

CHAPTER SEVEN  
IDENTITY IN RUSSIAN-JEWISH  
WOMEN'S LITERATURE

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I

When addressing the theme of Russian femininity in a literary context, we are asking whether there are specifically Russian models of femininity constructed in literary texts and criticism. This question already implies that we are referring to something relating to identity, which differs from other models and which, therefore, either exists or does not exist.

According to occidental thinking patterns, identity means clarity, self-consciousness, one's own (and owned) language, and closeness—all referring to both personal and group identities. As regards social conflicts, it is group identity (based on cultural categories of class, ethnicity, religion, sexual and political orientation, and so on) which determines the concept of Self and Other.

Postmodern discussion interprets the original and autonomous Self as a "function of discourse" (Foucault) and calls identity into question. I follow neither the position of unity nor the contrary position of subjugation, but a third way,<sup>1</sup> which means that a solid core of identity is disputed. The possibility of "internal congruency and duration of a form or structure,"<sup>2</sup> however, is affirmed. The German philosopher Manfred Frank speaks of a "fixed stock of homologous predicates in changing constellations."<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Glomb, "Jenseits von Einheit und Vielheit."

<sup>2</sup> Straub, "Personale und kollektive Identität."

<sup>3</sup> Frank, *Die Unhintergebarkeit von Individualität*. See also Dees Ermath, "Beyond 'The Subject.'" Ermath speaks about an "unmistakable sequence." See also Henrich, "Identität—Begriffe, Probleme, Grenzen," 134, who understands identity as "the human being's relationship to himself and [...] his certainty that he will in many conditions and phases of life stay the same."

From this point onward, we can further explore Russian models of femininity as a "fixed stock of homologous predicates": for example, the fertility cult, the mother myth, *sofinost'* (spiritual wisdom), *sobornost'* (spiritual community), *krasota* (beauty), Soviet matriarchy, Russia as the Other, and so on. These predicates repeat themselves and vary "in changing constellations." Hence my research on identity is determined by a concept of identity whose differentiating attributes keep changing their relations and meaning.

Within the *zhenskaia proza* (women's prose) of the 1980s and 1990s, I have discovered a large number of women writers of Jewish descent who treat their origins as a literary theme, and, by raising the question of Jewish identity, also broach the subject of the relations between Self and Other in both post-Soviet society and society as a whole.<sup>4</sup> Femininity and being Jewish appear as a dual mode of discrimination in Liudmila Ulitskaia's "Vtorogo marta togo goda" (2 March of That Year), published in her collection *Bednye rodstvenniki* (Poor Relations, 1994),<sup>5</sup> or Mariam Iuzefovskaia's "Rishel'evskaia, 12" (12, Rishel'evskaia Street, 1993).<sup>6</sup> At the same time, the ethnic factor totally dominates the other differentiating attributes of identity and is represented as a flaw or blemish. This is a post-totalitarian phenomenon, as differences outside class antagonism had hardly been officially discussed in Soviet society. In the works of Russian women writers who are not part of an ethnic or religious minority, I have not, so far, found any comparable reflection of *being Russian* as an identity issue.<sup>7</sup>

<sup>4</sup> See Ulitskaia's stories "Bron'ka," "Genele-sumochnitsa," "Vtorogo marta togo goda," "Sonechka," in *Bednye rodstvenniki* (1994); the pictures and plots of racial discrimination in Iuzefovskaia, *Deti pobeditelei*; Katerli, "Starushka ne spesha," "Utrata"; Makarova, "Moisei Ben-Fric"; Polishchuk, "Solo dlia vorony"; Shcherbakova, "Emigratsiia po-russki..."; Bukur and Gorlanova, "Uchitel' ivrita." On hybrid identities, see also Rubina, "Vo Vratakh tvoikh."

<sup>5</sup> [Ed.]: In later editions, the title of this story is given as "Vtorogo marta togo zhe goda" (2 March in That Same Year, or 2 March in *That Year*)

<sup>6</sup> [Ed.]: This title refers to a smart address in the old Jewish quarter of Odessa, now in Ukraine.

<sup>7</sup> An exception is Iuzefovskaia's *povest'* "Oktiabrina," in *Deti pobeditelei*, where a Russian woman at the time of Lithuania's independence movement is excluded for being Russian. [Ed.]: see also Elena Trofimova, Chapter Six above, for a discussion of Tat'iana Nabatnikova's story "Shofer Astap" ("A Bus Driver Named Astap," 1989), which highlights the problems caused by a young Russian woman's liberal approach to gender and sexual identities in a Central Asian environment. Nabatnikova comes from a Russian and Ukrainian peasant background.

In the literature of Russian-Jewish women writers, configurations of artistic conflict were from the beginning oriented towards questioning the dichotomous structures of identity. Iuzefovskaia has shown us the relationality of the Other.<sup>8</sup> Dina Rubina has turned the exchangeability of positions into grotesque relationships between Russian and Israeli Jews and discussed the subtle interlacing of cultural characteristics which can no longer be proportionally attributed. And Ulitskaia has emphasized the common origin of people who, in the course of human history, have differentiated themselves according to religion, ethnicity, nationality and sex.

The increase in comical instances in literature by Russian women writers proves their growing self-confidence. Contrary to its situation of discrimination, the Other is not only seen as an accident or an opportunity (Ulitskaia), or poeticized (Ulitskaia, Rubina); the mechanisms of segregation are mocked in ridiculous relationships and situations.<sup>9</sup>

In the 1990s, with few exceptions, many Russian-Jewish women writers emigrated to Israel, the United States or Western Europe. Thus, the "changing constellations" already mentioned, that is, these writers'

<sup>8</sup> On the other hand, Russian women writers depict a reduced Self in their characters who repress or ostracize the Other and are unable to establish any self-restraint or self-determination. They are often dogmatic and aggressive and, at the same time, anxious monsters like the informers in Iuzefovskaia's novels (see "Deti pobeditelei" and "Komendant obshchezhitia" in Iuzefovskaia, *Deti pobeditelei*). Expressing intolerable grief, the depiction of the Other in Iuzefovskaia's work is the excluded stranger in the position of victim. Iuzefovskaia exchanges the position of the minority within the majority, reversing national arrangements (Jews, Germans or French people in Russia, Russians in Lithuania, Russian Jews in Israel), thus breaking the tragic cycle of Jewish people's experience of exclusion.

<sup>9</sup> Viacheslav Bukur and Nina Gorlanova depict the relativity of the Self/Other-relationship in their ironic story "Uchitel' ivrita" (The Hebrew Teacher, 1994). The teacher is of Russian-Moldavian descent and married to a Georgian woman; he mentions in an ironic, self-deprecating way that his children are obviously a "blood-mixture": «Вот если б в Молдавии был принят закон о возвращении как в Израиле, я бы считался сыном пострадавшего гражданина [...] но ведь там национализм расцветёт тогда, а у меня столько русской крови в жилах, а в детях и грузинская есть» ("If a Law of Return were passed in Moldavia, as in Israel, I would be considered the son of a citizen who has suffered [...] but in that case nationalism would flourish there, and I have so much Russian blood in my veins, and my children have Georgian blood as well"): *Zvezda* 5 (1994), 36. [Translations from the Russian are by the editor, unless otherwise stated.] In Galina Shcherbakova's short story "Emigratsiia po-russki" (Emigration Russian-style), the narrator, proud of her "pure" Russian blood, feels ashamed because of her flattened "Jewish" bottom and her foreign-sounding family name.

concrete living conditions in time and space, changed—and with them the significance of the attributes of identity for the concept of identity itself. Race as a category, just like gender, now becomes less important than social and cultural factors. The protagonists have the experience of being excluded and repelled, not because they are men or women or because they are Jews, but because they have emigrated from a country with another culture and ideology whose totalitarian structure is connected with the image of the immature citizen. Everywhere, every time, they are *belated*; the world around them is already determined.

These migrants' new identity hovers between fragments of the old Self as the *Other in the old homeland* and the new Self as the *Other in the new homeland*.<sup>10</sup> Situations like these create a permanently divided and alienated identity and, moreover, produce new dichotomies in the relationship between the dominant and migrant culture. Post-colonial discourse compares this disposition to the relations between the colonial power and the so-called natives.<sup>11</sup> This process is not necessarily attributed to national dichotomies, just as boss and worker are usually not separated by nationality but by social contrasts.

Due to the situation of discrimination to which the "colonial subject" (far from being "native") feels exposed, it tends to idealize the old homeland and is frequently at odds both with the culture it bore with it and that of the new homeland.<sup>12</sup> Therefore, Russian-Jewish emigrants often become intermediaries of Russian culture. Soviet life experience, the primacy of Russian culture, and the remnants of internalized social ideals of the Soviet era preserve a Soviet way of life which even in Russia has long since been *passé*.

We read in Rubina's book *Sindikát* (The Syndicate, 2004):

Эх,—говорит,—Ильинишна! [...] Всё какая-то сентиментальность в голове, какая-то советская дружба народов [...] Давненько вас тут не было. Это ж, [...] совсем другая, очень конкретная безжалостная жизнь.

("Oh," he [Slava] said, "Ilinishna! [...] You always have some sentimental notion in your head, some kind of Soviet-style friendship of the peoples

<sup>10</sup> Zaborowska, *How we found America*, 28.

<sup>11</sup> Fludernik, "The Constitution of Hybridity," 32, refers to "the hybrid's desire for the symbol of authority."

<sup>12</sup> Fludernik, "Colonial vs. Cosmopolitan Hybridity," 262, 275.

[...] You haven't been here for a long time. It's [...] a completely different, very concrete, ruthless life.)<sup>13</sup>

In modern discourse, the stereotype of the Other is assumed by the Jew. At the same time, a dual identity is attributed to the western Jew which is derived from the acknowledgement of two cultures and the connection between them: the Jewish and that of each respective nationality.<sup>14</sup> The Moscow ethnologist N. Iuchneva envisions Russian-Jewish identity as a "new sub-ethnicity of Russian culture in the twentieth century."<sup>15</sup> What we have to consider, however, is: does not this attribution again confirm mechanisms of inclusion and exclusion? And does this binary arrangement actually reflect contemporary sentiment?

Concerning the situation of the Russian-Jewish migrant, the subversive notion of hybrid identity by Homi Bhabha, the British researcher on post-colonialism, is highly relevant. Hybrid identity as the norm within post-colonial societies is for him "neither One nor the Other but something else besides."<sup>16</sup> Hybridity involves the inseparable mutual penetration of centre and periphery which enables the migrant to achieve a *double vision*. By virtue of this *double vision*, the migrant becomes a "productive parasite"<sup>17</sup> who brings his or her homelessness into play and operates in a *third space*.<sup>18</sup>

<sup>13</sup> Rubina, *Sindikát*, 29.

<sup>14</sup> On 1 March 2005, Iuzefovskaia wrote to Christina Parnell: «Генетически, исторически, а также, позволю себе такой расизм, ментально каждый из нас принадлежит к определённой группе. Особенность евреев заключается в дуальности. Они одновременно принадлежат нескольким культурам и нескольким странам с их историей. Но ведь это и особенность любого мигранта и эмигранта. Главное не быть буриданновым ослом и не умереть от голода между двумя охапками сена.» ("Genetically, historically, and, I'll permit myself this racist comment, mentally, each of us belongs to a specific group. The peculiarity of the Jews is their duality. They belong simultaneously to several cultures and several countries with their own history. But after all, that's the specific feature of any migrant and emigrant. The main thing is not to be Buridan's ass and die of hunger between two stacks of hay.")

<sup>15</sup> Iuchneva, "Russkie evrei v XX veke." The roots of this can be seen in the processes of acculturation (not assimilation) of Russian Judaism in the nineteenth century.

<sup>16</sup> Bhabha, *The Location of Culture*, 219.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, 219.

<sup>18</sup> On hybridization, see Horatschek, "Hybridität auf dem Prüfstand in *The Moor's Last Sigh* von Salman Rushdie," 217.

One of these “productive parasites” who are creatively exploiting their situation is Dina Rubina, who discovered her very own themes and style in Israel, the Promised Land, where she has been living since 1990.<sup>19</sup> The situation of the migrant has also influenced Iuzefovskaia's portrayal of Jewish identity. While her writings during the Soviet and post-Soviet periods present identity as a burden, the distance of exile allows her for the first time to create protagonists who *live out* their Jewishness.

## II

Collective identity can be distinguished from personal identity by “an exclusively symbolic expression,” which lacks physical presence.<sup>20</sup> As a metaphor it can be rejected and changed. Time and time again Iuzefovskaia mentions the right of human beings to choose their own group identity freely—even if this means displacement. Ulitskaia, who stayed in Russia, regards Jewish group identity in today's Russia as something unspectacular.<sup>21</sup> In its national, religious, ethnic and gender aspects, identity appears to be an interweaving of highly heterogeneous phenomena. Especially provocative are the sliding transitions concerning gender differentiation and religion in Ulitskaia's novels *Medeia i ee deti* (*Medea and her Children*, 1996) and *Veselye pokhorony* (*The Happy Funeral*, 1998). Rubina's idea of identity, on the contrary, is outspokenly essentialist, even though the cultural and national identities of her protagonists contain strongly hybrid structures.

Which collective identities are invoked by Russian-Jewish writers, and specifically, Russian-Jewish women writers? Russian? Jewish? Russian-Jewish? Feminine? Social? Human? Notwithstanding the fact that conflicts are usually not based upon ethnic quarrels and notwithstanding its varying emphasis, the ethnic aspect of group identity is still the connecting element between these writers. The Holocaust, pogroms and discrimination are core identity markers in the collective memory of European Jews. Experiences of disillusionment in the conflict between official equality and demagogic national policies in the Soviet Union are also determinants of respective group identities.<sup>22</sup> The internalization of the values of

<sup>19</sup> Parnell, “Russkii Ierusalim”; Parnell, “Emigration und Heimkehr.”

<sup>20</sup> Assmann, *Das kulturelle Gedächtnis*, 132, 134.

<sup>21</sup> See the calm remark on her grandparents' possible Protestantism made by the narrator in Ulitskaia's *Skvoznaia liniia* (*The Main Thread*, 2002), or her reaction to her girlfriend's conversion to Russian Orthodox Christianity.

<sup>22</sup> See Iuzefovskaia, “Rishel'evskaia, 12,” in *Deti pobeditelei*, 143:

European enlightenment,<sup>23</sup> the meaning of family in Rubina's *Vot idet Messiia!* (*Here Comes the Messiah!*), and Ulitskaia's *Medeia i ee deti*, along with the problem of "Jewish self-hatred" in Iuzefovskaia's novels<sup>24</sup> are other characteristic attributes of Jewish group identity provided by the authors.

On the other hand, notions of identity among these writers reveal great differences. Rubina's female protagonists primarily understand themselves as Jews. In this context, Jewish identity is traced back to a monolithic, primary essence. Group membership is often referred to on the basis of kinship, with the members being interconnected by the "call of the blood" and the "Jewish soul."<sup>25</sup> This transfiguration of Jewishness and its essential determination through the ethnic factor contradicts the idea of

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«Как мне надоели твои вечные страхи. Твое вечное нытье. Запомни—у нас все равны! И я такая же, как все!»—крикнула я тетке прямо в лицо» (“I’m fed up with your eternal fears. Your eternal moaning. Bear in mind—we are all equal. And I’m the same as everyone!”, I yelled right in my aunt’s face.”) Unrequited love for Russia is a distinguishing mark of Russian Jews: «когда ты объясняешься в любви, а тебя сапогом под дых, то это уже не родина» (“when you declare your love and you get a punch in your guts, it isn’t your native land”). This is what the Ukrainian Jew Arik says about anti-Semitism in Soviet society in Iuzefovskaia, “Puti neispovedimye” (2003), 71.

<sup>23</sup> See the narrator’s reference to her grandparents’ generation (today her great-grandparents’ generation) of medical doctors who had studied in Switzerland, in Ulitskaia’s “Vtorogo marta togo goda.”

<sup>24</sup> See the conflicts in Iuzefovskaia between self-hatred and self-acceptance or between the demand for equality and the confrontation with the demagoguery of society: «Эта еврейская униженность! Это вечно согнутая спина, ожидающая удара», and «С чего вы взяли, что я—еврейка [...] Я—человек и больше никто» (“That Jewish humility! An eternally bent spine, expecting a blow,” and “What makes you think that I’m a Jew...? ...I’m a human being, no more, no less”): “Gospodi, podari nam zavtra.” See also Gilman, “Die Rasse ist nicht schön.”

<sup>25</sup> «Что это сокровенное чувство со-крови человеку навязать невозможно. Что порою приходит оно поздно, бывает—слишком поздно, иногда—в последние минуты, когда, беззащитного, тебя гонят по шоссе» (“It is impossible to impose this cherished feeling of blood kinship on a human being. Sometimes it comes late, at times, too late, sometimes at the very last moments when you are being herded, defenceless, down the road”): Rubina, “Iabloki iz sada Shlisbutera,” 329. See also Gomberg, “Sokrovennoe chuvstvo so-krovi”; Pitliar, “Do smeshnogo zhal’.” Both reviews refer to the end of the narration in “Iabloki iz sada Shlisbutera,” which reflects on the “hidden feeling of the blood in the human being.” Rubina also presents an essentialist understanding of identity in her novels *Vot idet Messiia!* and *Vo Vratakh tvoikh*.

identity in post-colonial discourse. In this view, subjects are not pinned down to an ethnic position; rather they are understood as a transgression of the diverging affiliations of ethnicity, class, sex or gender, respectively. The cultural identity of the individual is represented merely as an interrelationship between these affiliations.<sup>26</sup> Such connections correspond to the hybrid identity structure which replaces the dualism of Self and Other.

However, open identities of that kind hardly exist in the literature under consideration here. Rather, the hybrid Self conflicts with its own desire for the authentic. Is there, apart from the particularity of ethnic self-understanding, a specifically Russian or specifically Russian-Jewish gender position in the literature examined here?

### III

We know the equation of femininity and Jewishness in its negative interpretation from anti-Semitic literature, especially that of the *fin de siècle*.<sup>27</sup> In this literature both categories are physically associated with disease, weakness and chaos. Referring to Jewish women, stigmas of Jewishness like the "Jewish nose" or "Jewish eyes" are supplemented by bodily signs of voluptuousness, fertility and indolence when the so-called genetic predisposition of the Jewish woman to the "Jewish bottom" is cited. Male Jews are similarly attributed with effeminate marks. The argument about these ascriptions leaves an imprint on Jewish sexual self-understanding.<sup>28</sup> At the same time, there is hardly any discussion about the flaws of the Russian body in Russian literature.

Ulitskaia inverts these flaws by praising the beauty of the Jewish woman (her eyes, hair, and figure). Stigma is replaced by distinction.<sup>29</sup> Rubina presents the Jewish as being *as beautiful as* the feminine. And when life itself is threatened, the significance of ethnic and sexual identity as bodily identities outweighs social identity. In her story "Vysokaia voda venetsiantsev" (The High Water of the Venetians, 2000), the narrator grieves above all for the impending death of her body as a *feminine* body.<sup>30</sup> This does not allow us to infer that the affirmation of *corporeality*

<sup>26</sup> Bronfen, "Vorwort," ix.

<sup>27</sup> Weininger, *Geschlecht und Charakter*; Weigel, "Frauen und Juden"; Gilman, *Jüdischer Selbsthass*.

<sup>28</sup> Gilman, "'Die Rasse ist nicht schön'."

<sup>29</sup> See the chapter "Equality and Distinction," in Assmann, *Das kulturelle Gedächtnis*, 151.

<sup>30</sup> See Parnell, "Dina Rubina, 'Vysokaia voda venetsiantsev'."

and sexuality represents a specifically Jewish component of sexual identity, in contrast to its Russian counterpart. I must, however, point to the obligation of men, embodied in the Jewish religion, to provide their wives with “sexual delight”—or let them leave.<sup>31</sup> Hitherto, I have only encountered the importance of a fulfilled sexuality for a woman’s power in the works of Ulitskaia—in the female protagonists Aleksandra and Nika in *Medea*, or in Sonechka, the mother-figure, commenting on her husband Robert’s “diligent closeness.” But in Iuzefovskaia’s novel *Puti neispovedimye* (The Ways are Inscrutable, 2003) too, the mother-figure, Ruth, accuses her husband of coldness in bed and of denying her female pleasure.

In contrast to the disordered sexual relationships of the *zhenskaia proza* of the 1980s and 1990s (Petrushevskaja, Tokareva, Polianskaia, Vasilenko, Tolstaia, Sadur and others), man and woman in this literature are a couple who complement each other mentally and physically (as in Rubina’s *Vot idet Messiia!*<sup>32</sup> and many of Ulitskaia’s works). Usually, female protagonists in such literature are their families’ breadwinners in emigration, while men—artists or unemployed academics—take care of the dishes and children (in contrast to *zhenskaia proza*), or lament their failure. The Silver Age idea of femininity is complemented by the mother myth whose meaning perfectly matches the notion of the “Jiddishe name.” Rubina interconnects everything *homey* with the Jewish and the

<sup>31</sup> In her book on women in Judaism, *Was wurde aus Saras Töchtern?*, Levinson refers to this subject in Jewish matrimonial relationships.

<sup>32</sup> In Rubina’s work of the Israeli period, matrimonial relationships are determined by respect, love and humour, demonstrating the intimacy between both partners. Men and women are comrades, connected in a shy, moving and at the same time solicitous tenderness. «Он сидел в тёмной комнате, поминутно отжимал горячее полотенце и расстилал его на лбу и закрытых веках жены. Он тяжело и преданно любил эту вспльчивую, мелочно несправедливую и жертвенно великодушную женщину» (Rubina, *Vot idet Messiia!*, 265) (“He sat in the dark room, constantly removing the hot towel and laying it on his wife’s forehead and eyelids. He had a difficult and devoted love for this irascible, pettily unjust and sacrificially generous woman”); «Она перекинулась к мужу, забила ему под руку, вжалась в него, свернулась под боком, как креветка [...] Он придвинул ее к себе покрепче, разгрёб—как щенок носом—волосы, [...] и сказал, ...— Зяма, вы мне нравитесь [...] Вы неброская женщина, но...» (“She moved over to her husband, took him by the arm, pressed close to him, and curled up under his side like a prawn [...] He drew her to himself more tightly, raked her hair aside, like a puppy with his nose [...] and said: ‘Ziama, I like you [...] You are an unpretentious woman,’ but...”): *Ibid.*, 174.

feminine in its maternal significance. The relationship with Israel is compared to that of a mother with her baby:

Приняла это, как впервые вбираешь потрясённым взглядом лицо своего ребёнка, поднесённого к твоей груди на первое кормление.<sup>33</sup>

(She accepted this, as for the first time you absorb with an astonished glance the face of your baby, raised up to your breast for its first feed.)

Jerusalem, the spiritual origin of the Jews, is itself seen as feminine through the idea that one can dive into its waters and be at home.

These distinctions of femininity are, however, contrasted with the patriarchal role model of the sexes in Judaism. In Iuzefovskaia's *Puti neispovedimye*, the family legacy is assigned to the male line—the father and grandfather—and finally redeemed by the son. The legacy of Ruth, the mother of the family, however, directed towards keeping her kin together and ensuring faith and tradition at home, is invested with lesser importance. In Ulitskaia's novella "Vtorogo marta togo goda" the stories told by the great-grandfather convey a sense of pride about Jewish history. But there is no situation or protagonist that could make the young grandchild become aware of the value of femininity. The only female protagonists are either "man-like" (for example, grandmother Bela, and the doctor), "repulsively effeminate" (the janitor), or sexually neutral (the teacher).

It is the daughter's generation that reveals an altered concept of identity. Ulitskaia's "Sonechka," an incarnation of both the Russian and the Jewish mother-figure, is superseded by her daughter Tania. She is an independent and goal-oriented young woman who utilizes the western politics of race and gender for her career, and, by giving birth to a son, also fulfils her duty as a Jew. A similar function is conferred by Iuzefovskaia on the daughter protagonist in *Besa me mucho* (Give me Many Kisses, 2004), who quickly comprehends the new social mechanisms, adapts her career and even love affairs to them, and becomes a rational and dependable support for her mother.<sup>34</sup>

The characterization of Russian-Jewish literature is usually based on a dual, deterministic system: Russian and Jewish. The Russian is occupied

<sup>33</sup> Rubina, *Vot idet Messiia!*, 19.

<sup>34</sup> Iuzefovskaia, *Besa me mucho* [sic]. Extract in *Kontinent* (2004), 121. [Ed.]: this novel was published in full in Russia by Vagrius Plius, 2006. "Bésame Mucho" is a Spanish-language song written in 1940 by the Mexican songwriter Consuelo Velázquez.

with language, the Jewish with the writer's links to history, culture and religion, that is, Judaism.<sup>35</sup> Questioning this duality, however, draws attention to an interweaving of markers of identity.<sup>36</sup> None of these writers openly determines herself or her protagonists through Judaism. Nonetheless, its unique importance for Jewish self-definition (being the chosen people and having a covenant with God, having the experience of exile and exclusion)<sup>37</sup> is repeatedly evoked in motifs and metaphors.

Thus we can already draw conclusions about the arguments on identity structure in their writings. As a Russian Orthodox Christian, Ulitskaia combines the influence of both religions. This parallels her idea of the union of peoples, developing from the common origin of mankind to the multitude of differences. The interlacing of these differences is in her view the standard contemporary situation,<sup>38</sup> which is also opened up in the categories of gender and nation.

Although living in Russia and, therefore, outside migrant status, Ulitskaia perfectly matches the position of cultural difference described by Homi Bhabha. A *third space* replacing the dualism of Self and Other can apparently be claimed within one's *own* country. The thing that matters is *which* cultures and identities are understood as colonial or colonized, and where the writers position themselves—as partisans or “in-between.”

As I have stated before, a serial concept of identity does not necessarily turn subjects into objects, thereby liberating them from personal responsibility. Elena Makarova takes up this issue in *Smekh na ruinakh* (Laughter on the Ruins, 1995). In this novel, the whole post-Holocaust world appears to be a *thereafter* in which authentic identities exist only in playful

<sup>35</sup> Markish, “Religioznaia stikhiia kak formoobrazuiushchii element russko-evreiskoi literatury.”

<sup>36</sup> Contrary to Markish, Wolf, “Sprache Russisch—Autor und Sujet Jüdisch” stresses the “hybrid nature” and the “as well as” of Russian-Jewish literature. Criticizing the binary structure of the definition of Russian-Jewish literature, he emphasizes that Russian-Jewish literature runs the risk of being “ground down” between the Russian and Jewish mother cultures before establishing its own position.

<sup>37</sup> See Assmann, *Das kulturelle Gedächtnis*, 196: “Religion will become the foundation and the medium of resistance against an environment, the cultural and political structures of which oppose religion as an autonomous sphere of meaning and sense”; “a conscious confession of a normative self-definition” (198); “Bringing the people out of Egypt is the constitutional act as such, which establishes not only the people's identity but above all God's identity” (202). [Translation by C.P.]

<sup>38</sup> We can follow this message in the argument between the Rabbi and the Priest at the deathbed of a New York Jew in Ulitskaia's novel *Veselye pokhorony*.

succession and, therefore, the feeling of guilt has no rightful place any more.

The category of "language"—in this case, Russian—not only links Russian-Jewish women writers, it also integrates them into Russian national literature. Thus, Rubina could already be seen as a Russian-speaking Israeli writer, whereas Ulitskaia is still a Russian-speaking Russian writer of Jewish descent.

The writers discussed here have artistically shaped their very own identity discourse between authenticity and hybridity and contributed to a new definition of group identity within post-colonial cultural discourse. They stick to a common range of experiences and symbols, a "cultural memory," to varying extents.<sup>39</sup> At the same time, different geographical, social and ideological spaces, as well as individual or group stances, sometimes have a stronger influence on concepts of identity than a common ethnic, cultural or religious symbolism. In twentieth-century Europe, Jewish writers were already seen as prototypes of hybrid identities. In taking up the search for identity and reflecting on it, post-Soviet Russian-Jewish women writers can be seen as an *avant-garde* in the discussion of global cultural conflicts and encounters.

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<sup>39</sup> Assmann, *Das kulturelle Gedächtnis*.

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