

## Reproaching the Other in Finding the Self: The Discourse of Identity in Russian-Jewish Women's Prose

Recent sociological studies focus on how increasingly the alien is being eliminated from modern society.<sup>1</sup> Facing the current crisis of identity and the ensuing loss of it in the countries of Eastern Europe, researchers are prone to continue the ways in which things have been seen from Western Europe and consequently tend to disregard important social and political conflicts even in the west of Europe. Any crisis of identity will sharpen the image of the alien, and it will add to its numbers.<sup>2</sup> The Other is not only located at the other place, different from the spatial meaning, the other is alien in the sense of socially not-belonging. Thus, his concrete individuality will not be adversely affected or subjected to deception by a kind of *exclusive universalism*, which as a relationship between the *general* and the *concrete* Other has been repeatedly criticised by Seyla Benhabib with regard to enlightenment moral philosophy.<sup>3</sup> The Other as the alien is beyond any common frame of reference. More aptly, in his theory of "asymmetrical oppositions" Reinhard Kosellek describes this problem as an act of excluding the Other by the "we-group".<sup>4</sup> There is a grave danger of excluding the "non-equal", which – as Julia Kristeva has shown with regard to the evolution of the national states in Europe – will consolidate the formation of a group identity.<sup>5</sup> In post-Soviet Russia, which has hardly come to terms with the abolition of totalitarianism and which is currently re-emerging under the guise of nationalism, excluding the other is justified by

(Quotation translated by the author unless otherwise stated.)

<sup>1</sup> See Stichweh, R.: Soziologie der Indifferenz. In: Furcht und Faszination. Facetten der Fremdheit. Ed. by H. Münkler and B. Ladwig. Berlin 1997, p. 5.

<sup>2</sup> See Schmitt, C.: Der Begriff des Politischen. Text von 1932 mit einem Vorwort und drei Corollarien, Berlin 1963, p. 27: "The vital importance of the alien is to appear as the enemy who induces the collective to unity. In general the alien does not belong to the moral community."

<sup>3</sup> See Benhabib, S.: „Der verallgemeinerte versus der konkrete Andere“ and „Neue Überlegungen zum Standpunkt des 'verallgemeinerten' versus des 'konkreten' Anderen.“ In: Selbst im Kontext (Situating the Self). Gender Studies. Frankfurt/Main 1995, p. 175-191.

<sup>4</sup> See Kosellek, R.: Zur historisch-politischen Semantik asymmetrischer Gegenbegriffe. In: Furcht und Faszination. Facetten der Fremdheit. Ibid., p. 211-259.

<sup>5</sup> See Kristeva, J.: Fremde sind wir uns selbst. Frankfurt/Main 1990, p. 50 and 70.

a new kind of mechanism implying that an international conspiracy of the Jews was responsible for bolshevism, that the Caucasian nations drive Russia into wars and that the Asian nations undermine it. If there is any difference between the role of the Jews in European cultural history and that of the other alien, it is the stereotyped reduction to the category of exclusion. According to Sander Gilman, "as a symbol of those projections of a world [...] out of control, the Jew became 'evil' as such." Spatially, the Jew as the *near alien* is the *internal other* within the system of society. Moreover, he has to play the role of the scapegoat for relieving the fear that a part of one's own escapes identity within the intra-subjective relationship.

The Lithuanian-Jewish author Grigorij Kanovič observed in an interview in 1990 that in the post-Soviet space he foresaw only two possibilities to survive: assimilation or emigration. Ljudmila Ulickaja, however, a Russian-Jewish writer, who became well-known in recent times, describes otherness as another possibility. This is a third way which is connected with literary groups marginalised during the Soviet period. In the present their themes are moving from the periphery to the center. Russian-Jewish authors who reflect their own Jewish identity belong to these groups. Many of them are women, and most often their issues are different from those we know from the 1960s and 1970s (A. Rybakov: *Tjašelyj pesok/Heavy sand*). To them the problem of exclusion is less a moral concern than a psychological phenomenon. Strangeness, understood as relational, proves to be an aspect of reciprocity. Each of us can be an alien, and tomorrow the victim can be the transgressor. The way in which alienation is currently defined and in which society treats their aliens will throw some light upon the criteria of identity. The way in which the alien himself reflects his own situation, whether as

<sup>6</sup> See Krachmal'nikova, Z.: Rusofobija, christianstvo, antisemitizm. In: *Neva* (1990) 8, p. 163-178. On antisemitism see in Šafarevič, I.: Rusofobija. In: *Naš sovremennik* (1989) 6; Borščagovskij, A.: *Obvinjaetsja krov'*. In: *Novyj mir* (1993) 10, p. 105-151; Koenen, G./Hielscher, K.: *Die schwarze Front. Der neue Antisemitismus in der Sowjetunion*. Reinbek bei Hamburg 1991; Margolina, S.: *Das Ende der Lügen. Russland und die Juden im 20. Jahrhundert*. Berlin 1992.

<sup>7</sup> See Weigel, S.: *Frauen und Juden in Konstellationen der Modernisierung – Vorstellungen und Verkörperungen der „internen Anderen“*. In: *Jüdische Kultur und Weiblichkeit in der Moderne*. Köln 1994.

<sup>8</sup> See Todorov, T.: *Die Eroberung Amerikas. Das Problem des Anderen*. Frankfurt/Main 1982.

<sup>9</sup> See Basche [Parnell], C.: *Des Menschen Kopf hat keine Federn*. Interview with the Jewish writer Grigori Kanowitsch. In: *Freitag* (28. 06. 1991), p. 17.

the exiled or the one who draws the boundaries for himself/herself or even the one who is ready for assimilation or finally ready for discriminating other *Others* will illustrate the degree to which the values of the we-group are just imagined in the process of self-alienation or rejected by raising against them.

Russian-Jewish women authors do not only write from their position of withdrawal and exclusion. Their representation of the problems of alienation is to be provocative especially by the irreverent exchange of the roles of those who are excluded with those who practice exclusion. Accordingly, the nimbus of tragic destiny is taken off the excluded, and the exclusion stereotype is undermined by the human weakness they (negatively) have in common. Nina Katerli's "Staruška ne speša" (Old Mother, go easy) rises above the alien Other who is even weaker, an uneducated woman from Usbekistan, and thus parodies the image of the good old grandmother, who is not *easy going*, but vicious. In the works of Vjačeslav Bukur and Nina Gorlanova, the Jewish friends of "Učitel' ivrita" (teacher of Hebrew) "drink, bawl, and behave like Russian louts", so that emigrating to Israel does not make sense. In the writings especially of the Russian-Jewish women authors in the modern-day Diaspora in the U.S.A. and in Israel, and also in the works of the Belo-Russian writer Juzefovskaja, there is a concentration on subjects such as homelessness, exile and even the tragedy of exclusion. From the critic's point of view, however, the most impressive feature of the works mentioned above is the feeling of rational control with which the experience of deadly stigmatisation is exposed to ridicule, for instance, when the woman narrator in Galina Ščerbakovas "Ėmigracija po-russkij" (Emigration in Russian) who is so proud of her pure Slavonic blood gets worried about the presumably Jewish flatness of her

<sup>10</sup> Katerli, N.: Staruška ne speša. In: Vest'. "Knižnaja palata" 1989, p. 172-185.

<sup>11</sup> Bukur, V./Gorlanova, N.: Učitel' ivrita. In: Zvezda (1995) 5, p. 5-40.

<sup>12</sup> See Murav'eva, I.: Bliznecy. In: Novyj žurnal 200. The New Review 1995. New York 1996 (sentjabr' 1995), p. 211-229 and "Doroga. čast' vtoraja". In: Doroga. Rasskazy. Oktjabr' (1994) 3; "Filimon i Bavkida". In: Novyj žurnal 198-199. The New Review. New York 1996 (mart-ijun' 1995), p. 21-47.

<sup>13</sup> Rubina, D.: Vo vratach tvoich. In: Novyj mir (1993) 5; Makarova, E.: Moisej Ben-Fric. In: Aprel' (1992) 7, p. 129-130.

<sup>14</sup> See Juzefovskaja, M.: Kamni. In: Družba narodov (1993) 11 and "Deti pobeditelej". In: Deti pobeditelej. Moscow 1993, p. 179-197; „Rišel'evskaja, 12“. In: Ibid., p. 127-176.

buttocks, which prevents her from being accepted by society.

“Such a petty-minded caste system of this kind was unknown even in ancient India,” the voice of the narrator in Ulickaja’s “Vtorogo marta togo goda” (On the Second of March that Year) resumes on the mechanisms of exclusion in Soviet society. This latter narration is to be in the center of my analysis, the purpose of which is to show how Ulickaja deconstructs the binary system of self/other and own/alien by continually reducing any difference to a common origin.

At the mimetic level, two stories of experiencing the alien, which prove to be interlaced, are narrated: The history of the discrimination of the Jews in the Soviet Union during the fifties and the story of female individuation which is shamefully experienced by a young Jewish girl. Both stories are narrated from the alien’s point of view as reaction, which reverses the opposites. The discriminated person becomes the attacker. But both the structure and the linguistic surface lead the reader to express doubts about the reversal as a merely mechanical repetition of mutually exclusive oppositions. The narrator emphasises communication and community.

During the worst days of anti-Semitic hysteria and the persecution of Jewish intellectuals on the eve of Stalin’s death, twelve-year-old Lilja Žižmorskaja is ostracised by her schoolmates to whose community she had believed she belonged. Facing the stream of abuse and being debased, her family appears to her as the heart of an idyllic community centring in itself and renewing its energies out of its own. Her grandparents Bela and Surik melt in mutual love and care of each other and of both the old and the young generations, as they live up to their medical profession. Her great-grandfather uses tales of Jewish heroes to transmit the awareness of identity necessary for fighting against the exterior world. Lilja thus beats up her classmate Bodrik, who harasses her as a Jew and a girl. As the concluding subtext indicates, Stalin dies, and justice seems to be re-established.

This simple pattern of reciprocity is a contradiction in terms to the theme of the story for, coincidentally, old Aaron dies, too, and proud Lilička will not triumph over her oppressor. She then experiences her first menstruation as a worse form of oppression, because she is unable to ward it off. In this narration, becoming aware of female identity is connected with a sense of destiny even darker than Jewishness. The changes transform Lilja’s body

<sup>15</sup> Ščerbakova, G.: Ėmigracija po-russki. In: Ogonek (1991) 9, p. 18-21.

<sup>16</sup> Ulickaja, L.: Vtorogo marta togo goda. In: Bednye rodstvenniki. Moscow 1994, p. 175-189.

during puberty are linked to something nauseating such as “blobs of fat swimming on a mushroom soup,” so that she feels degraded and restricted to the mere female. Just at the moment when her self is coming into being, the girl suffers from an alienation of her identity to the worst degree. Identity features such as the name and the body, which make her a part of her group (both as a woman and as a Jew), work to the exclusion of herself from it. The body is not only the place of an inscription being refused, but even the name *Žižmorskij*, with its fatal association of abuse for Jews (*Žid[y]*) in the Russian language (*Žid[y]*), is borne shamefully (“horrible, impossible, a shame”). Man is a societal animal by birth, whereas existence leads to being an outcast from society.

Due to the patterns of identity incorporated by her grandfather, the young girl will be ambivalently related to a Jewish identity, whereas, at the same time, she rejects femininity. While women are without history the Jews have their legends. The tradition is passed down by the narrations of Mordechai and Haman, Daniel and Gideon focussed on the fighting spirit and on taking pride of one's origin without any allusion to the importance of Esther. Although she keeps her place in the Old Testament, femininity seems to be excluded from the epics of Jewish tradition. As the place of tradition, the grandfather's bed is exempt from references to gender. It represents the spirit and not the body and is thus an oasis of calm for the female protagonist who represses the corporeal. The strong smell of camphor and of old paper in her grandfather's bed and the smelling of the tomes bound in leather remind one of awe-inspiring science (medicine) and the feeling of respect caused by the word (Tora). A “whiff of honey and cardamon”, “the flickering golden light” surrounding old Aaron remind one of the girl's point and give an illusion of transgressing into another world. From the girl's point of view, femininity appears to be reduced to bodily functions coming up in a sequence of unpleasant smells such as urine and putrescence, “the unsavoury lower parts”. Due to associations of the “dark, sticky, gluey”, which seem to materialise the core of femininity, the backbiting directed against her family is particularly scathing to her.

As a keeper not only of Jewish epics, but of the Law and the statutes of Jewishness (“Israel lives in God”, 178), the dying grandfather consolingly remains conscious of Jewish identity. This is a form of self-exclusion which

<sup>17</sup> Furthermore, Ulickaja employs name-symbolism. *Žižmorskij* refers to “*Žiž[a]*”, i.e. slush, swill. *Morskij* refers to big water or sea. So the girl's name becomes an indication for the swilling liquidity, which is (negatively) connected with stereotypes of Jewishness and femininity in modernity.

<sup>18</sup> See Mayer, H.: *Außenseiter*. Frankfurt/Main 1975.

keeps its distance to the other in order to preserve its own identity. This means that self-exclusion results from being aware of one's own particularity; it is not a form of reaction to being excluded by others nor to self-withdrawal. Self-confidence and the ability to act are grounded in it. The feeling of comfort the young girl experiences in the family is, we should note, not based on the rational argument of Western enlightenment, in the supra-national intellect and culture of which her grandparents had every confidence, but on mutual love and charity. This calls into mind Levinas' philosophy of responsibility which, in the intersubjective relationship, requires to hold holy the other, whose needs must be supplied. In Levinas' theory human being becomes a subject in being responsible for the other. To the married couple of medical doctors, this relationship to the other does not appear in holding sacred the difference in the other, i.e. otherness, by caring for his well-being. The other rests on himself, exists as a world of his own for which I have to share responsibility. In this context the notion of the 'second birth' of the girls gains importance, who grew by medical skills and the care provided by the grandparents. As a seriously ill baby she was taken in her grandparents charge by her father, of whom it is said that he was volunteering for services for which no normal man would enrol "for anything in the world". In a passage further down in the text, her father is alluded to as the commander of a prison camp in the Far East. I.e. Lilja's father, as a Jew belonging to the stereotyped other expelled from Soviet society, takes over the responsibility for taking into custody other aliens, in this case for "alienation in thought". Thus the child grows up under the charge of the grandparents and it conceives its identity according to the role of the grandfather, while it refuses any nourishment supplied by its father. If we assume that the *father-figure* represents the over-father of the political system, his position as an alien and an 'other' (now in his own group) will be obvious. Thus the father's attitude could be considered as a conversion, which, in Jewish religion, is more likely to be punished than agnosticism. By being consciously alienated in the service of the others or of the other's messianic idea, he proves unable to preserve the self.

In this narration, the relationship between the self and the other is represented not only as a binary and reciprocal constellation of mutual exclusion: further, the criteria of inclusion and exclusion are shifting. Even grandmother Bela has *Others* of her own: otherness as related to place, the property, and ability. 'Them' or 'unlike us' are the uneducated, the unable,

<sup>19</sup> Lévinas, E.: Die Spur des Anderen. Untersuchungen zur Phänomenologie und Sozialphilosophie. Freiburg/München 1983 and „Ethik und Unendliches“. – Gespräche mit Philippe Nemo. Wien 1996, p. 78: "I am unique to the same degree as I share responsibility."

thus the less prosperous, to whom there is no emotional distance, but some kind of toleration and even support. Regularly in spring, it is said, Bela takes her grandchild's clothes, worn-out but properly mended and washed, as a gift to the porter's family. When their son Bodrik and her Lilja quarrelled furiously and came to blows with each other, she takes this to be trespassing. Bodrik does not have the right "to raise his hand against her innocent young girl, against her rosy cheeks and round face". In this context the underlying dichotomy between the upper classes (innocent, pure, intelligent) and the lower classes (uneducated, dirty) is revealed as an immovable constellation within this relationship, in which the other is provided for the sake of peace in society, but is never supposed to be sovereign. This is what has been criticised by Benhabib as "exclusive universalism", which leads to ignoring the history and the needs of the "concrete other". By alienating the other the current constellation is coming to the fore, which equates the ego with the own and with what is familiar and cherished, but determines the unfamiliar to be alien. For this relationship, one could even use the term *cultural alienation*, which implies a state of alienation which does not socially expatriate the alien, but leaves him in his own, i.e., in the *other* context.

In theory, this relationship is projected on the "distant alien" (Todorov), which is not valid for the one between Bela and Bodrik's mother. The "cultural alien" similarly is the "near alien" (Weigel). By extending the notion of culture and applying it on a Moscow neighbourhood, alien is being used in the sense not of inter-cultural, but of intra-cultural. This idea of the alien has to be taken into account. The sense of being, which, according to Hegel, has been established by comparing oneself with the Other, is disturbed by becoming aware of the fact that the roles of "master and servant" can be easily reversed.

In the narration, each intersubjective relationship appears to be a binary constellation. But the dividing lines are not only reversible and exchangeable, they can be blurred by gliding to-and-fro. This is the meaning of the love-hate scene between the two young protagonists. The opposing dichotomies of gender, class, religion or ethnic group are confused, not by reconciliation, but by the exchanging of blows. By using comedy, Ulickaja succeeds in reducing pathos, which, normally, is part of the tragic subject matter in the narration, and in representing the victim as superior. For Bodrik the porter's son, the grandchild of the highly-specialised physicians defines herself by the properties absent from his own family. From the adolescent's point of view, she incorporates the disquieting fascination of

<sup>20</sup> See Münkler, H./Ladwig, B.: Dimensionen der Fremdheit. In: Furcht und Faszination. Facetten der Fremdheit. Ibid., p. 25f.

otherness, which is different from the image attributed within his own group to women. This degree of otherness demonstrates that there are inherent gaps which might fittingly be compensated by the society's feeling of superiority against the Jews. The portraits of the characters in this scene are based on the traditionally dichotomous stereotypes: From the victim's point of view, the metallic blue eyes and the expressionless face of the (Aryan) youngster contrast with the (Semitic) expressively high nostrils, with the corners of the eyes bent down and with the arched mouth. The suffering of the innocent and beautiful Jewess from the violence of the blond man is ironically reflected in diction and subject-matter: "He was an actor, this Bodrik," it is said, "and now he represented something terrible and important, of which he supposed that it was Christ, but, in truth, he was a little, arrogant, luckless robber." In the comparison of Lilja's "suffering Semitic face" with "Marija Iosieva'[s]" one, pathos is not to be re-established. By relating Jesus and Mary to Bodrik and Lilja, the writer, as mentioned above, strategically reduces the dichotomies to their common origin, which is to play an important role in many respects. The image of Jesus and Mary takes up the connection between Jews and Christians, which is, genetically and historically, indivisible and reveals the irreconcilable divisions as a construct. Similarly, the images of Bodrik being beaten at the end of the scene can be read as a proof of the active nature of gender roles. The beginning of the scene is conventional (the boy puts his hand under the skirt of the girl who already suffers from the awareness of her own body) and it ends like a performance on stage: it is not the girl, but the boy who lies in bed and is being sick (a traditional sign of pregnancy). The bandages which are to cool his head suggest injuries. In-between, the girl's struggling, which is charged with thrusts and trembling according to the male role in sexual activity (this is made clear by the jargon used for intercourse such as the verb "trjachnut"), and the astonishingly female reaction of the young man groaning, warding off and digging his nails into the girl's face ("not in the male manner with his fist, but with all his five fingers") create a degree of subject consciousness, which undermines the traditional gender roles and which permits taking revenge on Mordechai's line even to the female. Whereas penetration and impregnation are traditionally linked to the man's coming of age, Lilja's progress is triggered by her aggression. She experiences her first menstruation and thus seems to regress to the role

<sup>21</sup> This refers to the name-symbolism: *Bodrik* goes back to "bodryj" (fresh, lively, i.e. the healthy race) and *Lilja* (Lilith [Hebrew]) to demon (i.e. the dark and sick race), which became negative only in Christianity, but was in its origin a good devil, even a Goddess.

<sup>22</sup> Ulickaja converted to Russian orthodoxy, but she is very cosmopolitan in her philosophy.

which she had believed to have overcome and which, as she thought, would prevent her from growing up. At the same time, however, she is connected by her aching belly and her blood with Bodrik's injured body as a shared corporeal experience in pain. This is a further example for the hidden unity of the binary system.

The motif of the common origin is repeated by the girl's struggle when, after a deep sleep, she awakes relaxed and ready for reconciliation and looks back upon the disturbing events "as unrecognisable and unimportant". The change derives from a dream vision which expressed the eternally human longing (both male and female) for fulfilment by escaping from reality and returning into the uterus ("a warm, round slit which had been familiar to her for a long time"). The experience of the essential/existential will transcend any binary system.

Awaking from otherness, the girl is permitted to see the order of her domestic world as "alien". To her, the symmetry of this world obviously lacks any originality. This means that the infinite space of her dream world appeared "so *unique* in its nature" that it excluded "any possibility of a parity". Thus the "lit-up face" of her grandmother Bela ("belyj": clear, white, vast), whose world picture is frequently related to the symmetrical arrangement of the furniture, loomed over her when she awoke. Domestic symmetry (order) forms a counterweight against the asymmetry (disorder) of society. Symmetry – not taken as a simple act of mirroring – moreover leads one to the similarity which exists between phenomena and relations. The other man would appear to me as *alter ego* – being not unique, but part of the ideal pair. It is said about Bela and Surik that their bodies, due to the embraces during long years of marriage, have been "deformed on their way to each other in order to achieve this union".

Thus, in the narration, the metaphors of space reveal in structure as well as in detail a semantic opposition between symmetry (parity, equality) and asymmetry (exclusion). The principle of parity corresponds to the excluded, familiar, Jewish. The principle of asymmetry corresponds to Soviet society, which builds its group identity on a common enemy, but which, due to its asymmetry, should not be taken as unique.

In the narration "Vtorogo marta togo goda", apart from the stories about the alien being the Jewish and the female, a third story is told which evolves on the level of signs and symbols and which, beneath the surface of the binary system, throws some light on the forces working for the fusion of the different elements. But differences are not abolished yet. Oppositions merely prove their ability to co-exist. What once was separated cannot grow together again.

In Ulickaja, death is, again and again, the true dichotomy able to transcend

the binary systems of gender and status, origin and ideology. Therefore, the conclusion of the narration discussed here necessarily creates a common cause for the antagonists out of the identity of the cases, the similarity of the places and the coincidence of time in four images. Death connects Aaron the Jew lying on a piece of carpet with the "dead man" on the plank bed in his datcha, who unmistakably must be identified with Stalin. As an awareness of the body, pain achieves the connection between the Russian youngster Bodrik on an iron bed frame and the Jewish girl in the lavatory, which is a topos of the corporal.

To conclude: reducing the oppositions in human life to their common origin, the anthropological basics such as death and pain, Ulickaja is subverting the binary structure of a social system in which exclusion seems to be the basis for constitution. Thus negative exclusion of the other, which haunts our society and knowledge, appears to be an error in human thinking. This crosses the border of Jewish discrimination and I see here the contribution of Russian-Jewish women writers in the contemporary European cultural discourse, who use their experience in being the *other or alien* to show asymmetric opposites as relative, reversible and, in the same time, connected in their roots.