

*Writers and Rebels: the Literature of Insurgency in the Caucasus*

Rebecca Gould

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It will be news to few that the dominance of postcolonial studies by Anglophone writings is meeting increasingly strong challenges; Aamir Mufti's exhilarating *Forget English!* (2016) is merely the clearest and most prominent strand in this debate. A related thread is the questioning of the reliance of many postcolonial literature scholars on writings in translation, with the accompanying problems it presents for their analysis, especially in relation to the role of texts in their home cultures.

It is, therefore, refreshing to find, in Rebecca Gould's opening "note on transliteration and method," the statement: "All translations from Russian, Georgian, Arabic, German, French and Chechen are mine except where otherwise noted." Gould's command of seven languages, involving at least four different scripts, highlights the richness of this study. Bringing together literary analysis and religious texts with history and ethnography, this note on translation is no act of braggadocio, but a foretaste of the fact that in *Writers and Rebels* we are encountering a formidable piece of scholarship, rooted in intimate encounters with numerous cultures, and immersion in their shifting intellectual and political currents.

Almost as important as her access to texts available only in their original languages and the insights of these first-language readings, is Gould's use of secondary literatures, especially in Russian, to inform her analyses. Not only does this enable interpretations rooted in understandings of Caucasus literature and history from intellectual traditions directly—if at times problematically—related to them. It lifts Gould's work out of one of the current quagmires when it comes to critiques of many postcolonial studies; that is, that they are overly embedded in Anglophone theories and focused on Anglophone writings. This is a book rich in theory and methodology, but not entirely dominated by them.

As she explains in her introduction, Gould does not fall into the trap of using the literature of non-Western peoples as an ethnographic source, something which Western scholars are sometimes accused of. Rather, by undertaking an exercise in literary anthropology across a historical period, Gould explores how a multi-layered approach that combines a historical background, literary biography, and analyses of texts and their reception, can reveal much about ideological and normative strands in a society through the aesthetics of its cultural products and the complex interrelationship between aesthetics and the environments from which they emerge.

Gould's core thesis throughout this book is that the literature of the Caucasus, from the mid-nineteenth century onwards, shows an ongoing concern with an ethic she refers to as "transgressive sanctity." This is exemplified by the figure of the *abrek*: a kind of social bandit, delineated in ways which draw on the character type originally proposed by Hobsbawm. Gould sees the *abrek* as possessing a kind of religious or quasi-religious status, which confers legitimacy on acts of anti-colonial violence, particularly those enacted outside of approved social institutions of resistance such as local imamates. Selecting texts from the mid-nineteenth century through to the post-Stalin period of Soviet rule in the Caucasus, and from different parts of the Caucasus region, Gould traces how the *abrek's* origin as a troublesome outcast shifted to become a sanctified rebel in society, an actor of aestheticised violence in literature. Engaging with texts from three different sub-regions, she explores how this dynamic played out in different parts of the Caucasus, as it intertwined with their differing experiences of intellectual cultures, modernity, and Russian/Soviet imperialism.

In her introduction, Gould sets her scene, outlining how the end of Imam Shamil's quarter century of rule over Chechnya and Daghestan in 1859 created a vacuum in Islamic, anti-colonial authority in the Caucasus. It was into this gap that the figure of the *abrek* stepped, but with differing characteristics in the region's different territories. In Chapter One, Gould introduces what might be seen as the "classic" outlaw *abrek* found in Chechen literature. It is no accident, according to Gould's analysis, that the archetype of the *abrek* came from the most resistant of Caucasus societies to Russian and Soviet incorporation (one that, as thousands of Chechen and Russian civilians know to their cost, remains fiercely independent).

By contrast, Chapter Two explores some of the same legends and motifs as employed in Daghestani literature. With a less wild, lawless, reputation than its neighbour, Chechnya, it is unsurprising to see Gould reveal how the *abrek* of Daghestan's chronicles and literature is a more ambivalent figure, criticised directly or indirectly for operating outside of social institutions. In Chapter Three, Gould reaches the opposite end of the scale, detailing how the logic of the *abrek* was deployed in Georgian literature to redeem what, in the eyes of other Caucasus peoples, has been seen as treachery and collaboration. In Georgia, with its different religious traditions and closeness to Russian cultural influences, the literary depiction of the *abrek* again morphs in tension with political and aesthetic change.

In the final chapter, the book shifts radically from nineteenth- and twentieth-century literatures to a much more contemporary setting. Using ethnographic observations from periods in both the Caucasus and Palestine, Gould argues that the logic of transgressive sanctity can be witnessed in the world of female suicide bombers in the even now barely suppressed Chechen war, and particularly in the ways in which their acts are received by a wider public. The leap in time and the radically different kind of text under scrutiny makes for an initially jarring shift, but the careful, nuanced contemplation of this emotive and horrifying form of violence, considered through the lens of the

preceding analyses of history and text, is profoundly thought-provoking.

Despite my enthusiasm in this review of *Writers and Rebels*, the book is not perfect. The insistent return to the notion of transgressive sanctity at times feels like an argument which is being hammered home; with a little more showing instead of telling, readers could perhaps be trusted to grasp the point for themselves. And for the non-specialist in the literature and history of the Caucasus, the slew of names, places and events can be overwhelming. But overall, this is a fascinating and important piece of research. It should certainly inform those working on Tsarist Russia and Soviet history and culture, whether of the metropole or peripheries. But more widely, it should also be read by a much broader range of scholars for its insights into literatures of postcolonial violence, resistance and rebellion, and for the nuances it offers when it comes to ideas rooted usually in Anglophone and (to a lesser extent) Francophone experiences.

#### Works Cited

Mufti, Aamir R. *Forget English! Orientalisms and World Literatures*. Harvard UP, 2016.