

The Transformation of the Image of the East in the Post-Soviet Prose of Timur Pulatov and Hamid Ismailov

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Abstract. *The article explores the transformation of the image of the East in post-Soviet fiction through the works of Timur Pulatov and Hamid Ismailov. It analyzes the shifts in perception, representation, and symbolism of the East in the context of the Soviet Union's collapse and the formation of new cultural identities in Central Asia. Special attention is given to postcolonial approaches and intertextual strategies that reflect the tension between tradition and modernization in the authors' narratives.*

Key words: *East, post-Soviet literature, Central Asia, postcolonialism, identity.*

Introduction

The image of the East has long occupied a central position in the cultural imagination, both within and beyond the borders of Central Asia. In the Soviet period, it was often represented through a prism of ideological control and exoticism, where the East was either romanticized as a timeless repository of tradition or problematized as backward and in need of Soviet modernization. With the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991, a new discursive space emerged—one that allowed previously marginalized voices to redefine and reclaim cultural identity. In this context, the works of Timur Pulatov and Hamid Ismailov stand out for their nuanced portrayals of the East as a dynamic, multifaceted space.

This article explores how these two authors conceptualize the East in their post-Soviet prose. Rather than viewing it as a monolithic or static entity, Pulatov and Ismailov present the East as a contested cultural field, shaped by memory, displacement, hybridization, and historical trauma. The goal of this study is to trace the literary transformation of Eastern imagery and symbolism in their narratives and to examine how these reflect broader postcolonial and post-Soviet realities.

Methods

The research employs an interdisciplinary methodology, combining the following approaches: Postcolonial criticism: Drawing on Edward Said's *Orientalism* and its later developments, this study identifies how the authors engage with and subvert dominant representations of the East [1]. Narrative analysis: Examining the use of metaphor, allegory, and structure in the construction of Eastern space. Comparative literary analysis: Comparing recurring motifs and images across multiple texts to understand each author's evolving vision of the East. Historical-contextual reading: Placing the texts within the socio-political contexts of post-Soviet transformation, migration, and cultural memory.

Primary texts include Pulatov's "Cold Fire," "The Silk Road," and "Solar Eclipse" as well as Ismailov's "The Railway," "The Dead Lake," "The Underground," and "Gaia, Queen of Ants." These texts span different genres and periods but share thematic concerns around space, memory, and identity.

Results

The image of the East in Pulatov and Ismailov's fiction reveals several significant transformations:

1. From Exoticism to Internalization: Where earlier Soviet representations of the East often emphasized its exotic otherness, Pulatov and Ismailov internalize the East. The external gaze is replaced by an introspective voice, one that seeks to reclaim the region's spiritual and historical integrity. This is particularly evident in Ismailov's "The Railway," where the Eastern town becomes a symbolic crossroads of memory and modernity [2].
2. Hybrid Temporalities: The East is no longer bound to a singular historical narrative. Pulatov's texts layer Soviet, pre-Soviet, and mythological pasts within the same narrative structure. Time in the East is fluid, reflecting the psychological disorientation experienced by post-Soviet individuals.
3. Nomadic Imaginaries: A key feature of both authors' work is the motif of displacement. The East is often portrayed as a nomadic space—physically, culturally, and metaphysically. Characters wander through geographies that are at once real and symbolic, negotiating fractured identities along the way.
4. Language and Polyphony: Both writers employ multilingualism and code-switching as literary devices. Pulatov uses Uzbek, Russian, and Persian cultural references, while Ismailov often integrates Uzbek and English. This linguistic layering mirrors the hybridity of Eastern identity and challenges monolithic notions of language and nationhood.
5. Post-Soviet Trauma and Melancholy: Ismailov's "The Dead Lake" presents the Eastern landscape as a repository of ecological and existential trauma. The lake is both literal and allegorical—a poisoned remnant of Soviet nuclear testing and a symbol of spiritual stagnation. The East, in this vision, is both wounded and resilient [3].

Discussion

The transformation of the East in the works of Pulatov and Ismailov challenges conventional binaries such as East vs. West, tradition vs. modernity, and center vs. periphery. Instead, they propose a multipolar cultural map in which identities are negotiated rather than given. Their characters are often suspended between worlds, caught in the interstices of history and memory.

The intertextual strategies employed by both authors reveal a profound engagement with classical Eastern literature—Sufism, Persian poetry, Uzbek oral traditions—but also with Western modernist forms. This cultural dialogue is not merely aesthetic but deeply political. It asserts the right of Central Asian subjects to speak in their own voice, to reflect on their own history, and to imagine alternative futures.

Moreover, both authors use spatial metaphors to articulate psychological and historical conditions. The railway, the desert, the underground city—these are not just settings but dynamic agents of narrative and meaning. They structure the protagonists' journeys of self-discovery and cultural negotiation.

Conclusions

In their post-Soviet prose, Timur Pulatov and Hamid Ismailov redefine the East as a space of multiplicity and agency. Far from being a passive backdrop or exotic other, the East becomes a subject in its own right—capable of memory, critique, and reinvention. Their works illuminate the complex cultural realities of post-Soviet Central Asia and offer valuable insights into the processes of identity formation, historical reckoning, and literary innovation.

This reimagining of the East contributes to a broader postcolonial reorientation in world literature, where formerly marginalized regions assert their narratives and epistemologies. As such, Pulatov and Ismailov are not only chroniclers of their time but also architects of a new literary geography that transcends inherited boundaries.

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