

# Climbing the Mountain and Crossing the Wall: Politically Sensitive Post-Soviet Women's Literature in Translation

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## Introduction

Women translators have dominated the transmission of Russian literature to Anglophone audiences<sup>1</sup>. The self-taught and prolific Constance Garnett translated Tolstoy, Turgenev, Dostoevsky, and many others in the early twentieth century; her successors (including Rosemary Edmonds, Margaret Wettlin, and Elizaveta Fen) were commissioned to produce new versions of the same classics Garnett had originally introduced to British readers. Many, if not most, Russian-English literary translators active today are female; Marian Schwartz, Rosamund Bartlett, and Bela Shayevech are among the best-known contemporary translators from Russian. Since the days of Edmonds and Fen, translators are no longer primarily engaged in (re-)rendering literary fiction already acknowledged as canonical; now they are equally likely to introduce contemporary authors or previously untranslated work by famous writers to the reading public. Given their well-established historical precedent as mediators of Russian identity, it is unsurprising that Western female translators should use their skills and experience to promote female Russian-language authors abroad. However well-known the latter may be at home, most Russian authors struggle to generate name recognition in the infamously Anglocentric English-language publishing world. Even Ludmila Ulitskaya, the most acclaimed female novelist of her generation in Russia, is known abroad primarily to academics and metropolitan elites; from a publisher's perspective, Ulitskaya is no Sally Rooney.

This essay will contrast the translation and reception of two controversial Russian-language novels by female authors. It asks whether otherness, or cultural difference, enables or compromises the commercial success of a translation; and also how translators choose to mediate this difference. These authors, having both emerged from a liminal, post-colonial region, are personally familiar with the problems of containment and difference that afflict subaltern or peripheral literatures; both are also skilled at presenting their image to society through social media and journalism. I begin with Dagestani author Alisa Ganieva, whose novels *The Mountain and The Wall* (*Prazdnichnaia gora*, 2012) and *Bride and Groom* (*Zhenikh i nevesta*, 2015) were translated by Carol Apollonio in 2015 and 2018 respectively. My second subject is the Tatar novelist Guzel Yakhina's debut novel *Zuleikha* (published in Russia in 2015 as *Zuleikha Opens Her Eyes* [*Zuleikha otkryvaet glaza*]), translated by Lisa C. Hayden for Oneworld in 2019. Both novelists are young, female, and ethnically non-Russian (they share Islamic backgrounds, while their writing explore Islamic characters and issues). Ganieva writes about radical Islam in her Caucasian homeland, while Yakhina's novel addresses Stalin-era persecution from the perspective of one of its victims, a young Muslim woman.

Whether despite, or because of, their ethnic identity and controversial themes, both authors have been unexpectedly successful in Russia and now also abroad in terms of readership and

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<sup>1</sup> Any inconsistent spellings of Russian names are deliberate, as a result of the following system adopted for their transliteration into English: where the name was already widely known or published under a non-standard spelling (Tolstoy, Ulitskaya, Yakhina), I used this spelling except when directly citing a Russian-language source by that author. In such cases, I reverted to Library of Congress transliteration (Ulitskaia, Iakhina). This includes Russian-language Works Cited.

literary awards. Both their translators are experienced; Apollonio, a professor of Russian at Duke University, translates freelance from both Russian and Japanese. Hayden has translated a diverse range of contemporary Russian and Ukrainian authors, including Eugene Vodolazkin, Margarita Khemlin and Marina Stepnova. Her long-running blog on new Russian writing (including regular commentaries on book prize shortlists), ‘Lizok’s Bookshelf’ is highly regarded. Hayden’s translation of *Zuleikha*, which won a 2018 English PEN Award, was published by Oneworld Publications, while Deep Vellum published both Ganieva’s *Mountain* and her next novel, *Bride and Groom*. Comparing the subjects, translation strategies, and media reception of the English versions of Ganieva’s and Yakhina’s novels, I will discuss why their novels have enjoyed critical, and even some commercial, success within the infamous 3%.

### **Alisa Ganieva**

Ganieva’s first publication was *Salam, Dalgat!* (2009), a novella set in contemporary Dagestan. This former Soviet socialist republic is today an autonomous region within the Russian federation, with a population of approximately three million people of whom fewer than 4% are ethnically Russian. The rest belong to diverse Caucasian ethnicities, many of whom are Muslim, with Russian the universal first or second language; Ganieva herself is Avar, one of the largest ethnic groups. Although she leads a modern, Europeanized lifestyle in Moscow, her literary themes remain closely tied to her childhood and ethnicity. *Salam, Dalgat!* appeared under a male pseudonym (Gulla Khirachev), a gambit intentionally highlighting the disproportionately male influence over both literature and politics in Russia. Later, she observed that the 2009 committee of Russia’s Debut Prize Committee, who make a high-profile annual award for new fiction by writers aged under twenty-five, fully expected the author of *Salam, Dalgat!* to be “‘some brutal, unshaven guy from the mountains’” (Meyer 2015, 3). Instead they met the ‘casually glamorous’ Ganieva, whose ‘merciless’ depiction in this novella of her home town of Makhachkala – the capital of Dagestan – earned her not entirely welcome notoriety in Russia, including death threats. *The Washington Post* credited her with creating a portrait of ‘a Dagestani town roiling with drug gangs, Islamic fundamentalists, water-supply breakdowns, burning garbage cans, abusive police officers and women fawning over Gucci knockoffs’ (Wren, 2012). Ganieva went on to produce the novels discussed here while establishing herself on the Moscow arts scene as a journalist, literary editor, and media personality.

### ***Bride and Groom and The Mountain and the Wall***

Both Ganieva’s novels are set in recognizable versions of Dagestan: *The Mountain and the Wall* in its capital, Makhachkala, on the edge of the Caspian Sea, and *Bride and Groom* in a small provincial town which could be anywhere in the region, like a Caucasian version of Skotoprigon’evsk (the prototypical Russian provincial town Dostoevsky invented as the setting for *The Brothers Karamazov*). The characters in each are extremely realistic: women get their hair set for wedding parties, young men work out in basement gyms and go to nightclubs, mothers scheme to marry off adult offspring, mosques become radicalized, and local power-brokers enforce corrupt systems. One critic highlighted *Bride and Groom*’s ‘strange, comic and menacing characters that feel like they came out of a literary cross between *Goodfellas* and *My Big Fat Greek Wedding*’ (Groskop 2018). While both novels begin naturalistically, *The Mountain and the Wall* transforms into a magic-realist scenario where Russia erects a wall overnight along its border with Dagestan, simultaneously cutting off Internet access inside its smaller neighbour. Within days, an extremist Islamist faction

takes over Dagestan, introducing *sharia* law and forcing moderate Muslims into hiding or exile. These events are conveyed by multiple narrators, while the almost-lovers at the plot's centre, Shamil and Asya, are haunted by the recurring motif of a "Mountain of Celebrations", the *prazdnichnaia gora* of the novel's Russian title. This mysterious place may be a real mountaintop village which Shamil and a friend once visited, or a metaphor for the afterlife, or both at the same time. While the plot of *Bride and Groom* is superficially more prosaic – a love story between two young Muslims who have each returned to their village after working in Moscow – it rests upon what Ganieva calls a 'quiet subtext' of Sufist allegory. As she writes in her afterword to the English version, 'I wanted to structure my heroes' story not only as a movement of two hearts towards each other, but also as the path of a Sufi to the Absolute' (Ganieva, 2018: 235-6). Hence characters are in fact ciphers for mythical figures from Sufi philosophy; the narrative's tragic elements introduce the Sufi concepts of self-knowledge and asceticism; and the final vision of the Sea is a metaphor for unity with eternal Truth. It is perfectly possible to read *Bride and Groom* as nothing more than a love story with acutely observed commentary on the contemporary Caucasus; and yet its speculative, mystical elements, although less obvious than in *The Mountain and the Wall*, are essential to Ganieva's literary purpose.

While Ganieva has enjoyed considerable media attention in Russia over the last decade, she has so far failed to gain a widespread Western readership. This is despite her early connection with well-known translators such as Marian Schwartz (who translated one of her short stories, and [recommended her to Deep Vellum](#)) and Apollonio, her good fortune in becoming the first Russian writer to be published by Deep Vellum (and the first Dagestani novelist to be published in English), and positive reviews in Western media such as *The Guardian*, *The Washington Post* and the *Calvert Journal*. A collage of book covers of Ganieva's translations into other languages is shown below (see Image 1).



Image 1. Book covers of Ganieva's books translated into different languages. Credit: Alissa Ganieva.

I quote at length Will Evans's account of signing Ganieva to his company, Deep Vellum, because this passage demonstrates the importance of instinct and interpersonal connections in publishing (here, in accepting a debut novel by an unknown writer):

[...]n 2013, in our second meeting, I sat down and Petra [Hardt, of German publishers Suhrkamp, who had published *The Mountain and the Wall* as *Die Russische Mauer* in 2014] said, in her unmistakable forthright and unique way, "Will Evans, I have a book for you. By a Russian woman. Alisa Ganieva. Do you know her? No? Well you will. Read this book. I will send you the Russian text. Read it. You must publish her." I said I would read it, and asked what else she had for me. And she replied, "This is the only book for you right now. But it is the right book." I love when foreign rights directors, agents, translators, anybody in the industry, can get to know a person to recommend the one book to consider, rather than sifting through dozens of pitches and samples and submissions trying to find that ever-elusive gold [...], because it shows a commitment to understanding what I am trying to do with Deep Vellum, to doing homework on publishers, to get to know us as individuals with different tastes and affinities. To pitch a book that makes sense...but not just a book, but the book that makes sense. (Evans, 2014)

Deep Vellum's publication of both books was subsidized by the Russian philanthropic Prokhorov Fund; *The Mountain and the Wall* was additionally funded by the Russian Institute for Literary Translation. Both awards attest that Russian readers considered Ganieva's work to be culturally significant. (The translation of Yakhina's *Zuleikha* was supported by both a grant from Russia's Institute for Literary Translation and a PEN Translates award from English PEN, the latter arguably an even greater mark of esteem). In early 2018, BBC Radio 4 adapted *Bride and Groom* as a two-part, two-hour broadcast for their 'Reading Europe' series. While prestigious, the radio adaptation was, according to translator Carol Apollonio, badly timed, 'since the book was not widely available when the drama came out' (Apollonio 2019). She added, '[...] it would make a great movie! Fingers crossed some producer discovers the book' (Apollonio 2019). While Ganieva's work is yet to be filmed, the author I turn to next, Guzel' Yakhina, first planned *Zuleikha* as a screenplay before rewriting it as a novel, which was in turn adapted for Russian television.

### **Guzel' Yakhina and *Zuleikha***

Yakhina is an ethnic Tatar who was born and raised in the ancient city of Kazan, the capital of Tatarstan, before moving to Moscow in 1999 to study cinema and screenwriting. *Zuleikha* (see image 2 below) is a brutal, occasionally tragic, ultimately heartwarming romance, inspired although not wholly based upon Yakhina's grandmother's own exile to (and return from) Siberia during the 1930s. This was a period when the Soviet government savagely enforced 'dekulakization' – a policy of stripping wealthy peasants of their land, before exiling or executing them. Although set in the same area and in similar circumstances to those that would inform the gulag novels of the later twentieth century, this period lacks its Solzhenitsyn: the 1930s constitute a gap in Russian historical memory. Yakhina's narrative aims to fill that gap with frequently distressing detail – portraying starvation, infant death, insanity and murder – without failing to emphasize the positives which almost miraculously arise from the devastation of ordinary lives. Like Yakhina's own grandmother, her protagonist, Zuleikha, enjoys more opportunities in exile than she ever did as a vassal wife on her husband's farm. Highly popular in Russia, the book has won numerous prizes (including the prestigious Big Book Award in 2015), been translated into thirty-one languages

(beginning with Tatar) and sold over a third of a million copies (see Amos 2019). It has now been adapted as a popular television serial, ironically not by Yakhina herself – and even more ironically, by Russia’s largest (and state-owned) television channel *Rossia*, which is known for suppressing or misrepresenting information about Yakhina’s fellow Tatars in the disputed Crimean region (Hutchings and Szvostek, 2015, pp. 190-3). The part of Zuleikha is played by the popular Tatar actress Chulpan Khamatova who, like Yakhina, identifies as a Russian national and is not noticeably Asian in appearance.

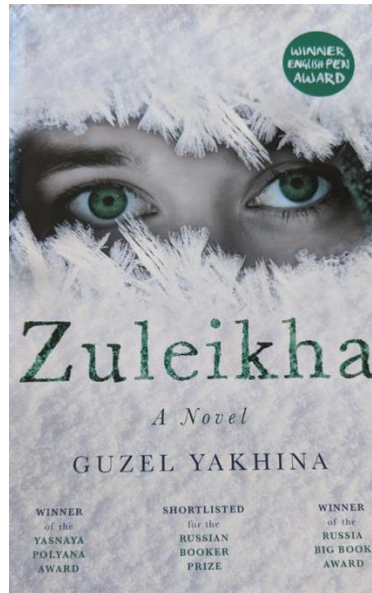


Image 2. Book cover of *Zuleikha*, Guzel’ Yakhina’s debut novel.

Translator Lisa C. Hayden first encountered the manuscript of Guzel’ Yakhina’s debut novel, then known by its Russian title *Zuleikha Opens Her Eyes*, when the Russian literary agency Elkost asked her to translate extracts from the novel to share with Anglophone publishers. Recalling this in 2015 in her blog ‘Lizok’s Bookshelf’, when Oneworld had yet to acquire the rights to the novel or commission her translation, Hayden praised the book’s ‘absorbing’, ‘compelling’, and ‘wonderfully readable’ qualities (Hayden 2015). This readability has been perceived as a weakness as well as a strength; writing in the *New York Times*, Francine Prose criticized Ganieva’s weakness for trite and ‘overwritten’ descriptive passages (Prose 2019). Despite this flaw, the book was longlisted (although not shortlisted) for the 2019 Warwick Prize for Women in Translation. *Zuleikha*’s melodrama is ideally suited for screen adaptation, and not all of it is contrived. For example, the sinking of the barge carrying the exiled kulaks upstream on a Siberian river, and the subsequent abandonment of the survivors in the taiga with insufficient resources for survival, could be based on the real-life Nazino affair of 1933, which led to the deaths of over 4000 kulaks within a few months on an island in the Siberian River Tom. However, the follow-up scene in Yakhina’s novel (where the manly camp commander rescues Zuleikha from drowning under the crippled barge) is sheer invention.

In her foreword to the 2019 Russian edition of *Zuleikha* (not included in the UK edition, although cited on its book jacket), Liudmila Ulitskaya endorses Yakhina as the latest in a tradition of Russian-language writers with dual cultural heritage (including Chingiz Aitmatov, Anatolii Kim, and Fazil Iskander) who benefit from this hybridity. In an example of Sufi-Russian symbolic overlap, almost as if echoing Ganieva’s sustained Sufi allegory in *Bride and Groom*, Yakhina creates a resonance between Semruk, the name of the crude Siberian settlement built by the exiles, and the Sufi myth of the Simurgh. Additionally,

Ulitskaya praises Yakhina's pioneering use of a woman's perspective to focalize historical fiction (Ulitskaia, 2019: 5-6). Western critics such as Prose, on the other hand, seem divided between praise for Yakhina's focus on troubled Russian history, and criticism of her refashioning of suffering as melodrama.

## Conclusions

Has these two writers' relatively exotic ethnicity, and their religion, influenced their Western reception positively or negatively? Their exoticism is, oddly, both intrinsic and superficial to their authorial identities. Despite their non-Russian ethnic origins, both authors write in Russian, and both lead Westernized Russian lives rather than a traditional Islamic lifestyle; Ganieva's books are scathing about the social consequences of Islamic fundamentalism, while Yakhina's oppressed Muslim heroine Zuleikha gradually adapts to a new, unsupervised and largely irreligious life in the *taiga*. Thus both authors and protagonists are cultural moderates whose divergences from familiar European norms are in many ways negligible. Even the dramatic jacket illustration of *Zuleikha*'s first UK edition has been criticized for orientalizing its subject: the green-eyed model, veiled by frost like a woman in a burqa, is more Western than Tatar in appearance. But has precisely this façade of exoticism, coupled with an accessible plot, allowed Ganieva and Yakhina to enjoy a positive Western critical reception? These books may owe their success to an explicitly sham transaction: they offer to edify, but actually they entertain. While the cover art, settings, and exotic characters *appear* to problematize Russian history and Islamic identity, the entertaining, plot-driven narratives conform to reader expectations. This is particularly true of Yakhina's work; Ganieva's novels are both more exotic and more philosophically complex. However, Yakhina avoids the trap of Orientalizing and thus diminishing her heroine; Yakhina's Zuleikha is normalized, rather than Orientalized; overcoming exploitation and suffering, she evolves into an everywoman.

An area which both writers genuinely problematize is language. The Russian edition of Yakhina's book comes with a three-page Tatar glossary. This is missing from the English translation, where Hayden either omits Tatar words and phrases or leaves them in italics, sometimes coupled with an English equivalent. As her translator's afterword states, this was a strategy she agreed with the author. Hence, for instance, the '*tashkil*' on the gravestones of Zuleikha's infant daughters is defined in the Russian edition's glossary as Arabic diacritics; Hayden's translation simply italicizes this Tatar word, leaving the context (or the Internet) to explain (Yakhina, 2019: 59). Apollonio's translation of *The Mountain and the Wall*, by contrast, comes with a nine-page glossary defining words from no fewer than nine regional languages. The commonest non-English terms are Arabic and Turkic, but Avar, Kumyk, and Lezgian (all Caucasian languages) also feature; only one Russian word, marked as pejorative, is glossed. While the glossary (and the use of so much foreign lexis in the main text) emphasizes the cultural difference of Ganieva's fictional milieu and the diversity contained within that difference, it is probably not conducive to wider commercial success among entertainment-focused Anglophone readers. I would suggest, following Reimóndez (2017), that Ganieva's linguistic multivalence (faithfully preserved by Apollonio) harnesses polyphony in defence of cultural plurality.

Not only is the polyphonic text created by Ganieva and preserved by Apollonio a constant reminder of the ethnic and linguistic diversity of Ganieva's Caucasian community, it challenges the hegemony of English over Russian, Russian over Avar, and so on. The lexis of *Zuleikha* is much less diverse. While the Tatar glossary accompanying the Russian edition is gestural rather than comprehensive, its complete omission from Oneworld's UK edition

suggests that the publishers viewed it as a dispensable feature. By leaving Tatar words untranslated in her English version, Hayden arguably highlights their exotic context. These words become markers of cultural difference. By contrast, the detailed Caucasian glossary retained by Apollonio and Deep Vellum makes the many untranslated words in Ganieva's novels fully comprehensible to Anglophone readers – at least, to those minded to use the glossary. Both books are skilfully translated and smartly produced. However, the much greater visibility of *Zuleikha* in libraries and bookstores signals that this book is being marketed aggressively for commercial profit, whereas the comparative obscurity of Ganieva's two books (despite early positive reviews) suggests that the publisher does not expect any significant return on a marketing campaign. All three novels compel and entertain; but it seems clear that the greater thematic subtlety and linguistic complexity of Ganieva's work has made it less competitive on the Western publishing market.

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