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East-West Cultural Mediation in the Works of Galsan Tschinag

Even while the Soviet Bloc marginalized the Mongolian People's Republic for much of the twentieth century, the Mongolians themselves were marginalizing another perceived ethnic and linguistic periphery, the Tuvan and Kazak minority nomads in the extreme west of the country in the steppes beside the Upper Altai mountain range.

It was in this region that Irgit Schynkbajoglu Dschurukuwaa was born to a nomadic Tuvan family of leadership lineage. Shamanic training in the Tuvan oral tradition became his apprenticeship in the poetic arts. By the 1960s the Mongolian state had forcibly resettled many of the Tuvan-speaking minority into urban environments, principally Ulan Bator. Dschurukuwaa in urban exile was required to take on a Mongolian name to go to school. Thus he became "Galsan Tschinag" in place of his indigenous name.

When Tschinag left home to study German in a sister socialist country, East Germany, his Soviet-inculcated hatred of Germany led him to expect the worst; but his initial prejudice that every German was a fascist evaporated when he got to know the people. As he began writing novels, poetry and essays in the 1980s it was with European publishers and in German.

Despite the largely positive experience he had had in Leipzig, the writer had come to realize that the European attitude towards his own Tuvan people as a whole was condescending and distorted. A decade before the publication of Edward Said's groundbreaking book *Orientalism*¹ and its impetus for postcolonial studies, Tschinag was already aware of being made the "Other," of being Orientalized and forced to the margins.² Seeing through the process allowed him to declare:

“Die ganze Weltgeschichte [ist] unter dem Regiestock von Europäern diktiert und bewußt verfälscht... sie hat das Nomadentum immer als regressiv schlecht gemacht.”³

Tschinag’s literary attempts to bridge the cultural divide have evolved into at least three strategies that parallel those used in postcolonial critique.

#1. Re-Presenting the Narrative of Empire as Counter-Discourse

Postcolonial theory has sought ways to craft counter-discourse to subvert dominant narratives that negate and distort the indigenous voice.⁴ Beyond scholarly criticism, the strategy extends to belletristic works from the very authors whose peoples have earlier been silenced.

In an article entitled “Orientalismus umgepolt?” Jim Jordan suggests:

...that the use... of [exotic] elements is more differentiated and strategic than has hitherto generally been acknowledged, ranging from the de-exoticisation of the ‘other’ through encoded social criticism to the deliberate undermining of Orientalist attitudes through an ironic play with Orientalist expectations of migrant literature.⁵

In the case of Galsan Tschinag, the counter-discourse comes in German from a Central Asian nomad whose translations can be read in the languages of former Asian colonizers – English, French, Spanish and Dutch – as well as in languages ranging from Basque and Serbian to Hebrew and Japanese. Orientalist expectations of Eastern inferiority could be upended when readers learn that the author is in a position of power, a chief among his own people; a frequent world traveler; a prizewinner of the Adalbert von Chamisso literary prize and the *Bundesverdienstkreuz* who produces on average one book a year; and a popular guest on the German television talk-show circuit.

Tschinag’s first works were heavily autobiographical, introducing readers to daily life in yurts and grazing grounds on the steppes of the Upper Altai. A central trilogy reflecting coming-of-age struggles of a young nomad in a changing world appeared in the last decade of the

twentieth century as *Der blaue Himmel* (1994), *Die graue Erde* (1999) and *Der weisse Berg* (2000). Within the “politics of location,” the cultural linkage is temporarily shifted for the readers to the remote reaches of Western Mongolia.⁶ The seemingly exotic descriptions reflect scenarios that are universally human. One critic has compared Tschinag’s early work to that of the Afghan-American, Khaled Hosseini:

While *The Kite Runner* exposed readers to Afghani culture through its use of potboiler plotting, *The Blue Sky* does much the same for nomadic Mongolian society, but in a quieter and more sophisticated way. It is a meditative book that shows the seduction of modernity, and the fragility of tradition.⁷

The circuitous prose takes some getting used to until you recognize it as the literary outpouring of a language that only possesses an oral tradition. Thus Tschinag hybridizes the style in a language of Europe but with the word rhythm of the Central Asian steppes.

Tschinag works within the framework of Exoticism while counteracting its negative goals and effects in the novel *Dojnaa* (2001),⁸ where within an exotic nomadic lifestyle the female title hero leaves her abusive husband, protects her children, and still finds a way to harmonize with the tribal patriarchal structure, illustrating a stone-age culture where oppression of women is no longer supported. Thus the German reader finds an exotic setting where familiar struggles and values reduce the cultural distance. Jordan characterizes this strategy as “‘kulturelle Vermittlungsarbeit,’ wo der Autor versucht, die Fremdheit zwischen Autor und Leser abzubauen.”⁹ To be counter-Brechtian, we might call it the *Entfremdungseffekt*.

Talking back to the empire can also occur in a metaphorical, historical narrative. In *Das geraubte Kind* (2004),¹⁰ the legend highlights the tragedy of a Tuvan boy abducted to China during the Manchu Dynasty who is groomed to return to his people as

their prince only if he will lead them back into the “main body,” that is, China. He and his people oppose that with predictably genocidal consequences. On one level a personal story, it could also represent the unequal encounter between a weak society and the empire, be it Manchu, Mongolian or European, that threatens to swallow it up.¹¹

Even within a work that seems at first glance to have no connection between East and West, *Die neun Träume des Dschinghis Khan* (2007), discourse with Europe does appear after 250 pages, in the very last sentence of the book. Here Tschinag counters the imperious assumption that the Asian world must look west for inspiration and tales of accomplishment:

Denn er, Dschingis Khan, wurde von der anderen Flanke des Erdkörpers aus zum Mann des Jahrtausends verkündet. Und damit... wurden dessen Vaterland und Muttervolk mit einemmal so bekannt, dass alle Wege, die früher mal nach Rom, mal nach Paris und mal nach Beijing geführt haben, nun in die sonnenüberflutete, grasbewachsene Steppe zu führen schienen....¹²

#2. Using Contrapuntal Techniques to Present a Complex, Multipolar World

Tschinag writes implicitly or explicitly from the perceived margins to the center, from the East to the West.¹³ One way that the author has communicated with Western readers is to team up with a German-Swiss coauthor, as he did for *Im Land der Zornigen Winde* (1997). Amélie Schenk, a professional ethnologist studying Mongolian nomads, enters into a point-counterpoint dialogue with Tschinag while both shuttle from anthropological description to literary fiction and myth.

Another technique is the insertion of cultural connections that resonate with European readers. In *Die Rückkehr* (2008), for instance, describing Galsan's return to the steppes following his years in East Germany, he makes reference not just to Dschingis Khan, but also to Honoré de Balzac, Ludwig van Beethoven and Don Quixote.¹⁴

Gayatri Spivak has proposed another controversial technique for postcolonial activism called “Strategic Essentialism,” where a minority group, despite individual variations, distills an essential unitary identity that can be strategically put forward to help tease out the truth.¹⁵ Tschinag, the chieftain and spokesman of his group, uses this to depict Tuvan society in positive terms as round (“Rund ist die Urform des Lebens”¹⁶) and ancient (“Ich komme aus einer... längst vergangenen Zeit”¹⁷). The Tuvan, he suggests, lives smoothly, in harmony with the earth and at a natural tempo. Against a view of European life as hectic, angular, urbanized and modern, he portrays a smooth, pastoral and ancient tableau for Eastern nomads. At the same time, the warning of Edward Said remains valid: “...the answer to Orientalism is not Occidentalism.”¹⁸

The ongoing intent of the author is to contradict Europeans who equate “different” with “inferior,” as he expressed it in a cover letter to Insel Verlag accompanying his manuscript for “*Das andere Dasein*” (2011):

Dass diese Hirtennomaden aus der unwirtlichen mongolischen Wüstensteppe, meine Helden mit ihrer wurzelhaften Ausdauer und ihrem triebhaften Selbstvertrauen, alles andere sind als träge und stumpf oder gar mongoloid, dürfte jeder unvoreingenommene Leser erkennen.¹⁹

The title of the work itself, *Das andere Dasein*, directly addresses polarization, and binary opposites populate the book. A nomadic Central Asian shepherd falls in love with a European woman named Anni two separate times while visiting Europe, first in Moscow and later in Budapest. Or is it two women, each named Anni? The relationship between a Caucasian woman and an Asian man are central to the tale. From the Hungarian Anni’s grandmother and her generation, racism pours forth. The racist epithets are never quoted, but presented only indirectly in third person, as if holding them at a distance by the scruff of their neck. One example will suffice:

Man nannte sie bald Kirgisen, bald Mongolen, und brachte sie so etwa zwischen Russen und Schweinen unter....²⁰

Tschinag thus forces the marginalizing racist discourse to the margins in a way designed to mock the act of mocking.

#3. Universalizing the “Other” to Encourage Inclusivity²¹

In his early prose Tschinag had depicted universally recognizable contours of family life on the steppes. In the hyper-nomad's²² two most recent novels, the narrative action unfolds in Mongolia but in globalized contexts that reference the East-West divide with Central Asian characters and situations at both ends of the spectrum. In *Gold und Staub* (2012)²³ the protagonist is a mirror of the author, so thinly veiled that the character's name is Dschurukuwaa. The antagonist is a lovely Kazak woman who seeks his assistance in a scheme to strip-mine the steppes for gold. She serves as proxy for certain ascribed European values – turbo-capitalism and environmental destruction – that the leader of the nomadic peoples rejects. Despite such profound differences, though, the author's bottom line is to mediate: “... nicht jeder Kampf muss in Feindschaft enden. Wenn man weise genug kämpft, steht man auf derselben Seite.”²⁴

In *Der Mann, die Frau, das Schaf, das Kind* (2013)²⁵ the twin protagonists are nomads forced to live – and find common ground – in an urban environment where sheep are not welcome in apartment houses. In this case their nomadic ethos is set against the 21st-century bustle of Ulan Bator, which stands in for the perceived European projects of concrete and steel.

The most basic anti-colonial technique is for the native to describe himself rather than to be described. For that Tschinag turns to poetry. To the Tuvan, shamanic poetry is so powerful

that it must not be spoken until the time of thunderstorms is past.²⁶ In his most recent anthology, *Steppenwind und Weltenwind* (2013), Tschinag defines himself with animistic imagery and belief:

Ich bin ein bebeintes
Gras der asiastischen Steppe
Ein behüteter Stein des Altaiberges.²⁷

From his status as “a blade of grass with legs on the Asiatic steppe,” as a “skin-covered stone of the Altai mountain,” the poet speaks to power, demanding from the West his own autonomous existence:

Verlangt daher von mir nicht Dinge
Die ihr kennt, die ihr könnt
Und nötigt mich, bitte, nicht in eine Rolle
Die mir nicht liegt noch steht
So lasst mich das und dort sein
Was ich bin und wo ich richtig bin.²⁸

In that same anthology, Galsan Tschinag sums up the ultimate goal of reciprocal respect, not in a world of Occidentalism or Orientalism, but in a mediated, multilateral acceptance of commonality in the midst of fascinating differences:

Die Welt ist ein gemeinsames
Fortlaufendes Werk.²⁹

¹ Edward Said, *Orientalism* (New York: Vintage Books, 1978).

² Shehla Burney, *Pedagogy of the Other: Edward Said, Postcolonial Theory, and Strategies for Critique* (New York: Peter Lang, 2012), pp. 26-27.

³ Michael Backmund, “Jeder Europäer ist eine Abfallfabrik” [Interview], *AZ [Abendzeitung]*, 20 November 1995, p. N-13.

⁴ Burney, p. 42.

⁵ Jim Jordan, “Orientalismus, umgepolt? Zum Gebrauch des Exotismus und des Fantastischen in Werken der Diaspora-Literatur,” in: Helmut Schmitz, ed., *Von der nationalen zur internationalen Literatur: Transkulturelle deutschsprachige Literatur und Kultur im Zeitalter globaler Migration*, p. 157.

⁶ Cf. Burney, “Politics of Location,” pp. 43-44.

⁷ Adam Braver, “Nomads in a Changing World,” *Providence Journal* (Rhode Island), 10 December 2006, I, 6.

⁸ Galsan Tschinag, *Dojnaa* (Munich: A1 Verlag, 2001).

⁹ Jordan, *op. cit.*, pp. 158-160.

¹⁰ Galsan Tschinag, *Das geraubte Kind* (Frankfurt a. M.: Insel, 2004).

¹¹ Cf. Keith Hitchins, “Das geraubte Kind,” *World Literature Today*, 1989, vol. 79, 3-4, p. 87.

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- ¹² Galsan Tschinag, *Die neun Träume des Dschingis Khan* (Frankfurt a. M.: Insel, 2007).
- ¹³ Burney, p. 126.
- ¹⁴ Galsan Tschinag, *Die Rückkehr: Roman meines Lebens* (Frankfurt a.M.: Insel, 2008). Cf. also Sophie Divry, "Chaman de Galsan Tschinag: Passeur de frontières," *Le Monde Diplomatique*, April 2012, p. 24.
- ¹⁵ Burney, pp. 55-58.
- ¹⁶ Lerke von Saalfeld, ed., *Ich habe eine fremde Sprache gewählt*, p. 102. Cf. also Galsan Tschinag, *Verteidigung des Steins gegenüber dem Beton*, 2nd ed. (Frauenfeld: Waldgut, 2004), pp. 7-20.
- ¹⁷ Tschinag, *Verteidigung des Steins gegenüber dem Beton*, p. 7.
- ¹⁸ Said, *Orientalism*, p. 328.
- ¹⁹ Galsan Tschinag, *Das andere Dasein* (Berlin: Insel, 2011), p. 8.
- ²⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 60.
- ²¹ Burney, pp. 160-164.
- ²² Jacques Attali, *L'homme nomade* (Paris: Fayard, 2003), pp. 392-393 warns that any society that closes itself off to nomads, to itinerants and foreigners, will go into decline by losing its sense of novelty and momentum. He posits the term *hypernomade* (p. 409) for the modern counter-imperial traveler/rebel.
- ²³ Galsan Tschinag, *Gold und Staub* (Zurich: Unionsverlag, 2012).
- ²⁴ Angelika Fey, "Mongolischer Witz verzaubert Publikum," *Oberhessische Presse [Marburg]*, online edition: <http://www.op-marburg.de/Lokales/Kultur/Kultur-lokal/Mongolischer-Witz-verzaubert-Publikum>.
- ²⁵ Galsan Tschinag, *Der Mann, die Frau, das Schaf, das Kind* (Zurich: Unionsverlag, 2013).
- ²⁶ Tschinag, *Verteidigung des Steins gegenüber dem Beton*, p. 7.
- ²⁷ Galsan Tschinag, *Steppenwind Weltenwind. Gedichte* (Frauenfeld: Waldgut, 2013), p. 17.
- ²⁸ *Ibid.*
- ²⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 37.