

# Migrant's Semiotics in the novel "The 45<sup>th</sup> Parallel" by Polina Zherebtsova

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**Abstract.** The article is devoted to the socio-cultural and linguistic analysis of the characteristics of mutual penetration and mutual determination of Christian and Muslim semiotic culture codes in migration discourse of North Caucasus that creates the effect of syncretism of “ours” and “theirs” in speech behavior based on the novel “The 45<sup>th</sup> Parallel” by Polina Zherebtsova. The story takes place in Stavropol, on the 45<sup>th</sup> Parallel of the Earth. The documentary novel written in 2005 – 2006 is based on personal diaries of the author, a refugee from Grozny. The aim of this article is to analyze mentalities of Russian (Christian) refugees from the Chechen Republic in the fiction. The research makes it possible to conclude that secondary acculturation of migrants has modified their axiological picture of the world, psychology, lifestyle and sociocultural habits of migrants; together with attributes of their culture, they have preserved relics of the worldview of societies, which they have left. So it is possible to speak about a palimpsest of Christian and Muslim semiotic culture codes “Clothes”, “Food”, and “Interpersonal relations” in migration discourse of North Caucasus. The main methods of the research are the semiotic analysis and the hermeneutic interpretation of discourse.

## 1 Introduction

Modern humanistic studies pay special attention to analysis of interaction of language and culture, language and society, language and ethnicity. In this regard, markers of belonging to any social group, that can be distinguished and systematically studied considering the prevailing mentality, norms and values, are in the focus of academic interest. In this foreshortening the migration processes are actively studied [1-6]. Semiotic and cultural aspects of studying speech and behavior of a migrant and a refugee come forward in modern research in the sphere of critical analysis of discourse, which seems logical and natural as verbal communication, being a fact of culture of native speakers, contains not only factual explicit information but also implicit semiotic cultural codes [7-13].

Cultural determinism of semiotic codes manifests itself in the most expressive way in ambivalent periods of social disasters. In particular, the post-Soviet period can be mentioned, when fringes of the former empire were flooded with refugees. Then there was the secondary acculturation of migrants, and it modified their axiological view of the world, and it became clear that psychology, lifestyle, social and cultural habits of the migrants, together with attributes of their own culture, kept relics of world outlooks of the societies from which they had come.

Western humanistic research traditions “constructed” the East in the discourse of “orientalism” as an

absolutely different world, something quite alien to Western people who contemplate it [14-19]. Based on this way of thinking, it seems actual to study the perception of the phenomenon of migration in North Caucasus that shows us the ethnic and cultural mosaic of communication, from the perspective of multiculturalism. The modern society involved in processes of globalization is trying to preserve its own cultural identity in the conditions of the migration crisis and islamization.

To characterize such process, the metaphor of a palimpsest, common in modern discourse, seems to suit as well as possible. According to Thomas de Quincey, the human brain is a gigantic palimpsest, that is, a parchment from which the original text is being rubbed off, layer after layer, for a new text to be written on it [20]. But the earlier text has not disappeared completely, it seems to be seen through the new one and its meaning can be decoded. Transposition of this metaphoric interpretation of a palimpsest as a meta-language in our research of migration is based on the assumption that the process of migration cannot completely eliminate the influence of the lost Islamic sociocultural milieu, even in the conditions of acculturation of migrant Christians in a new society. The aforementioned can be primarily applied to representing semiotic cultural codes in the migrants` behaviour, that is the net culture “throws” on the world around, decomposing, categorizing and evaluating it. Regarding the chosen sociocultural

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discourse, interpretation of semiotic cultural codes is given for the first time.

## 2 Material and methods

The material of this research is a documentary novel by Polina Zherebtsova, a modern Russian writer, "The 45<sup>th</sup> Parallel" [21], that is about her life in the city of Stavropol. This writer is known, above all, for her diaries describing the Chechen war. Polina was born in Grozny in a multinational family. The family did not leave the Chechen Republic during the war. In 2004, the family left Chechnya for the Russian Republic. Having arrived to the south Russian city of Stavropol, the writer went on writing diaries, on which this novel is based. The poor financial situation of refugees from Chechnya and difficulties of secondary acculturation, are in the focus of attention.

To achieve the defined aims, a number of methods is used in this research that complement each other. The main one is the descriptive method. Besides, the following methods will be used:

- Situational and context analysis, based on finding connections of this or that cultural code with the discursive context, in which it is used.
- Semiotic analysis, connected with consideration of migration discourse of North Caucasus as a system of signs, that implies combination of a certain meaning and a certain way of expressing it, that is, of what expresses and what is expressed.
- The hermeneutic and noematic method, that implies comparing of a structure of meaning of a seme with the noematic structure of the meaning to clarify different types of transformation of the structure of meaning by the process of creation of meanings that are non usual.

The algorithm of the research can be systematized as follows:

Step 1. Formulation of the aims and constructing the vocabulary of terms used in the research.

Step 2. Identification of microcontexts with the help of situational and contextual analysis, where there is misalignment of substantive and factual contents of the discourse, on the one hand, and the social environment of the culture, on the other hand, and recording their relevance in the context of **analysis** of the palimpsest of Christian and Muslim semiotic culture codes in migration discourse of North Caucasus.

Step 3. Identifying the given microcontexts on the basis of cultural codes belonging to the subjects "Clothes", "Food", and "Interpersonal relations" in migration discourse of North and South Caucasus.

Step 4. Verification of the conclusions, showing dependence of reception of cultural codes on characteristics of intercultural communication and sociocultural parameters of the milieu of its functioning, with the help of the following practices.

Step 5. Conclusions on the specificity of the syncretism of Christian and Muslim semiotic culture codes in migration discourse of North Caucasus based on the novel "The 45<sup>th</sup> Parallel" by Polina Zherebtsova.

## 3 Results and Discussion

Let us analyze the semiotic cultural code "Clothes" in Polina Zherebtsova's novel "The 45<sup>th</sup> Parallel". First of all, we should mention the head scarf that women wear in the Caucasus. This item of clothing is an important semiotic cultural code in Polina Zherebtsova's novel under consideration. In the Caucasus, the woman has always been considered the keeper of cultural community traditions, and the keeper of traditional style of clothing, at that. This is why the national costume became something like the territory of keeping local ethnic features that stayed original until the XX century. The head covering is one of the most interesting items in the complex system of items in the national costumes of the Chechens. In the traditional culture of the Chechens, the head covering is a unique sign of a woman's clarity, devotion and chastity. In the traditional culture of Chechen women, the head scarf is an integral part of their clothing.

We should mention that Christian women in the region of Northern Caucasus also wear headscarves. Thus, the character of Polina Zherebtsova's autobiographical novel, who was born and grew up in Chechnya, had got used to wearing it from her childhood:

*There as a reflection of my face in the glass: round forehead, a childish slightly snub nose with freckles on it, eyes of some hazel or green color, and big head scarf. Women with flowing hair are considered "unfaithful" and blamed in Chechnya. (Here and throughout translation of fragments of the book is ours. – Authors. )* [21].

For the girl, a headscarf is a symbol of the culture in which she had grown up. This is why, having left Grozny and moved to the Stavropol territory, Polina went on wearing this head covering in her everyday life, though it seems unusual to local people in Stavropol. Both in Western countries and in Russia, many people think the headscarf traditionally worn by Muslim women as a sign of piety, the greatest symbol of oppression and dependency. In the following fragment of the novel, an episode from the life of its character is described. Girls from Stavropol think that the headscarf worn by Polina prevents her from seeing the world adequately:

*The neighbor looked at us, as if we were enemies. – They ask me! – She wiped tears with her hand in a leaky mitten. – Can't you see the world above your scarf? You have come from your Chechnya and can't see what is happening on the Russian Orthodox Christian land!* [21].

The scarf on the girl's head is explicitly associated with a mentality that is alien to Russian people and their values (*You have come from your Chechnya and can't see what is happening on the Russian Orthodox Christian land!*). Another attribute of Polina being alien to Russian society, connected with the explication of the semiotic code "Clothes" is the length of the skirt worn by the main character. The long skirt, like the headscarf, is traditional in Muslim societies. The author of the autobiographical novel is not in a hurry of rejecting the clothes common in Muslim societies, in which she feels

comfortable, notwithstanding the fact that people mock at her:

*I took another shuttle bus going back. Thank God nobody mocked at the way I looked, at my long skirt and my headscarf [21].*

But it is characteristic that Polina who has left her native place in the Muslim world rejects her Muslim clothes trying to socialize. Trying her secondary acculturation, she changes, and her appearance changes, too:

*Going to look for a job, I took off my scarf for the first time, and had my hair curled. Instead of my hoodie, I put on a knee-length skirt and a pink blouse [21].*

But it is not so easy. After a short period of wearing European clothes, Polina puts on her long skirt and a headscarf again, as she feels comfortable in these clothes. Even after that, having moved to Europe, she often had her pictures taken for mass media in her traditional Muslim head covering and a long skirt.

Another aspect of the semiotic cultural code “Clothes” in Polina Zherebtsova’s novel is its ability to be a symbol of everyday hardships and a difficult material situation, which Polina and her mother faced, having come to Stavropol from the war-stricken Chechnya. For example, in the following passage Polina’s winter jacket is an inseparable attribute of her disappointment in her hope to improve her everyday life:

*Going to sleep in a winter jacket, I did not feel any difference between the Chechen war and peaceful life in a Russian town. Mother’s dreams about a better life seemed naïve to me [21].*

Non-traditional items of clothing make readers pay attention to axiological appraisals of the author of the novel. These appraisals conceal the author’s non-acceptance of Russian reality she criticizes the small-scale theft of her neighbors in Stavropol. In the following passage, a flea collar for cats is considered an item of human clothes because a man robs a cat from it; that means, he needs being protected from insects:

*Our new neighbors in the barracks stole not only the dog’s bowl, but also our cat Karina’s flea collar. They must have decided that they need it more [21].*

Thus, we can see the syncretism of Polina’s worldview; what is familiar to her is considered Muslim and obsolete, and she is “estranged from her own people”.

Now we are going to analyze the semiotic code “Food”. As in the case with the semiotic code “Clothes”, welfare issues come forward, which Polina and her family faced in their peaceful life in the quiet provincial Stavropol. Polina and her mother’s food in this new place is to some extent a matter of their traditions and habits that appeared during their life in Chechnya in wartime, where the main delicacies were pasta and canned food:

*-When we come home, we will cook pasta! There is some canned food. – Mother was consumed with her simple thoughts about a tasty dinner [21].*

We can state that sticking to food habits of the period of the Chechen war demonstrates weak acculturation in the new society. Besides, the semiotic code “Food” in Zherebtsova’s novel “The 45<sup>th</sup> Parallel” symbolizes the

poor financial condition of the Zherebtsov family in Stavropol, and frustration after their hope to improve their life after having left Chechnya:

*After the breakfast of a pair of potatoes, I visited editorial offices of Stavropol newspapers [21].*

One more aspect of the semiotic code “Food” in Polina Zherebtsova’s prose is Polina’s food preferences formed by the Muslim ethics. For example, she abstains from alcoholic drinks, even visiting other people, unlike other people from the Christian world, natives of Stavropol:

*An old, but very energetic woman met us warmly. She was drinking red wine glass after glass, telling us funny stories, and we were laughing. I enjoyed orange juice and salads, which were there in abundance. Julia cooked a chicken in the oven, and it smelt pleasantly with spices. It reminded us of the world where people eat their fill and have a roof over their heads [21].*

In the aspect of explicating syncretism in Muslim and Christian cultural codes in Zherebtsova’s writings, the examples are interesting, where the cultural code “Interpersonal relationships” is portrayed. Speaking of the new place of her living after having left Chechnya, Polina always actualizes the opposition “ours – not ours”. For a Russian refugee from Chechnya, not the Muslim world, which she has left, becomes alien, but the Christian worldview of Russian people. The image of Stavropol that thinks itself the unapproachable center of the world, embodies the Christian views of the Russian people:

*Somewhere beyond the mountains, an alien city was waiting for us, standing on the forty-fifth parallel of the Earth. Having stretched over the hills, Stavropol, like Rome, thought itself impregnable. City of the Cross – that is what its name mean in Greek [21].*

In the next example there are Polina’s thoughts at the moment when she is leaving Chechnya for Stavropol for the first time together with her mother. Here the world of Stavropol people is called Russian, as opposed to Polina’s world:

*We were walking in busy streets of an alien city, and I tried to discern people’s faces and guess how they live here, in the Russian world [21].*

A number of components of the cultural code “Interpersonal relations” in the analyzed literary work explicit ethical aspects of the Muslim culture in which Polina had lived from her birth and which she goes on keeping having moved to Stavropol territory notwithstanding their contradiction to cultural norms of that region. We think that Polina’s modesty that actualizes now belongs to such elements of the cultural code “Interpersonal relations”:

*I wanted to ask the driver if it is a long way, but whoever heard of a girl starting a talk and asking questions? I opened my mouth several times, but couldn’t utter a sound [21].*

Another characteristic feature of Polina connected with her coming from a Muslim region is submissiveness to parents’ will and respect for those who are older:

*I obeyed, as it is customary in the Caucasus, when older people tell younger ones what to do: marry an unknown man, marry a girl, whom only the older*



*relatives have seen and accepted, slaughter a lamb, and so on [21].*

As the author of the autobiographical novel writes, she inherited traditional respect for Muslim values from her mother who built her family according to Muslim traditions:

*Mother's character has always been harsh. At that time she was over fifty. A woman of this age is respected in Chechnya, as she has passed many difficulties: she was married at early age and not for love, but at her parents' will, battered by her husband; she gave birth to babies, she was in charge of the family [21].*

In her book, Polina describes peculiarities of treating a woman in a Muslim society, which Chechens still stick to after moving to other regions of Russia:

*Seeing among the visitors another Chechen whom he knew, our driver Askhab sat next to him. Sitting at the same table with unknown women is a disgrace for a man [21].*

For the author of the novel, such behavior is normal, which proves the syncretism of her worldview based on synthesis of Muslim and Christian systems of values.

Polina's attention to political events, to what is happening in the Caucasus, to the problem of terrorism, is an important aspect of her personal characteristic. This attention is not typical of those who come from Russian regions. Two motives are connected here. On the one hand, she denounces the terrorists' cruelty. On the other hand, when she describes the terrorist attack in Budyonovsk, there are other notes in her description; among them there is an attempt to understand the sources of that tragedy that was a consequence of the dark corners of Russian reality. First and foremost it is corruption:

*Budyonovsk is the town where Shamil Basayev once seized the maternity home. As the terrorists say, their intentions were good: they demanded feeing the Chechen land from Russian troops and recognizing the independence of Ichkeriya. Nobody met their demand, and it was written in newspapers, that a terrorist attack had happened. Women and newborn children have died. It turned out that everything can be bought that Shamil Basayev with his armed men gave out foreign currency at every roadblock to be let pass the post! [21].*

We should mention that having come to Stavropol territory the Zherebtsov kept sticking to Muslim moral norms, in particular, the shariah:

*"When I know who has stolen the homeless dogs' bowl, I'll cut hands off, by sharia law!" – screamed Mother. A police officer who had been at the Chechen war, heard her threats and walked hurriedly away [21].*

Another peculiarity of interpersonal relations in Stavropol society that shows lack of understanding between Polina and people of Stavropol is the following. Local people are indifferent to the fate of the homeless who freeze in town streets in winter:

*A stranger was passing by; she smiled at me:*

*-You are certainly not local, but from another town. We know that laws don't work. Even calling the ambulance is useless. You are naïve... [21].*

The author of the analyzed novel stresses it many times: indifference to troubles of other people is a value

of most people of Stavropol territory (though the author mentions some exceptions). Besides, the opposition "ours – not ours" is manifested by the population being prone to theft, that seems absolute to Polina:

*Going to the Lower Market, I remembered local people's tendency to theft, and wondered why it is so. Several consecutive days was I short-changed, and there were two times that they tried to steal my purse. For good reason do the Chechens think that if you enter a bus with five rubles in your pocket, you will leave the bus without them [21].*

One more aspect of the cultural code "Interpersonal relations" in Zherebtsova's novel "The 45<sup>th</sup> Parallel" is treating the refugees in everyday life. It is known that after the First and Second Chechen wars it was not adopted in the Russian Federation to mention the presence of refugees in the country. Polina Zherebtsova gives examples of indifference of Stavropol officials to their fate that is in contrast with Polina's feeling for socially unprotected people in the example that we have given:

*Visiting the city hall of Stavropol did not produce results. The chairman listened to our story and then said, "You are not local. Nobody has to feel for you. Big deal, they were wounded in the Chechen war! Get out!" [21].*

It is characteristic that such indifference is expressed not only by officials, but also by children of Polina's relatives who are ashamed of her stories about the Chechen war:

*Aunt Julia did not give me her daughter's address. She said it was a burden for them to deal with poor relatives.*

*-You can disgrace us speaking about the Chechen war, said she [21].*

So, in this case we can see a situation of mutual misunderstanding of each other by Stavropol people and refugees.

## 4 Conclusion

Intercultural interaction and peculiarities of national mentality have always provoked interest in human sciences, presenting problems of utmost importance. It is of contradictory character in modern societies. On the one hand, processes of globalization are gaining strength; on the other hand, cultural differentiation and striving for national and cultural identity also exist. In this context, studying discursive characteristics of the process of migration gains conceptual meaning for scientific understanding and smooths these contradictory processes.

In this article the complex cultural and linguistic analysis of cultural codes, belonging to the subjects "Clothes", "Food", and "Interpersonal relations" in migration discourse of North Caucasus based on the novel "The 45<sup>th</sup> Parallel" by Polina Zherebtsova, was carried out. In particular, the next moments are the focus of research interest's authors of the article:

- Analyzing ways of depicting of semiotic codes of Caucasian texts from the position of thinking, typical

of the modern socio-cultural situation of multiculturalism.

• Interpretation of symmetry / asymmetry in presentations of “our world” for “their world” that is carried out in migration discourse of North Caucasus in the novel “The 45<sup>th</sup> Parallel”.

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