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gender epistemologies and Eurasian borderlands

Madina Tlostanova, Basingstoke, Palgrave Macmillan, 2010, 260pp.,

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Near the beginning of her introduction, Madina Tlostanova states that this is not going to be a book about gender or feminism, but rather a text that looks at ways of using gender, 'racial-ethnic' (her term) and religious relations to 'decolonise' thinking and knowledge in, and about, the 'Eurasian borderlands' of Central Asia and the Caucasus (p. xviii). These are regions, Tlostanova argues, that have experienced successive waves of colonisation: Islam, imperial Russia, the Soviet Union and now Western academic theory. Tlostanova is of the view that while the qualitative experience of these waves of colonisation may have been different—for instance, Islamic religious practices and rituals were often merged into existing belief systems, Russian imperial colonisers largely ignored 'the natives', and incorporation into the Soviet Union brought with it schools, hospitals and physical infrastructure—all of them denied, denigrated and ridiculed the value systems and knowledge of the 'indigenous' populations (again, her term). This was through the imposition of a Eurocentric binary of tradition vs. modernity. Subjection to this colonisation and now reluctance on the part of scholars active in the region to recognise these colonisations for what they are—in particular, the Soviet period and the current dogged adherence to dominant Western theory in regard to gender and other social fields—have led, Tlostanova believes, to the ongoing 'zombification' and 'a specific self-orientalizing inferiority complex' (p 140).

Tlostanova draws on Women of Color and Third World Feminist Theory, and postcolonial theory, to analyse the colonial experience for those living in the Eurasian borderlands. Her methods include analysis of orientalising novels, poetry, travelogues, paintings and advertisements about or inspired by the Eurasian borderlands, produced in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, predominantly by Russians or Europeans from other parts of the Russian empire and later Soviet Union. Later on in the book, Tlostanova also draws on interviews with women from the region, conscious or otherwise of their colonial positioning. Ultimately, Tlostanova makes it clear that none of these theoretical frameworks can be applied blindly to Central Asia and the Caucasus. Rather, she calls on regional scholars to identify the intersections and parallels between these theories and the reality of Eurasian borderland colonial experience, and use them as a starting point to begin their own processes of 'decolonisation', and the generation of their own

theory. Throughout, she promotes the idea of the 'colonial gender trickster' (an idea drawn from Sandoval's methodology of the oppressed), able to determine and maintain her own subjectivity through 'flexible change[s] of identities' (p. 144), without falling into either of the categories of 'traditional' or 'modern' woman, which, she argues, are rigidly demarcated.

The book is divided into three sections, each of which is broken up into shorter chapters. The first section sets out Tlostanova's theoretical approach, the second deals with Russian and Soviet colonialism in Central Asia and the Caucasus and the third with contemporary gender discourses in the region. I found the second section to be the most interesting and engaging. Here, the author highlights not only the similarities between imperial Russian and later Soviet colonialism and orientalism, as directed towards its Caucasus and Central Asian colonies, and what she terms European colonialism, but also the differences. For instance, while the peoples of these regions were 'orientalised' and 'othered' in nineteenth century Russian literature and art, this process was compromised by the absence, in many cases, of any obvious racial difference between the colonised and the colonisers (particularly in the Caucasus) and of a body of water to physically separate 'us' and 'them'. It was also compromised by the knowledge among the intellectual and artistic Russian elite that Russia was *itself* orientalised by the West. This resulted, Tlostanova argues, in a form of 'second-rate' orientalism in what was felt to be a 'second-rate' empire.

In another example, Tlostanova draws parallels between the idea of the 'dirt fetish' and the association made between dirt, gender and class in the British Empire (as expounded in Anne McClintock's work, among others) and the way that physical cleanliness came to be coded as a marker for culture, civilisation and loyalty to the new regime in early Soviet propaganda. However, while Tlostanova draws on McClintock's image of physical and moral dirtiness as embodied in the subaltern woman, she expands this to argue that in the context of early Soviet Central Asia the veiled (and refusing to de-veil) woman came to be coded as a figure of backwardness, dirt, sickness, religiosity and ignorance, and ultimately as the embodiment of the deficiencies of the entire ethnic group to which she belonged. 'Gradually to be an Uzbek or a Tadzhik (*sic*) became not simply equal to being dirty and backward, but also meant a moral and even biological deficiency' (p. 139).

Finally, in this section we also meet a 'real-life' colonial gender trickster, in the fascinating testimony of RK. RK is a Russian-speaking Uzbek woman, whose links to her own culture and language had been severed by her Russo-centric Soviet education, but who contests this Eurocentrism and seeks access to this denied 'Orient' through studying Urdu at university. She later refuses to align herself with either of the categories of 'traditional' Uzbek or 'modern' Soviet woman, presented to her as mutually exclusive by the propaganda of the Soviet state

and its representation of proper Soviet womanhood. Instead, she chooses to leave Uzbekistan to live and work in another area of the Soviet Union.

In many ways, this is an extremely important book, not least because it attempts to deal with issues of racism, cultural annihilation (which really isn't too strong a term to use) and enforced Russification in the Soviet Union in regard to the non-Slavic dominated republics and autonomous regions, which to date remain widely unacknowledged and unaddressed within the region. It also adds to the growing body of feminist literature from the region and from elsewhere, which problematizes the façade of women's emancipation in the Soviet 'borderlands', under the guise of Soviet modernity. It is a great shame then that the author seems to have been seriously let down by her publishers, in that the text does not appear to have been edited for language consistency and coherence, making it difficult to follow in certain places, and distracting from Tlostanova's important arguments. I also hope that a Russian-language version of this book has been or will be produced, for Tlostanova's call to the scholars of the region to 'decolonise their thinking' is valid and timely.

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