

Colonial alienation and anti-, post- and decolonial responses: three texts from the former colonial spaces of the Russian/(post)Soviet empire

Madina Tlostanova and Epp Annus

Among most destructive symptoms of modernity/coloniality, colonial alienation stands out in its all-encompassing impact. Based on the fundamental¹ modern/colonial principle of objectification, alienation permeates all relationships and sensibilities, depriving colonial subjects of their unity with the world, with other people and other species, and with themselves. Colonial brainwashing uses alienation as a tool for effective subjugation by not only taking away land but also memory and the sense of self-identity. Alienation is at the core of many indigenous/decolonial writings, although some of its aspects have also attracted postcolonial and anticolonial critics and artists across different eras and cultural realms. In our view, alienation is a thread that can bring these different paradigms together pointing to their common grounds despite often very different responses and reactions. As a core modern/colonial syndrome, alienation also sheds a new light on the complex relationships, overlaps and rivalries between anti-colonial, postcolonial and decolonial frameworks. It reveals a shift from a focus on political independence and faith in the attainability of a completely decolonized condition; through painful attempts to understand and explain one's estrangement; to an awareness of (de)coloniality as a dialectically unsublatable state and to going beyond the boundaries of the anthropocentric relationality.

Multiple efforts to delimit anti-, post- and decolonial frames have led to inclusion or exclusion of certain important thinkers into several canons at once. Starting from the 2000s researchers have also engaged with intersections of the postcolonial and post-socialist experiences of unfreedom² (Kelertas 2006; Chari & Verderi 2009; Pucherová & Gáfric 2015; Annus 2018; Tlostanova 2017; Kudaibergen 2025; Biedarieva 2024). The emerging new theoretical trends, such as affect theory (Ahmed 2006) and New Materialism (Barad 2007; Haraway 2016), have inevitably marked the already complicated entanglements of anticolonial, postcolonial and decolonial thought, intertwining with the existing debates on colonialism and anticolonial resistance.

The scope of this article does not allow us to delve into the intricacies of these debates in detail and we do not wish to rehearse once again the well-known discussions, particularly that we both have written extensively on this topic in our previous works (Annus 2018; 2019; Tlostanova 2019; Koobak et al 2021). Our decision to write this article was triggered by the fact that since the beginning of Russia's full-scale war against Ukraine, decolonization has become a new buzzword, but what is really meant by it varies greatly. Political decolonization is often lumped together with conceptual, while critical thinking and deconstruction are relabeled as decolonization (Moosavi 2020; Botanova 2022; Hendl et al 2023). Where, then, to situate artistic practices, indifferent to labeling, but committed to exploring various forms of situatedness marked by colonial unfreedom? And how are artistic articulations rooted in concrete localities and bodily experiences, and marked by anti-, post-, and/ or decolonial commitments?

For us it is important to avoid interpreting relationships between anticolonial, postcolonial and decolonial in dialectical, progressivist, "stagist" ways. As literary theorists and fiction writers, we both know that worthwhile fiction rarely fits into such square political templates. And in this article, we focus on how dominant theoretical frameworks have affected the use of anticolonial, postcolonial and decolonial in the

actual literary praxis that enters into play with and messes up the artificially purified paradigms. We wanted to show that certain sensitivities, optics, ways of perceiving the world and its representations which have existed in (post)colonial societies at certain times and also have undergone the influence of various trendy approaches, cannot be mechanistically fit into a dialectical succession in which each new frame is presented as more progressive and successful. It is a non-linear relationship, even if historically literary works indeed could temporally coincide with the succeeding époques of colonial unfreedom, the struggle for independence, or the neocolonial and neoimperial present. Importantly, in contrast with historical anticolonial struggles, there were never any social-political-economic realities that can be addressed as postcolonial or decolonial, as both concepts refer exclusively to ideational, existential, and ethical dispositions and not political regimes.

Fiction writing has its own complex trajectory of anti/post/decolonial sensibilities and interventions that does not necessarily align with political aspirations, predominant social imaginaries, or fashionable theoretical approaches. Although anticolonial statements indeed appear the earliest when political decolonization is still a dream, and postcolonial sensibility roughly covers the difficult post-condition discovering the complexities, nuances and contradictions of neocolonial traces, while decolonial frame is the latest addition to the triad attempting to radically dismantle the colonial intellectual tools and delink from the modern epistemic and aesthetic frameworks, all these approaches leak into each other and combine in fictional works. Therefore, the three different (in their scale and genre) literary examples we would like to focus on below should not be interpreted as clear illustrations of particular separate stages that come one after another and can be compared in terms of their decolonizing effectiveness. Rather there is a cumulative outcome of a complex anti/post/decolonial hypertext, whose many elements continue to live and get reinterpreted in later works in increasingly complex, relational ways.

All three examples are linked to Soviet/Russian imperial control and local trajectories of resistance to the Soviet/Russian coloniality. These texts are products of different anti/post/de/colonial logics, experiences, and temporalities: one written by a woman poet and visualized by an Estonian woman artist, another by a Kyrgyz male author (whose mother was a Tatar), a third by a second generation Azeri queer immigrant to post-Soviet Russia. Yet all these writers interrogate colonial alienation in its different forms, while also engaging with other critical voices and aesthetics. Rather than simply tagging writers as anti-, post- or decolonial, we are interested in exploring the overlaps, the dominant features, and the ways they relate to historical and aesthetic dynamics and contexts.

The anticolonial sentiment: resisting alienation in times of empire

The anticolonial sentiment is the longer existing mood that starts together with colonial rule itself. Yet it changes its forms depending on the concrete conditions of unfreedom. In fiction, the anticolonial tends to be displayed as a gesture of protest, an articulation of dissensus during the time when political liberation might as-yet be scarcely conceivable. It is an attempt to map at least a symbolic imaginative space for resistance, dignity, and justice. The anticolonial gesture can be angry, bitter, melancholic, merely descriptive, existential, or satirical — indeed, folkloric laughter, the sharing of jokes in an uncensored oral medium, is its most common expression. At the same time, anticolonial sentiment largely rhymes politically with a hope for liberation and a genuine belief in its feasibility while the forward looking reflections of what comes after the liberation is gained are seldom part of anticolonial fiction/art. Hence, anticolonial cultural production is more about various forms of resistance than any rounded pictures of re-existence. Its vision of injustice is based on a clear-cut sense of an enemy and a well-defined understanding of what is right and wrong. One thinks, for example, of Ngugi wa Thiong'o's canonical story *Wedding at the Cross* (1976): colonizers destroy local value-systems, co-opted elites have internalized the “wrong” values of

the colonizers, and those who follow the same path lose their true authentic selves and connections to their genuine native cultures.

In the USSR, the anticolonial critique of Soviet/Russian rule was censored: it was impossible to publish direct reference to colonial aspects of the Soviet rule or to non-Russian nationalities' aspirations for sovereignty. Yet, anticolonial sentiment found ways to express itself (Kalnačs 2016). These ways included the use of Aesopian language with multiple levels of signification; the appeal to less censored genres; embedding anticolonial gestures within the framework of a different narrative; talking through history and employing themes that would invite anticolonial readings without involving explicit colonial thematics. Anticolonial writing would typically combine several such strategies.

In its October 1970 issue, the Estonian teen magazine *Pioneer* printed a poem entitled *Mägri maja* (The House of the Badger) by Helvi Jürisson, a popular author of catchy children's rhymes. Although the magazine was distributed among its subscribers, the rest of the print run was confiscated by the authorities and never reached bookstores and kiosks.

What could go so wrong with a publication aimed at communist youth? The rhythmic poem starts with a description of care and dedication that the badger family has spent in building and tending to their house, the centre and meaning of their lives, a place where everything was designed by the badger family, and no one tried to avoid contributing to the shared effort. Unfortunately for the hardworking badgers, everything changes unexpectedly when a pack of racoon dogs pile into the house and decide to stay (Jürisson 1970). There are so many of them, their teeth are sharp, and they are equipped with strong leather belts, so there's no way the badgers can stand against them. The racoon dogs settle in the badger's house and invite their friends to move in too. The poor badger starts frequenting

the court, yet the judge, an old and absentminded bear, neglects to advance his case.

The poem was accompanied by Asta Vender's illustration, which clad the badgers in clothing vaguely reminiscent of Estonian folk costume and dressed the raccoon dogs in coats bearing resemblance to Soviet military uniforms. Four skinny badgers facing a pack of fat, aggressive-looking raccoon dogs baring their sharp teeth – it is clear that the forces are unequal, and the badgers' downcast faces and defensive postures express frustration, loss, and a sense of alienation. The combined result is a smartly rhymed narrative of the Estonian annexation by the Soviet forces, affectively impactful on two levels at once: as a personal tragedy experienced by all those “badgers” whose homes were taken over by the “raccoon dogs,” the new settlers, and as the national tragedy, the loss of a home for a nation, an independent, self-governing state. The anti-colonial stance emerges here as a counter-narrative to the official Soviet interpretation of history, which presented the Soviet takeover as a liberation rather than aggression. In 1970, what was felt more directly was the massive influx of Russian-speaking immigrants into the country – the friends of the “raccoon dogs” continued to arrive and make themselves at home (Hlostanova 2018). By the late 1970s, the loss of independent statehood, compounded by the great influx of new settlers, produced an anxiety with respect to a total erasure of national culture and thus inspired a measure of anticolonial dissent in Estonia and Latvia. A blog post from 2012 provides some details about the reception of the poem:

I was 13 when I got this *Pioneer* issue in the mail. These issues were removed from newsstands, but the word had spread and my father even took ours to work with him. Grandmother talked at length about how the Russians came to Estonia.” (Mägri maja 2012)

Raccoon dogs were particularly suited to the role of aggressive newcomers, as this invasive species was introduced into Estonian

forests by the Soviet central government. In fact, the popular magazine *Eesti Loodus* [Estonian Nature] published its own reaction to the "Pioneer affair": one of the 1971 issues featured a photo of the raccoon dog on the cover, and the opening article gave a detailed overview of raccoon dogs, their release into Estonian forests in 1950, and the destruction that these predators caused (Naaber 1971).

Both the limit and the strength of *The House of the Badger* lies in its simple, clear delineation of victims and aggressors. The anticolonial message works indirectly: Jürisson's poem was, after all, a simple story about the unhappy fate of an industrious and kind badger. It ties the questions of land, place and ground to care – as in cultivating one's home – and to the sense of belonging. Indeed the issue of the native land – whether posed in terms of territory, home environment, or existential ground – is one of the most fundamental anticolonial themes. The loss of home as a base of existence leads to a deep sense of alienation.

Territorial control is tied to questions of care and to the metaphysics of belonging – the concern is that new settlers or long-distance decision-makers lack both the deep sense of connectedness and the feeling of ethical responsibility toward local environments. The badger's home, once a place of belonging and sustenance, becomes a place of estrangement, and the badger's futile appeals to the court reinforce the sense of alienation. Once defined by industriousness and self-sufficiency, he is now reduced to a wandering figure suffering from ontological dislocation.

"They do not care about our land" – such a critique, legible even in Soviet-era fiction, responds to environmental colonialism and damage produced by Soviet colonial rule. Consequently, in many parts of the Soviet Union, environmental activism became one of the first local mobilizations to flourish in the more liberal atmosphere of the Thaw and especially during Perestroika.

Postcolonial mourning of alienation : Land, language, body, and history

The postcolonial is typically considered as part of the larger family of ‘posts’, and is tied with the postmodern/poststructuralist critique of grand narratives of modernity. Marked by the mutual interconnectedness of the colonizer-colonized cultures, the hybridity produced by the colonial situation, and the impossibility of drawing clear distinctions and boundaries, the postmodern postcolonial is often playful and satirical. It might exhibit laughter and self-irony, it mixes different registers or reverses and problematizes historical truisms. Take Ukrainian poet and prose writer Yuri Andrukhovych’s intertextually playful postcolonial novel *Moskoviada* (The Moscoviad, 1993), in which the critique of Russian imperialism is expressed by a trickster figure, Otto von F, in the context of extensive drinking, as Otto moves within the Dantesque multileveled reality during the last spring of the disintegrating Soviet empire.

As compared to a typically clear structure of anticolonial writing, the level of complexity of postcolonial works seems to be of a different order, as such writing might operate with several storylines and intertwine various historical layers. Postcolonial writing might most precisely represent the complexity of the cultural mix under and after colonial rule, providing “the inscription and articulation of culture’s hybridity” (Bhabha 1994, 38). While the anticolonial gesture exhibits the colonial rule as clearly external to the colonized culture, the postcolonial might well mix clearly-targeted anticolonial critique with more hazy tones of co-optation and slow violence, cultural (semi-)erasure, and questions of the self and the body as gradually losing their ontological grounding. It might be tempting to valorize the postmodern sensibility over the anticolonial, yet each of these modes is a product of its particular moment and cultural context. Notably, anticolonial and postcolonial texts can also coexist as part of the cultural production of the same era: times of transition often foster cultural plurality, which finds expression through diverse literary modalities. And postcolonial

novels typically contain anticolonial motivation, as they are directed towards delegitimization of the colonial matrix of power.

Chingiz Aitmatov's novel *I dol'she veka dlitsia den'* (A Day Lasts Longer than a Hundred Years, 1980), though published before the major 1990s wave of postcolonial responses to Soviet imperial dictate, could well be considered the first masterpiece among postcolonial reactions to Soviet rule. Here, a critique of Soviet coloniality unfolds through a variety of themes and storylines, including colonization of the native land, but also of language, body, and history, while revealing the damaging effects of colonial alienation. The power of Aitmatov's novel lies in its multiscalar vision, its interweaving of ancient legend, a science-fictional plotline, Cold War realities, an ecological narrative about human life as deeply connected with nonhumans and with natural environments, and the story of the slowly unfolding changes under Soviet rule in a remote Kazakh settlement. All of this is tied into a complex whole, with various themes running through different plotlines and thus creating a multilayered fabric of meanings, held together by the central image of the mutilation of human body and cultural memory through most violent imaginable form of physical torture.

Aitmatov's critique of Soviet-era atrocities was publishable (and later suitable for an important state prize) thanks to several factors. First of all, he enjoyed a high level of personal prestige: in 1963, the writer was awarded the prestigious Lenin prize, he was a member of the Central Committee of the Kirgiz CP, a member of the secretariat of the Writers' Union of the USSR, the author of internationally lauded works that were turned into films and staged in theatres all over the USSR. No censor would send back a book from such an author. Aitmatov himself, well-practiced in cultural politics, furnished his book with a foreword that provided the proper ideological reading of the novel: it was presented as a story of a working-class hero Yedigei, fully in line with principles of socialist realism; it was a novel about the evils of imperialism, about the tragedy of Cold War antagonism; a book about Chinese traditions in manipulating individuality, something that the

Cultural Revolution shared with imperialism (Aitmatov 1981, 5–8). It was, in short, a sophisticated literary masterpiece, by a highly esteemed author writing in Russian yet coming from the national outskirts – this indeed might have been the only formula for a postcolonial novel publishable in the USSR before Perestroika. And, even though its year of publication (1980) had preceded Perestroika, nonetheless, by that time, some critique of the Soviet reality had become common enough in fiction.

I dol'she veka dlitsia den' gains its power as a postcolonial novel from its cumulative effect, from the way it ties together a commitment to the local tradition and the long-rooted human sense of belonging with land and everything living, to form an ethical relation to being, to the environment, and to the community. The novel's ethics of responsibility towards local memory and environment, sustained in an era of modernization and space travel, is juxtaposed with the indifference of those who have lost their connection to local culture and their personal integrity.

The main storyline follows a funeral procession, led by the central character Yedigei, moving across the steppe toward the ancient Ana Beit cemetery. The journey culminates in an unanticipated collision with the militarized, Russian-speaking order: the procession is brought to a halt by the barbed wire fence. The shock – experienced both by the funeral procession and by the readers – is deep: for many pages the author has been outlining the central cultural importance of the cemetery, recounting local legends that knit together this specific physical environment with its human and nonhuman inhabitants. In the local lore, this was Mother's Resting Place, the place where a loving, mourning mother had been buried after having been killed by her own son.

The impossibility of sustaining a connection with ancestral lands is articulated through a symbolic image: the violent erasure of memory reduces people to mankurts, obedient slaves. According to an ancient

legend, narrated in the novel, the head of a young man captured by the invading tribe is shaved and covered with a *shiri*, a warm udder of a freshly killed nursing mother camel. The captured man is then left under the scorching sun for five days, while the drying udder squeezes his head like an iron hoop, gradually tightened – Aitmatov’s original title of the novel, rejected by censors, was *The Hoop* (Obruch) (Mozur 2017). Most prisoners subjected to this torture die in agony, but those who survive lose their memory and sense of self, becoming *mankurts*, the living parables of human alienation, reduced to blindly obeying those who give them their daily food. When such half-human is ordered to kill a woman who claims to be his mother – a meaningless concept for a *mankurt* – he doesn’t hesitate to shoot the deadly arrow that takes his mother’s life.

The theme of *mankurtism* – the mutilation of the innocent by those in power through the erasure of memory and the denial of humanity – is developed through several intertwined storylines. Most explicitly, the novel links *mankurtism* to the education of children in the boarding schools: Sabitzhan, the son of a good, honorable man, through his boarding school education, becomes detached from native ethics and knowledge. Shaped into a blind follower of the regime, he imagines a future society in which all human actions are controlled by the government through invisible biocurrents – a metaphor for the complete *mankurtization* of society. The denial of the right to memory and personal opinion forms also a part of the novel’s Stalin-era storyline, unraveled through Yedigei’s reminiscences: the former school teacher Kuttybaev is arrested, in 1952, for writing memoirs that do not fit into the official memory regime. Having already endured the horrors of the Nazi concentration camp, he now perishes in a Soviet prison. Instead of becoming an obedient *mankurt*, Kuttybaev dies. Heart attack, states the official statement.

The squeezing loop of mutilation and erasure is also evident in the novel’s science fiction plotline. The efforts of the inhabitants of the harmonious planet Lesnaya Grud to establish contact with terrestrials

lead to the installation of the nuclear weapon ring around the Earth. Thus political superpowers consciously choose secrecy, oblivion, and ignorance over openness to new connections and possibility of change.

Finally, the barbed wire encircling the ancient Ana-Beiit burial ground offers the novel's most direct and detailed portrayal of colonial erasure in action. The barrier to ancestral lands is accompanied by the refusal and demotion of the local language: when the funeral procession approaches an officer at the armed checkpoint, Yedigei recognizes a fellow countryman and starts to address him in the vernacular. To this greeting, Yedigei receives a cold and formal response, spoken in Russian: "Comrade outsider, turn to me in Russian. I am an official on duty" (Aitmatov 1981, 273). Yedigei is so taken aback by such a stern refusal that he is momentarily rendered speechless. As he started to realize the extent of the combined denial of the native language and ancestral lands, his "soul went dark inside" (Aitmatov 1981, 274). The refusal is not just a matter of access to sacred territory; it also directly impacts the coherence of the protagonist's body – speechless, alienated, and without light in the soul.

As Anindita Banerjee remarks, "the mandate to speak Russian issued by an agent of the state translates those very subjects into 'outsiders'" (Banerjee 2018, 454). Indeed, the lieutenant addresses the procession as "outsiders" who are refused admittance to the military zone, causing one of the people to speak up: "What does it mean, an outsider! [...] Who is an outsider? Are we outsiders? [...] It is our – our Sarozek burial ground. And we, we Sarozek people, have a right to bury our people here." (Aitmatov, 1981, 275–76) This local man later goes on to shout in Kazakh, refusing to attempt the Russian language he has not mastered: "Sagan zhol da zhetpeydi, sagan zher da zhetpeydi! Urdym sendeydin auzyn!" In a footnote, Aitmatov supplies a translation of this strikingly direct colonial accusation: "The roads are not enough for you and the land is not enough for you! I spit on you!" (277)

Local people taking the body of their deceased friend to their cemetery are cast as outsiders in their own homeland through the triple denial of their right to land, customs and language. The presence of the dead body, the solemn matter of the procession, and the interweaving of the narrative with local legends imbue the situation with existential dimension. The novel can thus be read as a manifestation of the postcolonial ethics of memory: it both highlights cultural memory as the basis for ethical behavior and displays the damaging impact of colonial erasure. Through intertwining the issues of land, culture, language, embodied memory, bodily mutilation and loss, the novel offers a thoughtful meditation on colonial alienation.

Decolonial as re-existent: an attempt to leave alienation behind

One of the cardinal elements of decolonial fiction and art is its re-existent (Alban 2009) drive which allows to translate and transform resistance, anger, indignation, helplessness and doom into re-existence as a remaking and reweaving of one's world anew out of the bits and pieces of remaining memories, affinities, entanglements. In a way, decolonial artworks trace our possible paths to worlding otherwise, helping to relearn the art of being in the world and relating to other people and other species, bypassing the modern/colonial alienation and binary division into culture and nature.

Re-existent element is not exclusive to some specific group of writings. Rather it is a modality that reemerges in different times and contexts. Yet, the growing decolonial awareness and its complex entanglements with feminist, New Materialist, environmental and other frameworks put this sensibility forward in the works of many emerging authors, particularly working in auto-fictional frames. Re-existence can happen through the act of writing itself, as in Nora Ikstena's autobiographical novel *Mates Piens* (Soviet Milk, 2015). Its main storyline is devoid of any optimism: the focus is on the traumatized colonized body of a gifted Latvian gynecologist who slowly collapses both mentally and physically in a small rural clinic. The colonial domination results in deterioration

of the will to exist, and even newly gained independence cannot bring the damaged body back to life (Ikstena 2015).

Poet and fiction writer Egana Cabbarly is another interesting example of decolonial/feminist/New Materialist auto-fictional writing albeit with a more positive outlook despite the severity of her illness and a lack of future prospects. Her novelette *Ruki Zhenshin Moei Semji byli ne dlya Pisma* (The Hands of the Women in my Family were not for Writing, 2023) is a nonlinear, fragmentary, multilayered, and polycentric text whose seemingly disconnected vignettes are in fact deeply entangled. The centrifugal themes come together only at the very end through a shocking revelation that allows the reader to glimpse the true heteropatriarchal and colonial causes of the protagonist's illness.

The book is written in defiance of the repressive requirement to remain silent and tolerate the chronic devaluation of her life, of herself as a human being, of her illness, and her creative ambitions. Emaciated with this imposed silence and lack of real interlocutor with minimal empathy, the author trusted the text with her story for which there are no human ears, even among her kin. Here Cabbarly follows by now classical postcolonial feminist prose tradition of searching for means that help overcome imposed muteness while creating a healing, therapeutic text.

This effect is intensified by the unconventional composition of the novelette which is likened to the human body. One of the plotlines is a story of getting acquainted with one's own body, its subsequent ruin due to the illness and finally, its remaking and recreation anew. Together with the author's alter ego we move from the eyebrows to eyes, hair, mouth, shoulders, we trace arms, tongue, legs, throat, and belly of the character and of the text. It is not a simple compendium of the woman's/literary body parts. All of them have a metaphorical meaning and at times turn into metonymies. The throat is not just an organ but also an ability to sing, the tongue is not just a means of communication

but also an elastic muscle that allows you to speak. And their literal and symbolic functions merge to the disturbing effect of the corporality of the text. For instance, speaking of the native language she is gradually forgetting, the main character claims that "there were less and less words left in Azeri: the organ ceased to perform its function, it laid limply in her mouth" (45). Behind this textual corporality, there is an angst for the lost wholism and mutual relationality of everything and everyone in the world. Hence the text becomes a history of reassembling of the world anew by the body that overcomes nothingness. It is not a Cartesian body that is dismissed in favor of the reason and exiled back to nature. Rather it is a feminist decolonial body as a creative actor whose reason is an important but not exclusive part of the body. It is a text marked by what Hélène Cixous referred to as "reflexive sensitivity" (Cixous 1991) meaning that the writing is created not so much by cerebral ideas as by immediate feeling and emotions of the author.

Moreover, the novelette is written by a hybrid of the human and the technological while the text itself is a chimeric text in its genre and style. It balances between the *Künstlerroman*, the postcolonial novel, generally between prose and poetry, speculative fiction and coming of age feminist writing. The resulting chimeric text, just as the body that created it, suffers from the scars and stitches holding it together. The sick body in disharmony with the world writes down a story which cannot be told out loud. The surviving body remembers the hidden illness and carefully selects the words to describe its experience of adjusting to life anew.

Starting from the sexual difference feminism (Lauretis 1987; Irigaray 1985) there are many authors who consciously write *with* their bodies. Yet mostly it is a poststructuralist game, whereas in Cabbarly's case the metaphor acquires a shocking literal sense without losing its symbolic nature. Another feminist tradition that Cabbarly is obviously alluding to is grounded in an understanding of corporality as a source/instrument of creativity. It is a shamanistic writing in the vein of Gloria Anzaldúa and her conception of "la facultad" (literally, a visionary ability) as a

specific mode of thinking, understanding and remaking of the world and of the self. Anzaldúa defines it as a “capacity to see in surface phenomena the meaning of deeper realities, to see the deep structure below the surface” (Anzaldúa 1987, 60). “La facultad” lives in the bodies that go through systematic dehumanization, and is their way of resistance and re-existence, overcoming artificial boundaries between thinking and acting, rationality and corporality, nature and culture.

The protagonist is internally free but she has not been like that from the start. Illness, suffering and proximity to death have triggered her “la facultad” - an ability to value difference and specificity of every life experience. The material/corporal nature of the book is not only painful but also excessively beautiful. The author captures the colorful world in all its opulent manifestations – tastes, sounds, smells, textures, despite the rules, bans, sufferings and buried dreams. As in Audre Lorde’s canonical biomythography (Lorde 1982), the autobiographical here is balanced by the mythical and the personal corporeal testimony overgrows factographic limits to turn into a trope.

The book rebels against the heteropatriarchal culture which forbids women to write and have their voice or opinion. It is written against the illness which deprived the protagonist of the ability to speak, to breath, to live, and also, despite the poison of unlove emanated by the surrounding people, infected by misogyny and stubbornly guarding the “rules that someone once invented for them” (3). Distorted souls, disciplined bodies and psychological sadism of her relatives generate a complex love-hate relationship in the protagonist, against the background of the hostile postsoviet Russia, which interprets this family as “enemies and vessels for anger, as those on whom you work off your hatred”(33).

Yet, love eventually takes over thanks to the ethics inherited from the protagonist’s grandfather and her late ancestors. It is a transgenerational link through silent signs of love — the taste of the

dishes cooked by the loving hands, and the warmth and beauty of the clothes hand-made by women. The protagonist acquires her grandfather's ability to love as a gift to "read other bodies, to see the good in the ordinary, and light in darkness" (51). This compensates for her lack of mutual understanding with parents and peers, and the surrounding indifference and hatred. The main way to express this loving ability is through words as testimonies of love. The right to love through words/narratives and to remain oneself instead of being forced to sacrifice one's individuality to god, community, or family – is one of the key nodes in the book. The author is aware of the dangers of this step and stoically accepts it: choosing independence and freedom she is denied her links with and support and protection by the community, becoming solitary and vulnerable. Yet paradoxically, by consistently turning into an unsettled eternal vagabond, the protagonist ultimately overcomes the imposed colonial alienation.

One of the key themes in this work is the intersection of ontological and technological. The trendy posthumanist fantasies of cyborgs become quite real and disturbing in Cabbarly's book bringing New Materialist narratives from distant future to the present. The theme of otherness and rejection easily moves from political and ethnic-national to technological and biomedical. The main character already after the first episode of her illness becomes alienated from herself, cannot recognize her own voice, loses control over her body. Yet turning into a cyborg as a result of the subsequent surgery allows her to come back to and identify with herself. The illness and not the usual will to power or scientific curiosity is what generates an accidental cyborg in this case. It is not a superhuman cyborg and not a cyborg created as an experiment, but a terminally ill patient who acquires some features of a machine yet does not lose her human constants. The main character bitterly jokes that now she can be controlled by a remote control as if she were a toy car. The grim future from a cyberpunk novel interferes into her real life leaving her with no choices. The author describes this onto-technological shift as follows: "My body has become functional

and controllable like appliances, my existential anxiety was replaced by an endless concern for the wellbeing of the mechanism” (68). Yet the book demonstrates that existential anxiety is a basic human feature which cannot disappear even if the human is equipped with a remote control. Her angst is only intensified by technological dependency.

The novelette lacks a typical immigrant fiction juxtaposition of the colorful native land left behind and the inhospitable metropolis. After all, the protagonist is a second generation immigrant and her relations with native land(s) are mediated through ancestors. Likewise the book lacks a clear-cut opposition of our land and its unwanted invaders that we find to some extent in both Aitmatov’s and Jürisson’s accounts. So the anticolonial and postcolonial focus on the land as a source of resistance and re-existence gets shifted and shrunk in Cabbarly’s case to the individual body as the only space left for the protagonist’s decolonial struggles. The motif of the failed return to the homeland typical for diasporic writing turns into a reflection on the marginal status of all migrants who belong neither in the metropolis nor in their native countries although the degree of this exclusion differs a lot.

Still, it is a life-affirming book, as its focus is the disalienating overcoming and reassembling one's self and one’s world anew, among other paths, through realigning with one’s ancestors. It is a stoical narrative on how to endure and become who the protagonist wanted to be, the first woman in her family to actually make a choice rather than passively follow the circumstances. Medicine cannot cure her and the brain stimulator can only mask the disease. Yet, a truly healing act for the protagonist is the act of writing reinstating the invincibility of life and love.

An open-ended conclusion

As our goal was not to build a rigid taxonomy firmly dividing the anticolonial from the postcolonial and the decolonial but rather to

focus on intersections, overlaps and differences between these stances as reflected in concrete fictional works and practices, our conclusions are non-final and open-ended observations.

Anticolonial, postcolonial and decolonial paradigms should not be opposed to each other or arranged into a linear successive vector within which each new configuration denies the previous one. While corresponding to particular historical-political events and contexts, the anticolonial, postcolonial and decolonial sensibilities overlap in fiction. Moreover, there is a cumulative effect that allows the later artistic works to absorb the earlier aesthetic modalities and tensions and put them into play with more recent reflections. The texts we analyzed demonstrate how this cumulative effect becomes particularly pronounced in the recent works by the younger generation writers with an early awareness of anti/post/decolonial genealogies and trajectories.

Anticolonial, postcolonial and decolonial as theoretical stances and as artistic manifestations are different and not necessarily corresponding both conceptually and aesthetically. In anticolonial writing, the aesthetics is inseparable from the political, and though textual strategies may use metaphoric disguises, the political message is direct and clearly distinguishable (Jürisson). Postcolonial writings include both formally realist texts (Aitmatov) and ironic, playful trickster narratives (Andrukhovych) marked by indeterminacy and multiple viewpoints. Later, the postcolonial correlation with poststructuralism gives way to affect theory and New Materialism as theoretical grounds of recent decolonial fictional texts, particularly feminist and queer (Cabbarli). It indicates a focus on the corporeal and on the environmental crisis reinterpreted through bridging the alienation gap as the main conceptual instrument of modernity realized through endless binary oppositions (nature/culture, human/animal, human/machine, corporality/rationality, self/the world, etc.).

A key debilitating condition in all the analyzed works is the colonial alienation which is recognized, mourned and confronted at various

levels and in different contexts. This framework is central to anticolonial, postcolonial and decolonial fictional efforts to understand and mend one's relation to the world, to ancestral memories, and to native land in the conditions of continued occupation, colonization and destruction. Unsettling in a literal and figurative sense, the quest for the ways to belong otherwise, at times through intergenerational links and individual rediscoveries of one's body, stand in the center of the analyzed texts reinstating the importance of memory, corporality and spatiality in any attempt at mending the broken lives of postcolonial subjects.

Notes:

1. The early anticolonial engagement with alienation indicates the centrality of this concept for the whole paradigm, although its use of alienation was different from what is meant here. A great example is Frantz Fanon whose understanding of alienation balances between the Marxist view and a phenomenological colonial unsettling coming from his own experience (Fanon 1952). The early postcolonial attempts to question alienation, primarily in its narrow, economic-centric Marxist, post-Hegelian understanding, in the works of G. Spivak (1985, 1999), are also well-known and by now critically conceptualized. For obvious reasons both Fanon and Spivak lacked the New Materialist or queer feminist anthropic decentring or interspecies and matter-based understanding of alienation and its overcoming that we are especially interested in this text. These overtones come into power later, in decolonial and indigenous, mostly feminist and Queer scholarship (Lugones 2003, Machado de Oliveira 2021).

2. Thus, it is difficult to say if Ngugi wa Thiong'o (1986) is an anticolonial or a postcolonial writer, while Frantz Fanon is typically included in both the postcolonial and decolonial canons.

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