

BOOK REVIEW

Али и Нино

ВУ КУРБАН САИД

(Москва: ООО «Ад Маргинем Пресс»; 2008;
ISBN: 978-5-91103-039; 336 с.)¹

*This Book Review was written by Nurangiz Khodzharova**

Writing a review for *Ali and Nino*, a bestseller considered by many a national novel, is not an easy task as it seems hard not to repeat numerous other reviews. However, this novel is one of the few literary works which capture the essence of time and space so well that revisiting them at different moments brings up new feelings and associations. Nevertheless, to avoid repetition this review will focus on the book's connection with today, which in light of recent developments in the Caucasus presents quite a relevant comparison. It will also attempt at getting to the essence of the author's message.

Ali and Nino – A Love Story or More?

Ali and Nino has so far been described and reviewed in many ways: as a love story, a story on interethnic relations and the East-West divide, a guide book for the Caucasus, a national novel of Azerbaijan, romantic fiction, political drama etc. Even though it actually contains a little bit of all of the above, categorizing it as one or the other would do it injustice. This book needs to be read without presumptions and preconceptions, as a humble yet profound account of personal and historical drama. The love story of Ali and Nino, an Azerbaijani Muslim boy and a Georgian Christian girl, is not unique in history and does not pretend to be so, but what goes on in the hearts and souls of young lovers is deeply personal. Their relationship serves as an abstraction from the bigger picture of the novel, namely the historical and political one. Just as wars, conquests and revolutions are not unusual in human history, so each region has its own stories of

¹ Said, Kurban, “*Ali and Nino*” (trans. Mirza Huseinzade) (Moscow: OSC «Ad Marginem Press», 2008, ISBN: 978-5-91103-039-; 336 pp.) When quoting the book throughout the review, the author provides her own English translation. The latest English edition of the book: **Said, Kurban, “Ali and Nino: A Love Story”, transl. by Jenia Graman, (Anchor Books, 2000), 282 pages (ISBN: 0385720408).**

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heroes, battles, losses and wins. The Caucasus is no exception to this rule, and it is people like Kurban Said who document and tell these stories.

The Caucasus Revisited

While reading this book very recently, it has occurred to me that certain parallels can be drawn between some essential events described in the book and current developments in the region. However, it is not exactly history repeating itself, but rather some conditions and players that have not changed much in the course of a century. One of the central subject matters of the story is the path of the Caucasus in general, and Azerbaijan in particular. Almost one hundred years ago Said's characters discussed the role of the Caucasus, its geopolitics, history and its relations with the rest of the world. At the time, the course of events in the region largely depended on the big players: the Russian Empire, the Ottoman Empire and Persia. Situated in a buffer zone between these three decaying empires, the Caucasus was the last outpost where all three could still show their might. Moreover, the discovery of oil in Azerbaijan had led to a period of prosperity and its increased importance. Thus many had become preoccupied with the thought of just what the Caucasus meant to the Russian Empire and the real motives behind its conquest of the region. In chapter ten, Nino and Melik Nachararyan, a Georgian and an Armenian living in highly cosmopolitan Baku of the beginning of the 20th century, have a discussion on this topic, which to my mind, echoes many voices that we hear today. As they sit sipping champagne Nino suddenly says:

"[...] Russians did not come here out of their own will. We called them. Georgian king Georgiy XII surrendered to the Russian tsar. Haven't you heard the words [of Alexander I]: "We take upon ourselves the defense of the Georgian kingdom not to expand our already vast empire" (p. 103).

To which Nachararyan replies:

"[...] I agree with you that Russians have brought peace to our land. But now, we, the people of the Caucasus, are ready to maintain this peace on our own. Now the Russians claim that they are defending us from each other. That is why they have sent their armies, bureaucrats and a governor here" (pp. 103-104).

Nachararyan is skeptical about both the Russian intentions to "defend" Caucasians from each other and the need for such defense in the first place. However, somewhat similar statements were echoed by Russia during the recent conflict in South Ossetia in August 2008. In the first days of the conflict all major media outlets reported Russian President Dmitry Medvedev saying: "I must protect the life and dignity of Russian citizens wherever they are. We will not allow their deaths to go unpunished. Those responsible will receive a deserved punishment."² Many experts and politicians have since argued that today's Russia is looking to appease its neo-imperial ambitions, using as an excuse its citizens in the Caucasus. While it can be debated whether

² "Russian tanks enter South Ossetia," *BBC News*, August 8, 2008, Europe section, <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/europe/7548715.stm>.

Russia's present course is ideological, strategic or geopolitical, one fact remains clear. Russia always has and continues to claim to be the guarantor of peace and stability in the Caucasus, for whatever reasons of its own. Its presence and interests in the region, while changing with time, remain intact. However, there is more to the story than energy pipelines, armed conflicts and self-proclaimed republics. In contrast with papers and news reports, flashing with images of tanks and destroyed houses, *Ali and Nino* reminds us that the Caucasus is not just a witless player in the board game of world politics, but a land with an ancient history of honorable men, beautiful women and legendary heroes.

East-West

In the course of the novel, Ali and Nino find themselves in the middle of World War One, the Bolshevik revolution and the rise and fall of the first independent republic of Azerbaijan. As the characters struggle to keep up with the world changing around them, they are constantly forced to put everything in the frame of East vs. West. Whether it is the geographical location of Baku, Ali and Nino's relationship, or choosing sides in the war, there are always two camps – East and West – that cover all aspects of life, define all differences and justify all actions. While Said does not force his judgment onto the reader and leaves it up to him to decide whether such a divide is reasonable, he subtly invites us to look beyond, straight into Ali's soul. And there we realize that it is not so much about belonging to East or West, South or North, but belonging *somewhere*, having a place called home. For Ali Khan Shirvanshir that place is, without doubt, Baku. Baku is the place where the imaginary East-West line lies, where he fell in love with Nino, where his ancestors fought and died, and where he wants to die himself. *"I love [Baku] because God let me be born here, as a Shiite, in the religion of Imam Djafar. So may He be merciful and let me die here, in the same street, in the same house where I was born"* (p. 24). These are the words of a man who is not just Asian or European, Muslim or Christian, but a man who carries in his heart the kind of peace and devotion that can not be undone by any outside forces.

Conclusion

Ali and Nino is an outstanding novel for many reasons: for capturing the history and reality of the Caucasus, its people, its beauty, its music and its roots, but also for touching upon some much deeper and much more personal subjects. I have to agree with those reviewers who have said that it is a great tour guide for the Caucasus, and especially Azerbaijan. It does not just take you through the old narrow streets of Icheri Sheher (Old City in Baku), past the mansions from the oil baron era, down to the Caspian Sea, the oil derricks of Bibi Heybat, and further on to the country. It gives a tour of real history, with real events and people, real wars fought and real blood and tears shed. For a person like myself, a Caucasian by origin, having spent most of my life far away from the region, somewhere between East and West, trying to embrace the multiple identities of the world today, this book was an indispensable source of knowledge and wisdom. No matter who the mystical Kurban Said really was, his work is not just a national novel of Azerbaijan, but a universal tale of patriotism, love, tolerance and courage.