These non-Europeans are often even less aware of their position and the discrimination they face, and less ready to formulate a specific stance, than European women of color are. This is an indicator of thoroughly colonized minds and bodies marked by one maniacal urge to become a peripheral part of someone else’s modernity, even at the expense of their own kind. These people, in contrast to many honest and open-minded European feminists, are not really expressing any interest in coalitions with the Orientalized gendered Others, but instead stick to their own agendas which belatedly repeat and reproduce the Western ones. In the case of post-Soviet inequalities, intersectionality can hardly act as a reconciling device in the way it can in Europe, where anti-racist gendered migrants claim it as a weapon and a way of identifying the ongoing conflict with European white feminism.<sup>9</sup>

**THE LOCAL HISTORY** of the non-European ex-colonies of the Russian empire and the USSR – the Janus-faced second-class empire, marked by external imperial difference and double colonial difference USSR – generates specific multilayered identifications, modes of survival and re-existence, and intersectional tangents growing out of the multiple dependencies on modernity/coloniality in its Western, and also its insecure Russian and

Soviet forms, as well as complex and often contradictory religious and ethnic cultural configurations. They disturb the simple binarism of the modern/colonial gender matrix as they multiply and distort many familiar categories and discourses such as Orientalism, racism, Eurocentrism, imperial and colonial masculinity and femininity, and colonial gender tricksterism evolving in the domain of individual agency and social change. The specific Soviet experience of an *other* emancipation and efforts to create its own New Woman in her metropolitan and colonial versions, grounded in the double standards and reticence that was typical of the whole Soviet system, places the gendered subjects of the ex-colonies of Russia and the USSR into conditions that are not quite postcolonial and not entirely postsocialist, and that cannot be attributed to race, ethnicity, or religion, nor to ideology and class. Yet in the continuing situation of epistemic power asymmetries, the nuances of the Soviet gender trajectories, to say nothing of the presocialist local genealogies of women’s struggles and resistance, tend to be erased.

**MARIA MATSUDA URGES** us to “ask the other question” in order to avoid the inevitable blind spots in intersectional investigations. She suggests that we include categories that would not appear obvious in this or that particular study, which of course enriches the complexity and subtlety of intersectional analysis: “When I see something that looks racist, I ask, ‘Where is the patriarchy in this?’ When I see something that looks sexist, I ask, ‘Where is the heterosexism in this?’ When I see something that looks homophobic, I ask, ‘Where is the class interest in this?’”<sup>10</sup> This is crucial for any effort to understand the situation of non-Russian women from the former and present colonies of the Russian/Soviet empire. A good example in this case is the flat and frozen interpretation of veiled Caucasus women exclusively through terrorist discourses as black widows and potential suicide bombers.



## The hijab and the trajectory of Central Asian women

For a limited number of Caucasus women, the hijab indeed becomes a sign of political-cum-religious identity, as in other Muslim locales in the world. Yet there is a larger group of women in the Caucasus who choose to veil themselves for reasons other than religion or politics. In this case we find a specific intersection of class, religion, and ethnicity which does not easily yield to the simple “but for” logic. These women obviously experience discrimination when they travel to Moscow or other predominantly Russian cities. Yet in their native republics they are often marked by the hijab as possessing a certain social status, not anything religious as such, but rather a piety whose Muslim interpretation mingles with the ethnic-national traditional ethical codes. These are mostly middle class women for whom it is prestigious to cover themselves. (In some cases, it is a necessary condition for a good marriage; in other, it is a play on a stylized archaization, the construction of a *halal* self, similar to subcultural youth identities, behind which often stands an urge to become rooted in an essentialized or escapist identity.) Ostracized as potential terrorists in the Moscow metro, in their own world they would show a condescending attitude to those women who cannot afford a good, expensive hijab and who simply must work to support their families. Discriminated against in one world, they themselves become discriminators in a different world. This logic was pointed out by Patricia Hill Collins, who wrote that in the matrix of domination there are no pure victims or oppressors and the oppressed often becomes the oppressor.<sup>11</sup> This new Caucasian hijab fashion defies most other interpretations of the hijab because there was and is no traditional, unmarked hijab here. There are only political and boutique versions of hijab in the modern Caucasus since veiling has come only recently, and from the outside, to this region – one of secondary and late Islamization, where Islam is hybridized with local polytheistic and often feminocratic cosmologies.

**BY CONTRAST**, the Central Asians are universally seen in modern-day Russia as dirt poor, and are placed lowest on the scale of humanity, to the point of erasing the gender markers so that the so-called illegal women migrants have a status akin to that of the African-American slaves: these women are seen as biologically female, yet culturally and socially subhuman. These bare lives are used and abused in compulsory long workdays, sexual trafficking, and as producers of children to be sold as live goods. The religious factor is completely erased from their othering, since religion is a cultural marker and these dispensable lives are located outside culture. They were born and made to exist in the grip of global colonialism in its different versions – the neo-colonial world of Central Asia and the post-imperial (and also neocolonial) world of metropolitan Moscow. Any serious intersectional study would have to take into account the diachronic element of these women’s positioning – their trajectory towards today’s condition, which is different from that of African-American women or Latinas in the US. In some cases clearly deprived

of their social status and rights by Russian and Soviet colonization, and in other cases first discriminated against by their own ethnic national and religious environments and later accorded a number of rights thanks to colonization and Sovietization, the ancestors of these future post-Soviet slaves traveled the forced path of Soviet modernism with its double standards, racism, othering, violent emancipation, and low glass ceilings in relation to all non-Russian women, but also with such socialist advantages as universal education (although Russified, and not always of good quality), minimal social guarantees within the Soviet colonial mono-economic model, limited vertical social mobility for national minorities in accordance with Soviet multiculturalism, and honorary membership in the Second World. It is crucial to keep this in mind when tracing the trajectory of Central Asian women towards their contemporary condition of neo-slavery and their firm placement in the global South, without a share in its political agency and epistemology.

There is one more group of Caucasus and Central Asian women that does not fit the usual discrimination dichotomies. I define them as tricksters and border dwellers who switch codes and identities as a way to survive and resist. These people often belong to the middle-class educated strata of the post-Soviet societies; they are the postcolonial products of the Soviet multicultural policies who often grew up in the metropolis, and, through their linguistic and cultural competence, can easily belong to mainstream society, yet are constantly reminded of their inferiority and eventually choose not to assimilate. Such people experience discrimination in subtler but no less profound ways. Moreover, their assumed privileges, in comparison with those of illegal migrant slaves, turn into more sophisticated derogations on academic, cultural, and intellectual levels. The very existence of this group of people is not convenient to many Western and Russian researchers as it destroys their progressivist taxonomy, which is grounded in Orientalist stereotypes, and pigeonholes Central Asian and Caucasus women as stereotypical downtrodden and retarded Orientals/Muslims, or as Soviet modernized party activists and Westernized emancipated gendered subjects – invariably rejecting their culture to become New Women according to the standards of Soviet or Western mod-



Feminist graffiti in St Petersburg: “Cooking and fashion – that’s NOT freedom”.

ernism.<sup>12</sup> If Central Asian or Caucasus gender theorists are ever allowed into the international feminist club, it is usually in the capacity of meek apprentices of the Western gurus, who trade their independent thinking for a comfortable place in Western universities, and, despite experiencing Orientalism in their everyday academic lives, refuse to question the generally accepted Western scientific approaches, defending them as objective and uncontaminated by locality and/or ideology.

### Postcolonial gender theorists mimicking Western feminism

The few existing investigations of gender issues in the non-European Soviet ex-colonies seldom depart from the West-centric, fundamentally Orientalist yardstick and universalized set of concepts and assumptions for analyzing non-Western gendered Others. Many Western specialists reproduce this unconsciously. Their Russian clones follow the incurable Russian penchant for mimicking the West and reproducing its theoretical paradigms applied to local material, yet at the same time retain their old role as mediators and translators of modernism into the non-European colonies, compensating for their own inferiority complex vis-à-vis the West in the persistent habit of teaching colonial Others how to be. The post-Soviet ex-colonial Others are the most promising group of researchers, having all the ingredients for an insightful analysis of their local histories and contemporary struggles. Yet they are too often victims of the old parochial epistemic regimes that assume that knowledge is produced in the West, or in a few exceptional cases, in Russia, and agree to play the role of native informants or diligent pupils of Western and/or Russian feminism, reproducing derivative discourses delegitimizing any previous models of gendered resistance.

The obvious reason for this is economic and institutional. The massive indoctrination with Western feminism, supported by grants and accompanied by particular ideological demands in the first post-Soviet years, resulted in the emergence of many gender centers and programs willing to start from scratch, as if there had been no Soviet history of gender struggles. Or, in some cases, the history was acknowledged, yet misinterpreted by the mostly metropolitan post-Soviet scholars utilizing Western approaches such as post-Lacanian psychoanalysis. This syndrome is obviously a manifestation of a new kind of mind-colonization, which has resulted in an unhealthy self-orientalizing and self-negation on the part of the ex-colonial Others<sup>13</sup> that is hard to resolve.

**TODAY, WHEN RUSSIA** is rapidly turning into a fundamentalist police state, any type of feminism, and particularly the gendered forms of political and social activism, raise suspicions in the corridors of power. Practically all post-Soviet feminist organizations in Russia are now either banned or harassed as “foreign agents”. These unfavorable conditions further postpone the possibility of any intersectional coalitions and alliances. The minuscule islands of institutionalized academic gender studies and the exceedingly moderate and conciliatory state-supported gender institutions abstain with increasing frequency from any independent theorizing, preferring to collect statistical facts and apply someone else’s

methods to the analysis of mythologized post-Soviet reality.

In the Caucasus and Central Asia, Soviet modernism is replaced with either the Western progressive model or the peddling of nationalist discourses characteristic of young postcolonial nations that permit only specific ideas and propagandistic models of national culture, mentality, creativity, and religiosity. The complex indigenous cosmologies, epistemologies, ethics, and gender models discordant with modernism and colonialism are erased or negatively coded, even in the works of indigenous scholars, who are forced to buy their way into academia by conforming to Western mainstream gender research. So the tripartite scheme of the colonial and ex-colonial post-Soviet gendered Other persists: it sees women as forever climbing the stairs of modernity – from traditionalism through the Soviet half-traditional, half-modern model to the Western liberated female.<sup>14</sup> In contrast with Chinese gender theorists, who refused to walk the path of universal feminism wearing Western shoes uncomfortable for their feet – for the simple reason that they had already walked a long way on their own path,<sup>15</sup> gender discourses in peripheral Eurasia often remain in the grip of progressivism and developmentalism. It thus becomes all the more important for the ex-colonial, postsocialist gendered Others to get acquainted with some alternative non-Western approaches to gender, to be “indoctrinated” by the theorists and activists of the global South.

There is still little reciprocal interest between the ex-socialist postcolonial world and the global South. The global South was disappointed in the ex-socialist world, which failed to accomplish its expansionist mission. It also still codes “postsocialist” in ideological, not racial terms. As a result, gender activists are seldom ready to accept the equation between colonialism and socialism. However, this misunderstanding is already vanishing with the growth of contacts, dialog, and genuine interest on both sides, and a conscious refusal to follow the logic of modernism with its agonistic rivalry.

### Intersectional coalitions, creolized theories, and transversal dialogues

By finding intersections in our experience and sensibilities, we can recreate a flexible gender discourse which would answer local logic and specific conditions, yet would be able to find resonance with other voices in the world. In order to do this, it is necessary to take a border pluritopic position that negotiates between modernity in its various forms and its internal and external Others. Such a strategic intersectionality allows different de-essentialized flexible and dynamic groups to understand each other in their mutual struggles. What is at work here is a horizontalized transversal networking of different local histories and sensibilities mobilized through a number of common yet pluriversal and open categories, such as colonialism or the postsocialist imaginary. As a result, we can replace the frozen categorical and negative intersectionality that often entraps the groups of women it focuses on in a situation of sealed otherness and victimhood, merely diagnosing their multiple oppressions, with a more positive resistant and re-existent stance of attempting to build an alternative world with no Others. Such a positive



Frontline defenders' view on the situation of NGOs in Russia.

intersectionality would develop in the direction of an open creolized theorizing as defined by Françoise Lionnet and Shu-mei Shih: “Creolized theory is open to vernacular grammars, methods, and lexicons [...] in the sense that it is a living practice that precedes yet calls for theorization while resisting ossification. Creolized theory enables unexpected comparisons and the use of different analytical tools”. It becomes “urgent to attempt theory in the many idioms and languages that are congruent with our diverse orientations as transnational producers of knowledge.”<sup>16</sup>

**AN OPEN AND CRITICAL** intersectionality helps to make a shift towards a more conscious agency, laying the groundwork for a future solidarity. Transversal crossings of activism, theorizing, and, often, contemporary art, are among the most effective tools in social and political struggles against multiple oppressions and in the creation of another world where many different worlds would coexist and communicate with one another in a positive and life-asserting intersectional way aimed at restoring human dignity and the right to be different but equal. It is necessary to further elaborate an open critical basis that would take into account the existing parallels between various echoing concepts and epistemic grounds of gender discourses and would find an interdisciplinary, or better yet, transdisciplinary language for expressing oppositional gendered being, thinking, and agency across the transcultural and transepistemic pluriversal loci. Then the post-Soviet non-European gendered Others can finally hope to exercise our right to keep our dignity and no longer plead to be accepted by the West, the global North, or Russia. ❌

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