

Polyphony of Decoloniality*

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This review presents an analysis of the collection of articles *Decoloniality: Present and Future*, published by the Gorizontaĭ publishing house in 2022. The collection includes essays, interviews, and travelogues of Russia by foreign researchers, poets, artists, curators, and directors. The authors analyze the concept of decoloniality, consider the main strategies for living and creatively expressing oneself in decolonial scenarios, and analyze their own traumatic experience in modern post-Soviet space. The relevance and significance of this collection are determined by the relatively small number of Russian-language studies and works devoted to decoloniality, as well as the recently increasing interest in rethinking the domestic colonial past (which means both the imperial conquests of pre-revolutionary Russia and the national policy of the USSR). The collection raises questions about overcoming the consequences of the colonial hierarchy, defining the cultural identity of so-called “small” indigenous peoples and residents of countries that were part of the Russian Empire or the Soviet Union. An essential role is played by the discussion of decolonial art as one of the main strategies for the practical deconstruction of power relations and the creation of space for the polyphonic sounding of the voices of subaltern groups. According to the reviewer, this book makes a significant contribution to the development of Russian decolonial thought.

Keywords: decoloniality, postcolonialism, modernity, decolonial art, post-Soviet space, subalterns

В сборник «ДекOLONиАльность: настоящее и будущее» (М., 2022) вошли эссе, интервью, травелоги отечественных и иностранных исследователей, поэтов, художников, кураторов, режиссеров. В своих работах авторы ана-

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лизируют понятие деколониальности, рассматривают основные стратегии проживания и творческого проговаривания деколониальных сценариев, разбирают собственный травматический опыт в современном постсоветском пространстве. Их актуальность определяется сравнительно малым объемом русскоязычных исследований и работ, посвященных деколониальности, а также возросшим в последнее время интересом к переосмыслению отечественного колониального прошлого (под которым подразумеваются как имперские завоевания дореволюционной России, так и национальная политика СССР). В сборнике поднимаются вопросы преодоления последствий колониальной иерархии, определения культурной идентичности малых коренных народов, а также жителей стран, входивших в состав Российской империи или Советского Союза. Существенную роль играет обсуждение деколониального искусства как одной из главных стратегий практической деконструкции властных отношений и создания пространства для полифонического звучания голосов субалтерных групп. Рецензируемый сборник вносит существенный вклад в развитие отечественных исследований деколониальности.

Ключевые слова: деколониальность, постколониализм, модерность, деколониальное искусство, постсоветское пространство, субалтерны

The collection of articles *Decoloniality: Present and Future* (Moscow: Gorizontaĭ, 2022) is part of a large project called *Mezha*, which involves a series of lectures, workshops, festivals, and publications dedicated to decolonial writing and the problems of knowledge decentralization. The book consists of works by Russian and foreign authors: researchers, poets, artists, curators, and directors. The various formats of published materials (from interviews and fragments of scientific papers to travelogues and essays) are explained by Yegana Jabbarova, the editor of the collection: "...such a polyphony of text forms is important in so far as it loosens the strict ideas and normative framework laid down both in the scientific and artistic fields" [Джаббарова, 2022a, с. 5]. This seems completely justified, since the conversation about decoloniality inevitably goes beyond academic experience and scientific language, creating a need to search for new forms of expression.

For the Russian audience, decoloniality is still a relatively new and unfamiliar topic; therefore an important task facing the authors is to familiarize readers with this phenomenon, explain the basic terms, and, most importantly, present the various experiences of living and creatively expressing oneself in decolonial scenarios. Developed in the works of Latin American researchers in the 1990s, decolonial thought was positioned as an attempt to build an "optional image of the world" [Глостанова, с. 18], i. e., creating a completely different starting point for rethinking the past and present of discriminated groups (among which former colonized peoples play a central role). Decolonial authors declared the need to break with the existing traditions of Western-oriented science and culture, which inevitably carry elements of colonialism. This was the main difference between this new

direction and the postcolonial criticism that emerged in the late 1970s, which was methodologically developed largely from European philosophy.

While postcolonial scholars worked with the cultural, psychological, and socio-political mechanisms of colonialism, analyzing them from the point of subalterns, decolonial thought tried to free itself from coloniality, the “dark side of modernity”, which should be understood as “a trace or trail of power hierarchies, ideas, stereotypes, norms, human identities, and gender roles, economic and knowledge models that remain with us and in us, in how the world works after colonialism and imperialism have formally ended” [Джаббарова, 2022b, p. 37]. Decoloniality does not so much describe the trauma left by colonialism as ways to overcome it.

A special place in modern discussions is occupied by the legitimacy of using postcolonial and decolonial optics in relation to Russian history. Russian history here refers to both the legacy of the Russian Empire and the Soviet experience of national and cultural policy. Authors working with this topic usually focus on issues of identity, immigration, border positions, cultural and historical memory, chauvinism, etc. This collection makes an important contribution to the development of these issues, summarizing and analyzing existing experience and offering new decolonial strategies.

Decoloniality involves overcoming eurocentrism, which remains today a common problem for all peoples with a colonial experience. In his monograph *Provincializing Europe*, the Indian researcher Dipesh Chakrabarty convincingly shows that Europe monopolized ideas of modernity, and the rest of the world as a result has come to be seen as backward, requiring the intervention of “Western man” [Chakrabarty]. Europe declared itself as the standard of modern thought and the carrier of universal values associated with modern society, approving ideas about a sole path of development for any society. Rejection of this universalism, of “great narratives and utopias, of Truth with a capital letter, of attempts to impose their idea of happiness on the whole world” [Джаббарова, 2022b, c. 38], remains a primary task for decolonial authors. The artist and researcher Juliya Semenova notes: “In the aspiration to a reality without social discrimination and Eurocentric epistemes, the decolonial choice rejects the concept of the sole truth and rethinks the existing project of modernity” [Семенова, c. 58]. This should lead to pluriversality and heterogeneity, recognition of the existence of other equal subjects of history, and the expansion of the concept of modernity by including in it the diverse experience of subaltern groups.

Colonial suppression and subjugation of the Other, the deprivation of its independence, and the recognition of its dependent position lead to the partial erasure and blurring of the identity of colonized peoples. Therefore, the themes of cultural self-determination and overcoming psychological traumas and inferiority complexes are central for any post- and decolonial work. Franz Fanon drew attention to the fact that the inhabitants of the European colonies eventually began to imitate the white colonizers, mimicking their way of life and language. Putting on “white masks” over

black skin, they only exacerbated their dependence [Fanon]. A similar situation can be traced in the example of Soviet and post-Soviet space. The artist Saule Suleimenova, in her essay “Kudatku Bilig, or the Science of How to be Happy”, notes that Kazakhstan has long experienced the consequences of cultural imperialism from the Russian Empire: “The huge role of Russian culture was felt everywhere, the Kazakhs were embarrassed by their own authenticity, an inferiority complex developed in front of the rich cultural history of Europe and Russia” [Сулейменова, с. 92]. Therefore, during the twentieth century, one of the main problems in Kazakh art was the search for a national idea and self-identification.

Suleimenova shows the genesis of Kazakh fine art during the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, drawing attention to the fact that initially none of its directions represented the voice of subalterns. She highlights the authors who looked to join “the world community, trying to keep up and mimic global conceptual movements”, the artists who used “Kazakh as an image of barbarism”, and the official art of “ethnoromanticism” (a kind of social realism) [Там же, с. 84]. Only after independence did Kazakhstan face the question of creating a new aesthetic image for the country, and contemporary art began to solve this using decolonial optics.

According to Madina Tlostanova, Suleimenova “embodies one of the most original examples of conscious decolonial sensitivity in the post-Soviet space” [Тлостанова, с. 129]. Her works, presented in the iconic series “I’m Kazakh”, “Somewhere in the Great Steppe”, and “Saga of Returnees”, appeal to painful points in Kazakhstan’s history (for example, the Kazakh famine of 1932–1933 or the plight of ethnic Kazakhs in Xinjiang Uygur Autonomous Region). Raising the issues of defining national identity and her people’s participation in history, Suleimenova goes beyond the usual colonial dichotomy of “archaic-modern” (where the archaic is strongly associated with subalterns and the modern is the privilege of the dominant culture), offering a new way of representation: “Elements of Kazakh culture are not masked once and for all as archaic, but interpenetrate with the features of modernity” [Там же, с. 137]. Her artworks, made using a technique she calls “cellophane painting” (because they are made from plastic bags), are free from the stereotypes about Kazakhs and other steppe peoples typical of both Western art and “ethnoromanticism”. Suleimenova’s works are documentary and can even be considered as chronicles fixing the traumas and scars of colonialism.

This approach is similar to the views of Semenova, whose essay “Notes on the Elusive Form of Silence” also features in the collection. She describes her experience of decolonial art in terms of a photo project organized in the village of Yokundyu (Sakha Republic) together with the artist Marie-Noel Lego. The goal of this project was to create a collective narrative representing the voice of a subaltern group (in this case, the Yakuts). The artists organized a photographic circle to understand with local residents the issues of “identity, culture and history”, “to expand the boundaries of reality, to enter into sensitive interaction with the outside world, to take the present into their own hands” [Семенова, с. 73].

Like other authors in the collection, Semenova draws attention to the exoticization common for the dominant culture in the depiction of subalterns. Stereotypes, shrouded in a halo of romance, often having nothing to do with real life and the worldview of the indigenous people, also serve as a tool for objectification. In this sense, “exoticization” is synonymous with the term “orientalization”, introduced into postcolonial criticism by Edward Said. The image of eastern society as alien, archaic, unfamiliar, and different from Western (or Russian) customary norms becomes a distorted representation of the Other, strengthening the existing relationship of subordination and leading to the “exploitation... of the knowledge, stories, experience, lifestyle, meanings, and imaginary of indigenous peoples” [Семёнова, с. 60]. The rejection of such images, the collective discussion of self-identity, and the search for its expression is one of the tasks of decolonial art.

It is necessary to mention the appropriation of the historical memory of subaltern groups, which is a method for establishing a colonial hierarchy. In his travelogue “Tashkent – Termez (August 2021)”, Furkat Palvan-Zade, describing his trip across Uzbekistan, draws attention to the Registan, the main square in Samarkand and one of the main national symbols of the Uzbek nation. It was reconstructed by Soviet archaeologists, who, in the words of Benedict Anderson (to whom Palvan-Zade also refers), allowed “the state to appear as the guardian of a generalized, but also local, Tradition” [Anderson, p. 181]. In other words, through archeology, reconstruction work, museum work, cartography, compiling dictionaries, and other practices, the status of the dominant culture was established (and still is being established in some cases) as the main subject of knowledge, which has the right not only to study other traditions, but also to take over the duty to preserve them. At the same time, national buildings and monuments sacred to indigenous culture become part of the secular colonial system. An example of the appropriation of historical memory is the organization of the work of major museums in Europe and Russia, which has been actively criticized in recent years for the misappropriation and export to Europe of artistic and cultural values in colonial times. The question of the restitution of museum artifacts is sharply raised on modern agendas. The ways and possibility of representing various non-Western cultures through museum exhibitions prepared by European or American curators are criticized because they continue to preserve and broadcast elements of colonialism. As Walter Mignolo, one of the founders of the decolonial turn, argues: “...museums, as they evolved in the modernizing, western world, enacted the archive of western civilization but could not enact the archives of the rest of the world” [Mignolo]. In response, some activist movements have emerged in recent decades (for example, “Decolonize This Place”), insisting on the revision of modern museum policy, the restitution of exhibits, and the protection of the rights of subalterns in the cultural sphere.

Most of the authors in this collection are artists, writers, poets, curators, etc., i. e., people with creative professions. A thread running through

their essays is the limitations of science as the main institution to produce knowledge, since the academy in its modern form is strongly associated with modernity and, therefore, with colonial relations. This thesis is one of the main reasons that supporters of decolonial optics criticize postcolonial researchers for their adherence to the methodologies and principles of Western academic science, which is based on subject-object relations. In his classic of decolonial thought, Anibal Quijano points out that such a division of the world is rooted in the Cartesian philosophy of separating the soul (cognizing subject) from the body (object). Based on this, the idea was formed in Europe that “the ‘inferior’ ‘races’ are ‘inferior’ because they are ‘objects’ of study or of domination/exploitation/discrimination, they are not ‘subjects’, and, most of all, they are not ‘rational subjects’. Thus, they could legitimately be dominated and exploited. And only from that peculiar point of view was it (‘rationally’) possible to consider all non-European peoples as the past as previously articulated: as objects of knowledge or of domination and exploitation by Europeans” [Quijano, p. 221].

If we follow this logic, then any conversation about decoloniality conducted within the framework of a scientific approach is doomed to failure. Therefore, art becomes the main language for discussing these issues: “Art is able to convey diametrically opposed feelings and, thanks to this, create a symphonic work that reflects the breath of life. In rational optics, this exciting task is practically impossible” [Сулейменова, с. 76]. It should be noted that special attention to culture and art as a field of production and transfer of knowledge is also characteristic of postcolonial criticism (which arose primarily as literary criticism). But at the same time, postcolonialism does not deny, and indeed refers to, scientific research as the main way of rethinking the colonial past. Decoloniality, in contrast, postulates that “culture and art are freer than science” [Семенова, p. 71] and focuses on the creative language of statements.

The fundamental point is that unlike scientific knowledge, which strives for maximum detachment and neutrality, art always deals with personal life, with the refraction of life through a personal lens. In the same way, decoloniality emphasizes “concrete practical experience, namely, the experience of being the Other”, “direct, bodily experience of coloniality” [Мамедов, с. 121, 123]. And since this specific experience is different for everyone, the options for overcoming the trauma of coloniality may differ in each case. Consequently, no universal generalizations (typical for colonial rhetoric, often perceiving subalterns as a single group with common features and properties) are allowed. Speaking about the problems with which the decolonial agenda is struggling, Semenova notes that one is “the unification of the experience of indigenous peoples. A generalization of their past and present without considering many different aspects creates a common image, fictional in its essence” [Семенова, p. 61].

The other side of this problem is the impossibility of developing some common solutions – decoloniality takes on special specific forms in each country, each region. Georgy Mamedov emphasizes the difference between

Western and Russian/post-Soviet postcolonial criticism, rightly pointing out that “the translation of critical thought cannot be an exclusively linguistic task, but must necessarily include the translation of the context, premises, and political and affective aspects of theoretical thought” [Мамедов, с. 123]. The simple use of concepts and algorithms borrowed from Western theory may not always lead to the necessary result. Moreover, as many authors in the collection note, this often turns the domestic decolonial agenda into a kind of “fashionable fetish of biennale and art-corporate parties”, depriving it of “its original political and affective content” [Там же]. In other words, the desire to keep pace with Western historiography is fraught with an insufficient understanding of domestic realities and their differences from the colonial history associated with former European colonies.

It is especially important to talk about how decolonial optics should function in modern post-Soviet realities. One of the answers may be, according to Mamedov, the aforementioned personal, direct experience of living coloniality: “...the main task of decolonial criticism in Russian lies precisely in this – in the active connection of theoretical thought with everyday Russian (post)colonial life. How can this link between theory and everyday life be achieved?” [Мамедов, с. 115]. It should be emphasized that decoloniality is associated primarily with practice and not with abstract theorizing. The latter is a kind of trap into which any attempts to build a theoretical/scientific justification for decoloniality fall. Therefore, practical projects (such as photo projects by Juliana Semenova, paintings by Saule Suleimenova, or the various Internet projects dedicated to the study of the history and culture of central Eurasia by Furkat Palvan-Zade), affecting the history of specific regions/people, become important points in the deconstruction of coloniality, the disintegration of the surviving power hierarchy, the dissolution of the effects of colonial domination, and the revision of power and knowledge relations in the context of post-colonial space.

The publication of *Decoloniality: Present and Future* can certainly be considered as one such practical project, a collective statement of the authors based on their direct “bodily” experience of encountering coloniality. This emphasizes its relevance to modern post-Soviet space, in which more and more attention is paid to the issues of historical memory, rethinking the past, and the national policy of the Russian Empire and the USSR. The polyphony of this statement is important, which can be considered, based on the ideas of Mikhail Bakhtin, as “a combination of several individual wills”, “a fundamental way beyond the limits of one will”: “the artistic will of polyphony is the will to combine many wills, the will to an event” [Бахтин, с. 25]. This event is the formation of decolonial optics among readers (or at least acquaintance with them). Unlike scientific articles oriented to specialists and researchers, the essays, interviews, and travelogues included in this collection are understandable to a wide range of readers, which corresponds to the educational tasks of the decolonial agenda – to make the “dark side of modernity” visible, to make clear the problems that exist in modern times.

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