Who is the prisoner of the Caucasus? Vladimir Makanin, "The Prisoner of the Caucasus"

Kerstin Olofsson

Vladimir Makanin’s short story "The Prisoner of the Caucasus" was published in 1995, during the first war in Chechnya, but it was written before the war. As for the title the story has three well-known predecessors in Russian literature: 19th-century classical works set in the Caucasus by Alexander Pushkin, Michail Lermontov and Leo Tolstoj.

The prison theme, however, dates further back in Russian culture. In literature it was first introduced with "The Lay of the Host of Igor" (Slovo o polku Igoreve) from the late 12th century with its exclamation that it is better to be dead than to be taken prisoner. The Novgorod prince, Igor, is caught by the Asian steppe people, the Polovtsians, during his campaign. This medieval work was important to Russian romanticism. However, the Romantic writers, headed by Alexander Pushkin, transformed the prisoner theme which used to be based on actual events, in a number of earlier works.

The classic theme is accordingly that Russians are taken prisoners by Asian peoples whom they meet in their open territory during their troubled history. In the three precursors to Makanin’s story mentioned above it is also Russians who are taken prisoners by various Caucasian peoples. In Makanin, on the other hand, it is instead a Caucasian who is taken prisoner by Russians.

This is a departure from the historical tradition, but, nevertheless, it is not new. Michail Lermontov’s influential novel, A Hero of Our Time, from 1840, is set in the Caucasus. There the Circassian girl Bela is taken prisoner by the main protagonist, the Russian officer Pecorin. There are echoes of this novel in Makanin’s story. It is not a coincidence that his next work is the novel Underground Or A Hero of Our Time (1998). Again, to depict the present, the author alludes to the past in the very title, with the reference to Lermontov’s work.

Many Russian critics give prominence to Makanin as the great depicter of our age in the Russian literature of today. This was especially the case during the 1990s. One critic describes him in the following way: "Makanin is very rational in everything that pertains to ‘the structure of the text.’ But the original impulse is caught in the air, in the atmospheric situation, which is condensed into an image of hallucinatory clarity, a core image. Everything else is the result of an almost mathematical inventiveness. But the ‘core image’ appears to him on its own accord, without asking his permission. And in this sense Makanin is a wise man—one of the most irrational, almost oracular interpreters of his own time, a vessel for its stream."

Makanin is an allegorical writer, albeit of a modern and complicated kind, without a simple or exact correspondence between expression and content. His work is not easily interpreted, which is evident in the criticism cited above. Some of his works have given rise to many different, sometimes contradictory interpretations, among them “The Prisoner of the Caucasus”.

* * *

The story begins with an allusion to another Russian classic, namely Dostoevsky: “The soldiers probably did not know that beauty will save the world, but what beauty was they both knew, on the whole. In the mountains they sensed the beauty (the beauty of place) all too well—it frightened them.”37 And this is how the story ends: “The mountains. The mountains. For how many years had his heart been agitated by their magnificence, their mute solemnity—but what did this beauty want to tell him? Why did it call out to him?” (226)

In the introductory quotation two Russian soldiers are on their way through the Caucasian mountains on a task yet unknown to the reader. The story’s main protagonist, Rubachin, leads the way, and behind him comes Vovka, the rifleman. It is Rubachin’s heart that is agitated by the beauty of the mountains at the end of the story. He has served his term but has time and again remained in the Caucasian mountains, never returning to the steppe beyond Don which is his home, soul of the plain (ravninnaja dusja) as he is called in the story (194). This contrast between the plain and the mountains—one at home in Russia, the other away from home in the Caucasus—is to be found also among others in Lermontov.

Rubachin has consequently got stuck in the Caucasus—the mountains will not “let him go” (226). In this sense he is taken prisoner in the Caucasus. The story’s title refers both to Rubachin and to the Caucasian that he takes prisoner on his way through the Caucasus to complete the task that he has been given, together with Vovka the rifleman. The Caucasian prisoner is a boy at the age of 16-17, with long, black curls, just like Lermontov’s Caucasian prisoner, Bela. He resembles Bela also by being remarkably beautiful. This beauty agitates Rubachin at least as much as that of the mountains. The beauty of the mountains and the prisoner can be seen to interact.

A feature of Rubachin’s story that has given rise to some protests among Russian reviewers is the homosexual aspect of his interest in the prisoner. In a tragic scene Rubahkin kills the prisoner during an unforeseen meeting with Caucasian guerrilla. The death scene is also an act of sexual intercourse—the Caucasian boy shivers as a woman before intercourse; Rubachin suffocates the boy with his arm that also embraces him. (220, 221) In this way their relationship ends, a relationship which, in addition to being characterised by diffuse desire, is also marked by Rubachin’s care and empathy—the encounter with beauty in the boy’s figure has aroused new and previously unknown feelings in him.

There are also explicit discussions as to who is the actual prisoner. The two soldiers first arrive at a military unit led by Lieutenant Colonel Gurov, who is “almighty” in this beautiful place (196). Two lorries with soldiers have been ambushed by the guerrilla, and the two soldiers have been dispatched to get help. Gurov refuses to send his soldiers. This is why Rubachin takes a prisoner, to exchange him for free passage.

37 Vladimir Makanin, "Kavkazskij plennyj", *Antologija sovremennogo rasskaza*, Moskva 2002, p. 194
Lieutenant Colonel Gurov is sitting on his porch in "endless conversation" with this old friend, the Caucasian Alibekov (197). They are bargaining, trading weapons for supplies. But they also digress, venturing into philosophical discussions, some of which concern the prisoner theme. Gurov urges Alibekov to lower his demands—he is, after all, a prisoner: "You are in my place." Alibekov answers: "—Why in your place? /-/ You are joking, Petrovich. What kind of a prisoner am I? You’re the prisoner! —He points, laughing, at Rubachin, who assiduously pushes the wheelbarrow: —He is a prisoner. You are a prisoner. On the whole, each and every one of your soldiers is a prisoner!" (199)

* * *

Something that put its stamp on Russian life in the 1990s was the abrupt transition caused by Russia’s change of system and the disintegration of the Soviet Union, a transition that made people speak in terms of the “old” and the “new” era, clearly separated, a transition that also brought demands on people to change. This transitional situation can be regarded as Makanin’s main theme during the 1990s.

The prisoner theme in itself, in terms of being stuck, unable to move on, fits perfectly into the writer’s treatment of this overarching theme of the 90s. There are a number of expressions in the story that denote someone being stuck. Gurov and Alibekov are stuck in their "endless conversation". The mountains will not let go of Rubachin; he is stuck in the Caucasus. Not to speak of the Caucasian boy who is stuck in Rubachin’s mortal embrace. At the moment of death the boy’s eyes try to bypass Rubachin’s eyes to catch sight of his own people, the Caucasian guerrilla fighters who are approaching. The two lorries have been ambushed at a “tight spot.” (222) Such tight spots recur in several of Makanin’s works as metaphors describing the transition between the Soviet and post-Soviet era, or between different times generally; to pass through this place may entail change or even regeneration. The lorries cannot pass through; bypassing the spot is as impossible as it is for the boy to bypass Rubachin. Thus the story’s structure is a network of parallels—in the manner of allegory.

The two soldiers return to the lorries at the end of the story, without a prisoner and without succeeding to get help; consequently, nothing has changed, despite the dramatic events that have occurred. A number of expressions indicating immutability and immobility can be found in the story. When it comes to the lorries, they are stuck and are emphatically immobile in the same position (222-226). They can be seen as an embodiment of Russia’s situation in the Caucasus, that is of Russia being prisoner there.

There is one episode in the story where the issues of change and the absence of change are explicitly addressed: it is a part of the conversation between Colonel Gurov and Alibekov together with a passage that hovers between omniscient narration and Free Indirect Speech, coloured by Gurov’s perspective (203, 204). It is stated in this episode that neither the times nor people change. At the same time, the expression "times past" is used to describe the Soviet era, and the expression "present times" to designate the post-Soviet present—this is the sharp distinction that the abrupt change has occasioned. Gurov is a man of the past, and he misses the days gone by. But he adapts to the present— "life has changed on its own accord, to include all kinds of bargaining"; it is, consequently, not his responsibility. In the past he was able to acquire whatever the unit needed. "[S]ometimes he bribed the proper person with a handsome pistol, with his name engraved on it (he said that it might come in handy: the East
is the East! He could never have imagined that these playful words would one day come true.” (204) Gurov’s jesting words of wisdom about the immutability of the East consequently come true when the times change. It is not surprising that one Russian critic has called Makanin a man of paradoxes.

"The East is the East”, Gurov says, jokingly. In another part of the conversation between them Alibekov says: ”Europe is always Europé.” (200) He has just explained to Gurov that the wise old men in the Caucasian villages are against the war with the Russians and think that they ought to join forces against Europe instead— “The old men say that then there will immediately be peace. And life will become what it ought to be.” (200) This may seem somewhat confusing, but the meaning is apparently that Russia is also an Eastern country, having more in common with the Caucasus than with “Europe.” This interpretation corresponds with expressions indicating affinity that occur frequently in the story. We can see in this the traditional theme of Russia as a country both of the East and the West. However, the theme of affinity is not universally prevailing. We may recall that Gurov’s words, “the East is the East,” imply that the East is the Other, against whom it is necessary to be armed; or we may recall the death scene where the Caucasian prisoner tries to reach his own people, bypassing his murderer. The story paints an ambiguous picture.

I cited above the closing lines of the story: “The mountains. The mountains. For how many years had his heart been agitated by their magnificence, their quiet solemnity—but what did this beauty want to tell him? Why did it call out to him?” (226) Just before this passage Rubakhin is annoyed by his own attachment to the mountains. He wants to exclaim: ”for how many years! But instead, he said: ‘For how many centuries!’ — as if by a slip of the tongue, the words jumped out of a shadow, and the soldier, taken by surprise, pursued this quiet thought that had lain dormant in the depth of his consciousness.” (226)

Rubachin’s name is one aspect that makes him represent the Russian people in the manner of allegory, that is the decent, down-to-earth and responsible part of the people. The name alludes to the expression rubacha-paren’, as several critics have noted. And Vovka the rifleman calls him Rubacha. In the last passage of the story he is thus described to have a memory that extends his individual consciousness, a memory that comes out of the shadow and surprises him. Besides immutability the story also deals with fickleness and forgetfulness, not as opposites but as interacting phenomena. For example, Rubachin’s memory of the Caucasian boy is dissolved in a dream of his (225).

In one of Makanin’s earlier works, with the theme of escape from the past, one of the characters claims that we humans make an effort to forget the past, hoping that the past forget us. But the past does not forget us.38 This is why the playful “The East is the East” overtakes Gurov. Perhaps the short story tells us that the past that is denied has overtaken today’s Russia in the Caucasus, and that escape from the past prevents change. Susceptibility to beauty and its transforming power is, if my reading of the story is correct, also connected to memory.

Translation Anna Uddén

---

38 Vladimir Makanin, “Grazdanin ubegajuscij”, Izbrannoe, Moskva 1987, p. 21