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Breaking the Monolith of Russian-Language Culture: A Conversation about Multilingualism and Multiculturalism in Post-Soviet Space

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‘Breaking the Monolith of Russian-Language Culture': A Conversation with Hamid Ismailov about Multilingualism and Multiculturalism in Post-Soviet Space

Introduction: Natasha Rulyova

Hamid Ismailov was born into an Uzbek family in Tokmok, Kyrgyzstan, in 1954. He was educated in a Soviet secondary school and then military college. He recalls that, as a child, he read classical poetry and *1,001 Nights* to his grandmother, who brought him up from the age of 12, after his mother had passed away. As an adult, Ismailov lived in Tashkent and then in Moscow where he championed Uzbek literature for the Writers Union. He translated Uzbek classics into Russian. He also worked from Farsi, the basics of which he learnt from his family and later studied himself, into Russian and translated Western and Russian classics into Uzbek. He wrote poetry that was judged to be too “decadent” to be published in Uzbekistan. In 1992, he left Uzbekistan but later he returned. In 2017, he was deported from the Tashkent airport. His novels are still banned in Uzbekistan. After moving to western Europe, he lived in France for a short period of time and then moved to England where he worked at the BBC for 25 years. He was the first BBC Central Asia correspondent. In May 2010, he was appointed BBC World Service Writer-in-Residence and continued in this position until 2014. He currently lives in Prague.

Ismailov is a prolific author, having written articles, stories, books of poetry and many novels. He writes in Russian, Uzbek, and English. His first novel written in Russian was *Zheleznaia doroga* [*The Railway*] (1996), which was subsequently translated into English by Robert Chandler (The Harvill-Secker/Vintage*,* 2006). His first English-written novel was *Hostage to Celestial Turks* (The First Books, published 2001). It was an experimental text because the protagonist uses his pidgin English to keep a diary to ensure that it is not understood by the people around him. Then, he wrote two novellas in Russian: *Mbobo* (2009) *and Wunderkind Yerzhan* (2011)*,* which were translated into English by Andrew Bromfield under new titles, *The Underground* (The Restless Book/US, 2015) and *The Dead Lake* (Peirene Press, 2014). The following novel *A Poet and bin Laden* (Glagoslav, 2012) was also written in Russian. Meanwhile, Ismailov also wrote a few novels in Uzbek, which he published on social media due to the ban on his publications. *The Devils' Dance* was finished in 2012 and published chapter by chapter on Facebook in the same year. *Manaschi* was finished in 2018 and published online. Ismailov’s Uzbek-written novels were consequently published in English: *Devils’ Dance* (The Tilted Axis*,* English 2018) and *Manaschi* (Tilted Axis, 2021) were translated by Donald Rayfield; *Of Strangers and Bees* (The Tilted Axis, 2019) and *Gaia, The Queen of Ants* (Syracuse

University Press, 2020) were rendered into English by Shelley Fairweather-Vega. Four more novels, written in English, Russian and Uzbek, are forthcoming.

This written interview is based on my conversation in English with Ismailov, which took place online as part of the series "Natasha Rulyova's Conversations with Russophone Authors," co-organised with Pushkin House, London, on 24 October 2023. The conversation was recorded and can be accessed on the Pushkin House YouTube channel at www.youtube.com/watch?v=YXZSGoEx03U. The oral interview was subsequently transcribed and modified in the process of my continued conversation with Ismailov by email. Ismailov has approved the shortened written version of the interview, which is published here.

Natasha Rulyova (NR): Hamid, as a multilingual author, how do you choose the language in which you write your novels? To what extent does your choice of language depend on the audience you're writing for[1]? Why would you start a novel in one language and then decide to change it to another one[2]?

Hamid Ismailov (HI): I have many answers to your question why I am writing in a particular language. All the answers are in a way correct at the same time, but they are not exhausting the question. It's still a puzzle for me why I'm writing in a particular language.

Since childhood I have always lived with many languages around. Tokmok, the place where I was born, is famous because several renowned writers were born there: the Chinese poet Li Bai, the Uyghur poet Yūsuf Balasaguni and others. So, there are lots of literary histories. Also, it is an ethnically diverse place. There are Dungans, Uyghurs, Uzbeks, Kyrgyz, Kazakhs, Tatars and others. Then, I moved to Fergana Valley where there were Greeks, Turks — all kinds of people. After that, I moved to my granny's who lived in the Northern suburbs of Tashkent, which I described in *The Railway*. So, there it's a Noah's Ark of people. I was always within different languages and different cultures. They are with me, and I am happy to choose and write in different languages.

The latest explanation of mine is that I'm challenging myself. I'm writing in Uzbek those things which should be written in Russian, for example, that is I am recreating in Russian the things that I am thinking of in

[1] In past interviews and talks, Ismailov said that he chose to write in a particular language because of the audience he wanted to address (for example, see his talk 'Central Asia in World Literature,' CREES, the University of Michigan, USA, available on Youtube at https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=EFZbB-94--I).

[2] Robert Chandler who translated Ismailov's *The Railway* into English writes that Ismailov started to write this novel in Uzbek first and then, having written a chapter or so, he changed his mind and re-wrote it in Russian (see https://restlessbooks.org/blog/2015/1/26/-this-strange-teeming-world-on-translating-hamid-ismailov).

Uzbek, or English, or French. I am subliminally translating the books for myself.

N R: In an interview for *Asymptote*, you said: "Language is not a passive thing, it is a force just like atomic energy: once released it can be very destructive and have tragic consequences."[3] Does this imply that different national languages could be releasing different energy? Do you mean that writing in new languages stretches you while familiar languages have somehow exhausted their potential for you?

H I: I meant that on a subliminal level, I follow the common sense of writing what should be written in a certain language (childhood in Uzbek, professional life in Russian). Yet, in reality, I am writing it in a different language (childhood in Russian, professional life in Uzbek). By doing this, I create a new language or new vocabulary (Russian for an Uzbek childhood or Uzbek for my professional Russian life). It helps me find a new sort of expressiveness and suggestive energy in those languages.

N R: This makes sense in light of Aneta Pavlenko's argument.[4] She is Professor of Applied Linguistics and she shows that language is linked to the speaker's experience. For example, a bilingual person who grew up in Uzbekistan, like you, would indeed retrieve his childhood memories in Uzbek and they would need to be translated into another language. So, your point about challenging yourself to 'translate' the experiences accumulated through one language into another one as you are writing makes perfect sense. But do you actually self-translate?

H I: No, never. Writing comes as a package with a particular language. I leave it to true translators to translate.

N R: Do you work with your translators? In his translator's note, Robert Chandler describes how he had to contact you on various occasions to clarify various things when he was working on the English version of *The Railway*.[5] Can you say a few words about the process of working with translators?

H I: It depends on the translator. Robert Chandler is an ideal translator. I am one of those lucky people translated by Robert Chandler while still

[3] https://www.asymptotejournal.com/blog/2021/11/03/manaschi-a-modernist-novel-inspired-by-central-asias-oldest-epic-the-manas/

[4] Aneta Pavlenko, *The Bilingual Mind: And What It Tells Us about Language and Thought,* Cambridge: CUP, 2014.

[5] See https://restlessbooks.org/blog/2015/1/26/-this-strange-teeming-world-on-translating-hamid-ismailov).

alive.[6] He sent me nearly 2,000 questions. I never understood my novel *The Railway* better than after it had been translated into English. Some translators never ask any questions. I'm always there to help, but, at the same time, as a former translator myself, I entrust them with their job because I'm not a native speaker in their languages. A native speaker must know much better what to translate, how to translate, and what the translation is for.

N R: Can the meaning of the word survive in translation?

H I: It depends on the translator. For example, Andrei Platonov's language is very difficult to translate but, as far as I understand, from the reviews, Chandler was successful at transferring the oddities and the strangeness of his language. Just to give a gist of this language, there's Shklovsky's term '*ostranenie*' - 'making strange', which is applied mostly to how an author views things and situations as if for the first time. Platonov applies this term to language itself, as if he is the first man to speak. He was not the only writer who experimented with language, many others also tried to find a new language for the new revolutionary times (Khlebnikov, Mayakovsky, Grin, Pilnyak, Burlyuk, etc).

I know that Robert used all possible resources of English, including James Joyce's *Finnegans Wake*, Samuel Beckett's and George Orwell's findings in language in order to maintain the same richness, oddity and strangeness that Platonov's language has. So, it's possible, but I gave up translation activities. I've failed and generally I'm more pessimistic about actual translation.

N R: Joseph Brodsky said on various occasions that he was driven by language and he wanted to start writing in English because he was in love with the great English language and he was inspired by it. To what extent does the language you have chosen drive your literary work? To what extent does it make you think of texts that you want to cross-reference? I am asking this because your novels are full of references to other pieces of literature, to mythology, to poets and so on.

H I: First, I'm writing in different languages because I'm enchanted with languages. Now I'm living in Prague and I'm learning Czech. It's close to Russian, but at the same time, it's so different from Russian. It's a completely different set of tools. And to master this set of tools is so

[6] Ismailov is referring to the fact that Chandler has translated many texts by renowned Russian authors posthumously, including Alexander Pushkin's *The Captain's Daughter*; Nikolai Leskov's *Lady Macbeth of Mtsensk*; Vasily Grossman's *An Armenian Sketchbook*, *Everything Flows*, *Stalingrad*, *Life and Fate*, and *The Road* (all NYRB classics)' (see 'Robert Chandler' in *NYRB* at https://www.nyrb.com/collections/robert-chandler).

interesting and challenging. Obviously, if you don't fall in love with the language, you can't master it.

Second, a novel or a poem comes with a certain language and you are carried with this language. So, I do agree with Brodsky that language is writing through you rather than you are writing through the language.

Third, I have realized that what interests me is the interaction between stories. You know Bakhtin's famous comparison of Dostoyevsky's novels with Tolstoy's?[7] Dostoyevsky writes a struggle of ideas. It's a polyphony of ideas. I am interested in a polyphony of stories, in interactions between different narratives, cultures, attitudes, presumptions, and traditions. In my novels, different stories interact with each other. You can say that it's a sort of postmodern idea: a story versus another story, rather than a story as a linear thing.

N R: Intertextuality is always present in your novels. I'll quote Robert Chandler again who compared your novels to a precious carpet that slowly unravels before the reader, as the reader is going through the text and putting together all those different parts of the narrative, different subplots.

My next group of questions is about multicultural diversity, which you have pioneered in post-Soviet literature. In the past, you mentioned that you wanted to break the representation of reality, especially in Soviet literature, as a monolith. You depict reality in all its diversity. Your books are full of characters of different ethnic, religious and cultural backgrounds. On the one hand, this ethnic diversity is really important to you. But, on the other hand, ethnicities in your novels are not essential (or 'essentialist') because they can be acquired. In *The Devil's Dance*, Abdulla Qodiriy (1894-1938), an Uzbek writer who is also a protagonist in this novel, paraphrases Bābārahim Mashrab (1653-1711), a classic Uzbek poet and a Sufi thinker, saying that a person can be whoever they want to be whether in terms of their nationality or ethnicity, such as Russian, or Circassian, or in terms of their faith or lack of it, such Muslim, or unbeliever.[8]

Another example is in *Manaschi.* A Chinese man called Ulankhu expresses his desire to become a Kyrgyz; he says this to Bekesh who is half Kyrgyz and half Tajik but, for the Chinese man, Bekesh is an

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[7] Mikhail M. Bakhtin, *The Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays*, trans. by Michael Holquist and Caryl Emerson (University of Texas Press Slavic Series, 1982).

[8] Hamid Ismailov, *The Devil's Dance*, trans. by Donald Rayfield, UK: Tilted Axis Press, 2016, pp. 282-3.

ultimate Kyrgyz because he is a Manas reciter and has a horse and a hunting bird. These are the symbolic qualities associated being a Kyrgyz. Eventually, Ulankhu is accepted as a 'flat-faced Kyrgyz'[9] by a wise and old Manas reciter, which makes Ulankhu very happy. The ethnic identity in this passage seems to be understood by Ulankhu according to Stuart Hall's understanding of identity within Cultural Studies: 'not 'who we are' or 'where we came from,' so much as what we might become, and how we have been presented and how that bears on how we might represent ourselves. Identities are therefore constituted within, not outside representation.'[10] So, could you please say a few words about ethnicity and how you understand it. Is it something that is culturally constructed, fluid, constantly evolving?

H I: Two lines of thought here. Once I was asked by a magazine publisher to review an anthology of modern Russian writing. I honestly read all the anthology. And I discovered that every piece in the anthology was talking about dysfunctionality either in the family, or in society, or in the army or at work. None of the parts of this anthology but one — by Sasha Terekhov, a wonderful Russian writer — talked about otherness. You know, Russia is full of otherness, it consists of otherness. And yet the reality is sold by the writers or by the literati as one nation, one state. As I said, where I was born and grew up, everything was about diversity and the melting pots of different nations.

Another thought comes from my DNA analysis. I did it twice with different firms. I discovered that, among my 5th-8th cousins, there is every nation of the world. It's not because my forefathers were too promiscuous. [He smiles] I think it is true for many people. The DNA analysis helps us understand that both the ethnicity and nation are made up constructs.

I'll give an example from the history of Central Asia. The creators of the Tajik nation are considered to be Sadriddin Ayni[11] and Abdurauf Fitrat.[12] They are seen as the fathers of the modern Tajik culture. In

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[9] Ibid., p. 242.

[10] Stuart Hall, 'Introduction: Who Needs "Identity"?,' in S. Hall and Pall du Gay (ads), *Cultural Identity*, SAGE, 1996, pp. 1-17, p. 4.

[11] 'Sadriddin Aini was born in 1878 in Saktara in the then Emirate of Bokhara. He was a supporter of the Russian Revolution. Aini managed to survive the Stalinist purges and was a member of the Tajik Supreme Soviet. He wrote the first Tajikistani novel in Tajik and went on to write novels, poetry and memoirs. He died in 1954.' (quoted from The Modern Novel: The world-wide literary novel from early 20th century onwards, available at https://www.themodernnovel.org/asia/central-asia/tajikistan/aini/.)

[12] 'Abdurauf Fitrat (1886 – 1938) is an Uzbekistani writer, journalist and politician. Fitrat made significant contributions to contemporary Uzbek literature and was responsible for changing the national language of Bukhara to Uzbek in 1921. Thanks to his efforts the Uzbek language became official. In the early 1910s, he was influenced by Islamic Reformism and became an influential ideological leader of the local Jadid movement. Later, he sided with the communists. During Stalin's Great Purge, Fitrat was arrested, prosecuted for counter-revolutionary and nationalist activities, and executed in 1938. (Quoted from Academic Accelerator, available at https://academic-accelerator.com/encyclopedia/abdurauf-fitrat.)

reality, they were pan-Turkists[13] before the October Revolution. Ethnicity and nation are fluid constructs.

N R: Now I would like to ask you about Russian as the language that all these diverse people of different ethnicities often choose to communicate with each other in your novels. I have noticed that they speak some sort of a broken lingua franca because many of them haven't been educated properly. They learned Russian as well as other languages from various experiences. My favorite example is Mullah from *The Railway* who picks up lots of languages, but he cannot write in any of them. In the end, he's given a part-time post at a research institute as a 'Bearer of Dying Languages,'[14] which is such an ironic job title. Mullah speaks 'pidgin' versions of many languages.

It also makes me think of the role of Russian in this interlingual communication in Soviet and post-Soviet space. On the one hand, it helps people understand each other. On the other hand, there is a lot of misunderstanding and miscommunication. Sometimes characters in your novels either use their limited knowledge in one language to make sense of something in another language, or they use Russian words incorrectly and without understanding what the words mean. There are many examples of such misunderstanding in *The Railway*, which is populated with dozens of characters from diverse linguistic backgrounds. For example, Shir-Gazi says: *'Klyanu tebya Lenin-Istalinom … ', 'Maia tvaia neponimait*' ['I curse you by Lenin-Stalin…,' 'Mine yours not understand…']

Another example is Mbobo. His father is African and his mother is Circassian from Russia. His childhood is chaotic, as his mother is forced to leave her parents' home because she gives birth to a mixed-race child in a provincial Russian town. Mbobo grows up with his mother moving from house to house in Moscow. He attends an ordinary Russian school and hangs out with other kids but, due to the color of his skin, he stands out wherever he goes and never stops feeling like an outsider. He is treated with disdain and is a victim of racial abuse on a regular basis. However, he is very bright and does well at school when his messy life does not prevent him from focusing on work. Yet, he completely misinterprets the famous Mayakovsky poem entitled 'To Our Youth' (1927), which reads in the original:

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[13] Pan-Turkism is the name given to the idea of uniting all Turkic-speaking peoples of the Caucasus, the Volga-Ural region, the Crimea, Western and Central Asia under the aegis of a greater Turkish state. According to Pan-Turkist advocates, Turkic peoples have certain characteristics in common, such as related languages, a supposedly common descent and common history, and cultural traditions. (from European History Online, available at http://ieg-ego.eu/en/threads/transnational-movements-and-organisations/international-organisations-and-congresses/pan-ideologies/berna-pekesen-pan-turkism.) Tajik, related to Farsi, is not a Turkic language.

[14] Hamid Ismailov, *The Railway*, trans. by Robert Chandler, London: Vintage, 2007, p. 24.

Да будь я
и негром преклонных годов
И то,
без унынья и лени,
Я русский бы выучил
только за то,
что им
разговаривал Ленин.

[Even if
I were an old black man
I would have
— without sadness and laziness —
learnt Russian
just because
it was spoken
by Lenin.][15]

Mbobo's version of the poem creates tragicomic effects because it is partly incomprehensible and is underpinned by dark ironic undertones, hinting at racial abuse:

Добудь я и негра при клоуне годов,
Автобус унынья и лени,
Яру скобу выучил Толька зато,
Что им разговаривал Ленин.[16]

[If I were to get a black man clown's years
The bus of sadness and laziness
Yaru skobu Tol'ka would have learnt
Because it was spoken by Lenin.][17]

Where does his misunderstanding come from? If characters in *The Railway* come from linguistically diverse backgrounds, Mbobo is a Russian speaker and an avid reader in Russian. And yet, his linguistic skills fail him. What is the role of the Russian language in all these examples?

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[15] The translation is mine.

[16] Quotes from *The Railway* and *Mbobo* in Russian are taken from the novels as they were published in electronic form by Litres, a Russian language reader.

[17] The translation is mine. Please note that parts of this poem are non-sensical.

H I: So, it depends on how you understand the language: as a set of grammar rules or as a tool of communication. Basically, Russian is playing the role of a communication tool. It's similar to English. The *pidgin* English is spoken by half of the world. And one of my dreams was to write a novel in this kind of English. And I wrote *Hostage to Celestial Turks* in a kind of broken English. The character is forced to hide his thoughts in a diary and the only language which people around him are not speaking is English. And he writes a novel in his broken English.

For me the primary task of the language is communication rather than displaying correct grammar. The command of grammar is secondary. It tells us about the speaker's belonging to a certain nation or social class. So, in that sense, for millions of migrants who are going to Russia, for example, from Central Asia nowadays, Russian is still playing this role as a communication tool. After the breakup of the Soviet Union, many people from the fringes of the Soviet empire moved to its center.

Languages play different roles in different historical epochs. I was always puzzled, while working in the Soviet Writers' Union, to hear that a great Uzbek poet would talk to a great Tajik poet not in Persian but in Russian. For me it was completely odd because they share the common literature of Hafiz[18] and Rūmī[19]. But yet they were speaking to each other Russian because it was the language of communication.

N R: I can see that, but could we reflect on the poem that I quoted from your novel, the poem that Mbobo completely misunderstands. Is it because he never saw it written down? I don't see how it can be helpful in terms of communication.

H I: We hear speech primarily rather than reading it (both historically and volume-wise). Therefore, we appropriate and digest it by comparing it with patterns within our ears and mind. For example, Uzbek old ladies perceive "*otdel kadrov*" ("Human Resources Department" in Russian) as "*Abdulqadyr*," which means "a slave of the Mighty" and automatically associate it with the power center. There are many examples like that when people adopt and adapt words and phrases in the forms familiar to them, rather than in the form in which they were meant. And it doesn't help in communication, but it helps with creativity. I remember, for example, when I came first to France, my

18 Hafiz is a Persian lyric poet (see https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poets/hafez).

19 Rūmī is a Sufi mystic and poet (see https://www.britannica.com/biography/Rumi).

friend, a poet, said to me, “You know, I love your language because it's so broken that you can create metaphors of anything.” For example, I would say, translating directly from Russian, “the rain goes.” But for him, it would be a metaphor. So, in that sense miscommunication sometimes helps with some creative rediscoveries of language.

N R: In your view, what is the role of the author, especially a multilingual, Russophone author, who comes from Central Asia, in decolonizing minority literatures, especially in light of Russia’s horrible war in Ukraine?

H I: I feel that post-Soviet writers follow the same pattern as postcolonial British writers. The first instinct is to write better than the writers from the former colonizer-country. We can name writers of Indian, Pakistani and West Indies origin who write in English. There are several Nobel Prize winners among them who started to write better than the people from the center of the former empire. Similarly, some “exotic” Russian writers are also trying to write better things than Russians themselves.

The strength of these writers is that they can see stereoscopically, they can see both from the former imperial center’s point of view and from the colony’s perspective, with the tools, palettes, and cultures of both sides. But for me, that is not the answer to literary questions. I am interested in the relationships between the former colonizers and the colonized, in comparing post-Soviet and Western experiences.

N R: The Japanese writer Haruki Murakami compared writing with long distance running. What would you compare writing with?

H I: It's rather swimming than long distance running because you can drown.

N R: Speaking of that, where are you swimming now? What are you writing and in what language?

H I: Last year I finished a novel which is coming out with Yale University Press. It's about the relationship between AI and the great Persian poet Hafiz. It was written before all this hype with AI. The question I ask in the novel is whether the life of a creative person means anything; or whether it is a form of structuralist or formalistic dichotomy. I mean the views of “formalistic” and “structuralist” schools, which state that the life of an author doesn't mean anything for understanding his creation and that the work should be researched on

its own. Does the author's life mean anything for writing or is the text a standalone thing?

Another thing which I finished and passed on to my German publisher, and they're translating it into German, though the English translation is ready as well, is a hyper-novel which is called *The Russian Matryoshka*. You know the Russian dolls which are inside each other? So, it's six novels which are sort of getting smaller and smaller or, depending on how you look at it, they're getting bigger and bigger. So, they are put inside each other. It's a search for the so-called Russian soul in light of everything which is happening.

N R: And did you write *The Russian Matryoshka* in Russian?

H I: Yes, *The Russian Matryoshka* is written in Russian, and the AI is in Uzbek.

(4,434 words)