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Unstable Identities in

Prisoner of the Mountains

On April 15, 2013, two bombs exploded at the Boston Marathon, killing three spectators and injuring 264 others. When new information was released, the media was questioning the possible "Chechen connection" to the bombing because the two brothers involved were born in Chechnya. The story of Chechnya as a repressed and dissatisfied colonial entity is not an unfamiliar one in history, and people were quick to associate the sudden outburst of violence in Boston that day to anyone with a "Chechen connection". Chechnya has been fighting for their independence from Russia since the late 18th century and in recent times, the Chechen rebels became known for their terrorist attacks in and outside of Chechnya. Chechnya may have declared their independence from Moscow, establishing itself as the Chechen Republic of Ichkeria, but their autonomy is not completely recognized by the Russian Federation, which still considers Chechnya its federal subject.

Sergei Bodrov brilliantly captures the complicated relationship between Russia and Chechnya in his 1996 movie, *Prisoner of the Mountains,* which takes place around the First Chechen War. The movie revolves around the capture of two Russian soldiers by a Chechen father who wants to exchange them for his son, held captive by the Russians. The movie can be read as a postcolonial critique not because Chechnya manages to break free from the Russians in

the movie. Rather, the movie is about the lives of people who are caught in the mutual enmity between Russians and Chechens, and how their lives are affected by this colonial relationship. The movie exposes the contradictions inherent to a colonial relationship, in which the colonial subject is constructed as the "other" who physically inhabits the colonial space as well as the "other" to the Russian identity in order for distance to be maintained. The construction of this other entails attaching negative traits like violence, savagery and deviancy onto the people – traits the colonizer considers itself to be devoid of, quite inaccurately since the attempt to turn these colonial subjects into peaceful and domesticated people (essentially a mirror image of the colonizer) necessitates violent means on the part of the colonizers. As the quote famously credited to Ronald Reagan goes, "We maintain the peace through our strength; weakness only invites aggression." Every colonial relationship rests on these double, contradictory impulses: desire for the other but also the need to negate the other. This paper will examine how *Prisoner of the Mountains* exploits inconsistencies in the ideology of colonialism to show that "self" and "other" are unstable identities, which is where colonialist discourse starts to break down. It shows that the colonizer is not the superior and rational self it purports to be, but always defining itself in relation to an "other", which deconstructs the binary lines that reinstated colonial practices in the first place.

Some postcolonial theorists believe that these fissure points in the colonial relationship will open up spaces of resistance for the colonized people. One of these theorists is Homi Bhabha, who is interested in the *in-between* space, which is the "creative malleable indeterminacy involving feelings of simultaneous repulsion and desire that exists at the interface between self and other, or between the polarities of unequal world we still inhabit, of what Bhabha calls the 'ongoing colonial present'" (Boehmer, 354-5). This is helpful to look at the

Russian-Chechen relationship because it is still explicitly a colonial relationship, but Bhabha's theories can also be extended to other areas in study, such as race, gender or class because of his analysis of self and other in such relationships. Jacques Derrida's technique of deconstruction will also be useful here to locate the rupture points in colonial consciousness. Looking at the movie through deconstructivist techniques will reveal the ways in which identity is not complete or stable, but equally a product of Western assumptions of concepts like rationality, progress and civilization (Thompson, 300).

The relationship between Russians and Chechens in the movie is one of mutual and engrained hatred. In the opening scene, when Sasha approaches a group of Chechens in his armored car, he orders them to stop by calling them "non-Russians". Throughout the movie, the Russians refer to the Chechens derogatorily as "bandits" or "bastards", rarely ever by their real names. The Russians portray the Chechen community as irrational, distrustful and dangerous, which is why they do not go through with the exchange of Abdul-Murat's son for the Russian soldiers, Sasha and Vanya. Sasha warns Vanya that the Chechens will not think twice about cutting off his balls or tongue, when ironically it was the Russians who cut off Hassan's tongue, one of the Chechens, when he was in Russian prison. To maintain the distance which makes the colonial project possible, the colonizer has to project all its negative and unwanted traits onto the other, which is not identified by their name but by these negative markers of their identity. It also shows how easily any group could replace this other if they present a threat to the colonizer. Conversely, the Russians are always explicitly identified in the movie as "Russians". Even Vanya's mother is first identified as the "Russian woman", and not as a mother or school teacher or by her name. Abdul-Murat tells her that none of that matters, since they are both enemies. When Abdul-Murat brings Sasha and Vanya back to the village, everyone in the village is

repelled by them and wants them dead because the Chechens also see the Russians as irrational, distrustful and dangerous. This hatred unifies the Chechen community. They can only see Russians as the all-powerful aggressor who needs to be destroyed at all cost.

Even though the idea of vengeance and hatred is to further the distance between self and other, it also makes the self desire and obsess about the other, and so breaks down the very distance they've tried to establish. The purpose of the war is to stop the Chechens from establishing their independence from Russia. On one hand, this is for the purpose of domination over the colonized other, but it also symbolizes the colonizer's desire for his colonial subject. This breakdown in distance is symbolized in scenes where the Chechens are dressed in military attire (which is probably stolen), and in another where the Russian prisoners put on traditional Chechen attire (when inebriated). Mamed is a Chechen who works for the Russian police and has a good relationship with the commander. This double relationship with the other is further explained in Bhabha's theories:

> "…the colonizer is thus locked into the fractious position of constantly disavowing and rejecting (in the form of negative stereotypes) the presence of the other, yet at the same time acknowledging it. The colonized is that which the colonial occupier is not, the negative to his positive, yet the latter's authority would be meaningless were he not able to invoke that 'is not' in order to constitute his authority within the colony, as well as his own colonial identity".
> (Boehmer, 355)

Far from widening the gap between self and other, the mutual hatred and enmity produces a paradoxical situation in which self and other are brought closer to each other. One cannot exist without the other, which makes the colonial relationship a reciprocal one. The colonizer is not a

monolithic entity with total power over its colonial subjects; rather, the colonial subjects are just as central to the formation of the colonizer's identity, and the self cannot sustain itself without always referring or relating to the other. Interestingly, the region inhabited by Chechens is called the Caucasus, which is where the term "Caucasian" is derived from. This makes the Chechens the originary Caucasians, the white race, an aspect which is central to the Russian identity.

In the movie, we see this double impulse extended to the colonized, informing the formation of their identity as well. While Gayatri Spivak would argue that the colonized, or the *subaltern* in her terms, cannot speak, such a way of framing means the colonial subject can only exist as the other to a self, which isn't a wholly accurate representation of the relationship in the movie. Bodrov is at pains to make us see that the Chechens do have their own tradition, culture and values, separate from the Russians, through his use of cinematography and music. Throughout the movie, we see Chechens in their personal homes, tending the animals, taking care of children and going about their daily life. We even see scenes of their wedding ceremony and funeral practices, which humanizes the Chechen community and breaks down the distance between the Chechens and the audience as well (which Bodrov assumed would either be Russians or an international audience who would not be entirely familiar with the Chechen identity other than what they've seen on the media). In the opening scene, we see a tracking shot of the villages on the mountains accompanied by music played on native Chechen instruments. The scene captures the unique setting of the mountain village: dirt roads leading to simple stone houses built close together on steep mountains in the heart of wilderness, isolated from the outside world. Abdul-Murat and Hassan bring the soldiers back on horses, which is still their mode of transport even in the 1990s. In this scene, the Russian soldiers are the foreigners to the Chechen setting, with their camouflage military attire sticking out against the backdrop of a

different civilization. The inclusion of two Russian soldiers into their surroundings is equally important, because it shows how the Russian identity (specifically the military) has impacted their identity and way of life. The reason Abdul-Murat needs to capture the Russian soldiers is because his previous effort to buy his son back from the military had failed and so he resorts to using violence, the very tool used by his colonizer, to force an exchange of prisoners and the return of his son.

When Bhabha speaks of the *third space* of minority groups, which is the act of incorporating the culture of a place as much as one is incorporated into it (Boehmer, 356) he is speaking more specifically about language, but the analysis could be extended to the acts of violence that we see in the movie. In an effort to preserve themselves, the Chechens have emulated the violent ways of their colonizer. This isn't to say that the Chechens are never violent people (in fact there is a scene which shows the Chechens in a wrestling match, but this is more of a controlled and competitive environment for violence), but the forms of violence the Chechens engage in the movie are similar to what the Russians have done to them. When Mamed's father goes to kill Mamed, he is using the gun that a Russian soldier had sold to a shopkeeper for vodka. Despite the Russian attempt to paint the Chechens as violent and irrational, this movie asks the question of *why* the violence is there in the first place, and indeed it shows us that these are not spontaneous outbursts of violence but responses to a violent colonizer attempting to take over their way of life. This flips the binary lines because it is the colonizer who is enacting gratuitous acts of violence, while the colonized is just acting in defense of their people. Such a relationship, however, traps both parties in an endless cycle of violence, which is another aspect of the colonial relationship that the movie alerts us to.

There is disconnect between the identity of a group and those of individuals, particularly when seen through the lens of the opposing personalities of Vanya and Sasha and the relationship that eventually develops between them. It points to some inconsistencies within the Russian identity and the problem with establishing your identity as the superior and powerful colonizer. It means that the military becomes the marker of what the ideal individual in society should be, because they are the strong, dominant forces that protect the homeland from external threats. It also makes the ideal individual a masculine one, which leaves women or people who possess feminine traits out of this model. As soldiers, Sasha and Vanya are both what Antonio Gramsci calls "civil society" as well as "political society" (673). They carry out state power, particularly the war in Chechnya in this movie, and they are also supposed to enjoy the benefits as private citizens of Russia. Their current situation, however, puts them at the losing ends of both, which questions the legitimacy of state power in the first place.

The movie opens with Vanya at his medical examination before he is recruited into the army. Even though the room is full of men, who are also getting their medical examinations, the fact that they are all naked (including Vanya) and are ordered around by the doctors, establishes Vanya as more vulnerable, passive and even feminine. As the film progresses, he turns out to be the most unusual soldier. He is soft-hearted, peaceful and unable to kill. Instead he excels at working with his hands, building a mechanical bird out of sticks for Dina and fixing Abdul-Murat's watch. These are skills of no use to a soldier, especially during wartime. During the ambush, as Sasha leads the fight against the Chechens, he cowers and shuts his ears to the gunfire. While on the surface he may seem to fit the colonial identity of Russia, his personality contradicts the expectations of a Russian male soldier. Spivak theorizes about the "different forms of othering" and more specifically, the gendered ways which "mark out heterogeneous

colonial experiences and form of understanding" (Boehmer, 353), of which Vanya becomes an example. His personality is seen as weak and passive because he is of no use to the army, and the movie attributes it to the fact that he was raised by a single mother. He becomes the other to the military system and within the Russian identity, which incites the anger of Sasha, the veteran soldier who is tough, hot-tempered and ruthless. The pair has an unfriendly relationship at first, with Sasha bullying and dismissing Vanya because he is not a good soldier and he cannot kill. In one scene, Sasha expresses his desire to come back some day and kill all the Chechens, but Vanya does not want to kill any of them. In response, Sasha says, "Vanya, we have to. This is war." Vanya's timidity and reluctance to use aggression, especially embodied in a male soldier, presents a different side to the Russian identity. It suggests that the Russian self is not a stable, concrete identity but rather one that is formed through disavowal of what it considers to be feminine and weak traits.

Despite appearances, Sasha is also a more complicated character than he may let on, which speaks more about the instability of the Russian identity. We first see Sasha coming back from a military mission on the front of an armored car in the dark and grimy setting of the Russian commander's office in Chechnya. When some soldiers make a commotion, he shoots in their direction, laughing heartily. This is in sharp contrast to the Sasha we see at one point in his captivity, who breaks into tears as the Russian patriotic march "Farewell of the Slavianka" plays in the background because he knows the Russian army will not come for them. It is the first time we see Sasha in a vulnerable position in the movie, while Vanya, the weaker soldier, is still singing along to the song. This is a powerful moment in the movie, for it shows the breakdown of Sasha, the archetypal Russian soldier who symbolizes the might of the Russian army. Bodrov uses music here (and in other places) to show the disconnect between the colonial ideology,

which informs group identity, and the individuals who live under it. What's more, there is a performative and deceptive nature to Sasha's character, which is not present in anyone else's. His frequent lying about his childhood and experiences make it hard to believe Sasha's words at any point in the movie. He also makes many references to him being an actor before he was a soldier, claiming that the Bolshoi Theater had asked him to play Hamlet. This lends a strange twist to Sasha's character, whose identity we previously thought was the most stable, concrete and representative of the colonial and Russian self. He also becomes more feminine as the movie goes on when his attitude changes towards Vanya and especially in the moment when we see him cry (also in contrast to the opening scene in which he is laughing as he fires the gun). He softens up to him and becomes more of a parental figure, and eventually dies taking the blame for Vanya's mistake.

The ideology of war is central to the Russian identity, which is a prime instance of an identity being formed through the simultaneous negation and glorification of the other, which is the enemy. Gloria Anzaldua writes about the importance of things like language and music to her identity as a Latino woman, "There are more subtle ways that we internalize identification, especially in the forms of images and emotions" (1027-28) which is the effect that is being created in the movie with the images and music of the Chechen community. It says a lot then, that the mark of the Russian identity is songs and images of war. The two main songs in the movie played are "Blue Handkerchief" and "Farewell of the Slavianka", which are both symbols of the Great Patriotic War, in which Russia lost close to 24 million lives. The former is a heartrending song about the effect of the war on the soldier's loved ones and families, symbolized in the blue handkerchief that falls off a Russian soldier's shoulder onto the road as he departs for war. It is played at the start of the movie, as the soldiers patrol the mountains in their

armored cars, before the actual "war" in the movie has even begun. The song evokes memories of the casualties in World War II and foreshadows the emotional distress this Russia-Chechen war will have on the families of soldiers, particularly Vanya's mother. Sung by Oleg Menshikov himself (the actor who plays Sasha) for the movie, the song also foreshadows Sasha's death in the movie. Hassan (one of the Chechens in charge of the prisoners) hums it when the discussion about the eventual death of the prisoners comes up, which is another moment shared between the Russians and the Chechens. Music, in this movie, is also an important deconstructivist tool because it alerts the audience to moments when the ideology of colonialism, especially its war practices, is inconsistent with the reality of the individuals living amidst the war. These war songs are contrasted to the music of the Chechen community, which is played mostly during their times of joy and celebration.

In another scene, Sasha and Vanya, still in captive, are singing the words to the song "Farewell of the Slavianka" which is a Russian patriotic march: "If our country calls us all as one / we will go to war / And we will fight to the last drop of blood / For our homeland". The camera shifts from the two soldiers to a tracking shot of the villages as the actual song performed by the Red Army Choir comes on. This is a subtle moment in the movie which hints at the atrocities that the Russian military has committed on these mountain villages in the guise of "fighting for the homeland". The Russians are using their superior fighting abilities to destroy the villages of people who pose no threat whatsoever to the Russian homeland, except for the fact that they live on Russian soil. The shot then shifts back to Sasha, the archetypal Russian soldier, crying, and we see the problem when patriotism comes at the cost of its soldiers and citizens. The binary lines of the rational and civilized colonizer over the violent and savage colonial subject are flipped when Bodrov points out this contradiction by playing the music that calls for Russians to

fight, against the backdrop of the personal homes of the Chechens. The closing scene of the movie is also another powerful moment in the movie: Russian helicopters fly over Vanya to bombard the villages to make them pay for the kidnapping, instead of actually saving their soldier.

Even the American jazz song "Go Down Moses" by Louis Armstrong makes an appearance in the movie, another deconstrustivist moment in the movie, for the song is about the slavery of the Israelites under Egyptian rule, drawing the comparison between the Russian-Chechen relationship with the Biblical one. The song goes, "'Cause the Lord said / Go down Moses / Way down in Egypt land / Tell old Pharaoh/ To let my people go." Music allows for such proliferation of voices which represent different identities, cultures and struggles, which is why the movies goes beyond being just a postcolonial critique. Another such voice belongs to the women in the movie. The two Russian songs have a lot to do with women in wartime as well, as both songs present a poignant image of women left behind by the men in the war and the songs were usually played when the Russian soldiers left their homes for war. For Russians, the politics of fighting a war is deeply connected to the personal as well, as these songs demonstrate. The underside to the masculine and dominant identity of Russia is the anguish of women whose fathers, husbands and brothers perished in the war for the homeland. There is also another side to these war songs, and that is the image of woman as a fighter. "Farewell of the Slavianka" (Slavianka means Slavic woman) was originally written in honor of Bulgarian women who fought alongside their husbands in the First Balkan War (Vukov, 36). This is another example of the double, contradictory images present in the identity of self and other, since woman occupies both. With that, the movie introduces the most disruptive element for colonial discourse: the women in the movie.

Women are always already this "internalized other" to the power structure, whether it's patriarchy or colonialism, which is why their representation in this movie presents such a challenge to colonial discourse. If the colonial self is built on masculinity and domination over the other, women have no direct role in the colonial project, but she is still inside the system in that she enjoys the rights of a citizen of Russia and plays other roles beneficial to the country. But her femininity will always make her the other and her identity threatens to undermine the colonial consciousness (which we already see in Vanya), which is why patriarchal structures have functioned to repress women in public and private life. Theorists like Michel Foucault, Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari call this *nomadic thought*, which is thought that "exists on the periphery as a mobile network bent on decodifying, on slipping out from under the totalizing structure that the administrative spirit would like to put firmly in place." (Rice, 156) Vanya's mother, in particular, is a school teacher who is tasked with educating the future generation of Russia but she is also the mother to a Russian soldier who is kidnapped by the enemy, an experience which is contradictory to what she has to teach her children about the Russian identity. The scene in which she finds out about the kidnapping in a letter from Vanya is particularly telling. The scene opens in Vanya's mother's empty classroom, with pictures of the Kremlin and various wars drawn by her schoolchildren on the wall behind her. Vanya's voice is reading the letter and she holds back her emotions, before turning towards the wall and almost collapsing from grief. It shows the disconnect between the pictures on the wall, which is a symbol of hope for the future generations, and the bleakness of Vanya's fate. When Abdul-Murat fails to convince the Russian army to exchange his son for the prisoners, he asks Sasha and Vanya to write letters to their mothers. The Russian army's failure to retrieve their soldiers from

Abdul-Murat is even more glaring as Vanya's mother appears in Chechnya in a personal mission for her son.

Vanya's mother's willpower to get her son back – to the extent that she ignores the commander's warnings about the Chechens being "distrustful" and "dangerous" and meets with Abdul-Murat herself, while the army would only go with helicopters, armored cars and weapons – is what Spivak calls the "aporia" or gap in colonial representations that dismantles and subverts the "binary system of colonial control" (Boehmer, 354). She breaks with the Russian forms of othering by defying her passive feminine role but also by reaching out to the Chechens, the other to the Russian identity. She tries to establish a connection with Abdul-Murat by pointing out that both her and his son are schoolteachers, and that she understands his plight. Instead of focusing on Abdul-Murat's identity as the enemy or a Chechen, she sees him as a parent to a kidnapped son as well. Perhaps she is refusing to conform to her role as the colonizer, but it could also be that such an understanding between them is possible due to the fact that she also occupies the position of the other within the Russian psyche. This is the first time in the movie that we see compassion and forgiveness over hatred and destruction, and it is in the figure of a woman.

The women in the movie do not perform merely not passive roles; they often drive the action of the movie, while the men's fears and prejudices about one another hinder actions or promote actions that result in disaster. It is Vanya's mother who succeeds at getting the commander to make the trade but Mamed's father makes an inopportune appearance at the commander's office and kills his own son for his betrayal. In the commotion, the prisoners, including Abdul-Murat's son, tries to run and is shot down by the soldiers. Spivak's criticism of how postcolonialism does not address women is answered by Bodrov's movie, which represents women as strong, active characters, but also addresses their position as the other in the system of

colonialism and patriarchy. To some extent it is this position that makes them the voices of resistance to the injustice of war and ideology of colonialism because they are able to exist outside of the colonial ideology.

How the women in the movie relate to the other becomes the alternative model for how the self relates to the other. We see this in Vanya and Dina's relationship, which is the only relationship in the movie that is not determined by the self/other divide in the colonial sense, or even in the gender sense. Dina is another character who does not conform to her prescribed roles, whether as a girl or a Chechen. The boys in the village denigrate her for bringing the Russian prisoners food and water, but she ignores their taunts and even responds back with taunts of her own. Even though her brother has been killed by the Russians, she still brings Vanya the key from her father's room so he can escape, under the condition that he will not kill anymore. Vanya, however, stays with her because he is worried that the villagers will not forgive her for helping him. Like Vanya's mother and Abdul-Murat, Dina does not see Vanya as a Russian or as an enemy, and is the only Chechen to call him by his name. Instead of negating the other through hatred and violence, this model is built on relating to the other through love and empathy. At one point Vanya even expresses his desire to marry Dina, but she responds by saying that the marriage would not be possible, suggesting that she would be married next year in an arranged marriage, according to their customs. But with Abdul-Murat defying his own traditions as well in the end by not killing Vanya, we are left with some feeling of hope that Dina's future will turn out differently, if they had survived the bombardment by the Russians.

Even though these positive values are embodied in the female characters, which is important, the movie does not make them values exclusive to women. They are "feminine" values in the sense that they deconstruct masculine assumptions about the world, but they are not

tied to the biological meaning of woman, since they can also be found in Vanya, Abdul-Murat and even Sasha. These feminine values are established as the alternative to the masculine and colonial structures in place, which had only resulted in violence and destruction. At the last minute, Abdul-Murat decides not to kill Vanya, even though the "right" thing to do, in order to gain the acceptance of his villagers, would be to kill him. While the reason behind his actions is left ambiguous to his audience, Dina's plea to her father, asking him to not kill Vanya, could have made him realize that the old ways of his people only trapped him further in the cycle of violence. Dina's forgiveness of a Russian for the death of her brother opened up the possibility for Abdul-Murat to also embrace this new model of relating to the other, which he does. This establishes a peaceful and civilized image of the Chechens, in sharp contrast to the barbarism of the Russians when the helicopters fly over Vanya to bombard the villages. The Russians are trapped in the colonial relationship, while Abdul-Murat, in a sense, does break free from it by letting Vanya go.

Through its storyline, characters, cinematography and music, *Prisoner of the Mountains* achieves its goals of presenting a heterogeneous community, represented by different colonial experiences. The characters in the movie are vibrant, interesting and different in their own ways, marked by their unique view of the world. At the end, all of the characters defy audience expectations by breaking out of their prescribed roles. Many moments in the movie, like the scenes of Sasha crying or Vanya's mother receiving his letter, leaves powerful impressions on the audience that only a well-written and well-made movie can do. Even though we can dispute how realistic the alternative model would be when politically implemented, it certainly addresses our tendencies to resort to hatred and violence when confronted with the "other", instead of realizing how much more in common we have with each other. The movie takes on the challenge

of portraying the commonality of the human experience, but also not leaving out the differences in human experience, which makes the movie a refreshing take on the colonial relationship between Russia and Chechnya.

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