

**M. Yu. Lermontov's 'A Hero of Our Times' and Bela
Love in the times of Colonialism**

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Colonialism is defined as “*the forcible takeover of land and economy, and in the case of European colonialism, a restructuring of non-capitalist economies in order to fuel European capitalism.*”¹ The term Colonialism as defined here as forcible takeover of land; but the take over might not be just the land. In some cases the takeover might be in the sphere of ideas and identity. The second feature pointed out in this definition is more relevant in my opinion. It refers to the restructuring of the non-capitalist economies in order to fuel the European capitalism. In the initial stages of Colonialism it might have been the fuelling of the European economies but eventually it became a tool to fuel European *style* economies. This process eventually encompassed the parts of the world other than Europe. In this process of restructuring of the non-capitalist economies, some of the old structures that were connected not only with the economy, underwent a remarkable change.

This resulted mainly from the expansion across the globe by Western Europe from the second half of the 15th century. By the end of the 19th or the beginning of 20th century Western Europe had extended its influence across the globe, touching almost all the mankind. The physical expansion of Western Europe was accompanied by exponential growth of capitalism as also tremendous development of science and technology and culture. All these three factors were interdependent and interconnected; each facilitating the development of the others. The non-western humanity had to come to terms with it and adjust to it. This whole process of adjustment was colonization in my opinion. In some cases like India, there was accompanying physical occupation of the territory. But it should also be borne in mind that the actual control of Indian territory and the administration of the colonial power was brought about by the British with active participation from Indian agents, who knowingly or unknowingly contributed to the process of colonization. In case of some other countries like Russia and Japan for example, the process of colonization was internally motivated. So I have used the term “Colonialism” here in the sense of a device used to encounter the ‘alien’, the ‘other’ and the reaction from the ‘other’ to it.

Another term in the title that needs a little explanation is ‘love’. I have taken into consideration the interaction between men and women in the colonized societies sparked by sexual attraction and its development as depicted in colonial fiction. Whether it reflects the noble sentiments usually attributed to the term ‘love’, is something we’ll see in the course of this presentation.

‘A Hero of Our Times’, a novel by Mikhail Yurievitch Lermontov is a remarkable novel. Set in the early 19th century the main events of the novel unfold in the Caucasus region of Eurasia. The entire novel has the Tsarist Russian Expansion in the Caucasus and Central Asia as a backdrop. The novel has got an

interesting structure. It is a narrative within a narrative. The first Narrator or the Narrative Self of the Author is travelling through Caucasus. The novel starts ostensibly as a travelogue. In the course of these travels the first Narrator comes across an old military hand, Maxim Maximytch, in Caucasus. The second narrator, Maxim Maximytch, tells a story to the first narrator in which the Protagonist, the hero of the novel Grigory Aliksandrovitch Pechorin, makes first appearance, as a lead character of this narration. The first narrator and the protagonist, the Hero Pechorin come face to face in the second chapter of the novel, where the first narrator comes in possession of diaries and notes of Pechorin. That point onwards, barring an introductory note by the author's narrative self, the narration is taken over by Pechorin, who then becomes the third narrator. A travelogue started by the first narrator turns into memoirs and confessions of the third narrator. All the three narrators namely, the author's narrative self, Maxim Maximytch and Grigory Aliksandrovitch Pechorin are travelling on the Military Georgian Road (Voenno-Gruzinskaya Doroga); a military supply line that fed the Tsarist Russian expansion through Central Asia and beyond.

Travelogue and memoirs, both the genres are typical of the colonial era, used to record images, impressions and experiences in the lands being brought under control. It immediately strikes a chord with an Indian Reader since similar techniques were used to record and essentialize the Indian reality by a battery of British travellers, soldiers, mercenaries, missionaries and Memsahibs accompanying their husbands or brothers. They travelled length and breadth of India recording its people, their customs, costumes and rituals, describing and essentializing the 'Other' through white, European, male gaze.

The entire novel 'A Hero of Our Times' can be analyzed as a piece of literature expressing the colonial experience peculiar to Russia but in the present paper I am focusing on the first chapter of the novel entitled 'Bela' which describes a romantic encounter between Grigory Aliksandrovitch Pechorin, a young officer in the Tsarist army, engaged in subduing the Chechens and other Caucasian tribes and Bela, a young Circassian princess.

As mentioned earlier, the story of Bela unfolds through the narration of Maxim Maximytch, the second narrator and is recorded by the first narrator or the Author's narrative self. Grigory Aliksandrovitch Pechorin, a young and probably rich nobleman from St. Petersburg is demoted and sent to serve on the Caucasian front under Maxim Maximytch. In terms of class and education Pechorin, a member of Europeanized elite in St. Petersburg, is much above Maxim Maximytch, who is an ordinary army Captain. During his stay in the military fortress, Pechorin and Maxim Maximytch attend a wedding of a daughter of a mountain chief. The younger daughter of the Chief Bela, catches Pechorin's eye. Through Maxim Maximytch he also comes to know about Bela's brother's, Azamat's intense desire to possess a beautiful horse belonging to another Circassian and that Azamat had offered Bela in exchange of the horse. Pechorin abducts Bela, in collusion with her brother. Pechorin buys her brother's compliance and silence by helping him steal that horse from another Circassian. Bela is held a captive in the fortress, in spite of protests from

Maxim Maximytch. Pechorin carries out an incessant seduction campaign and Bela ultimately gives in. With Bela's capitulation, the thrill of chase is over for Pechorin and he loses interest in her. Bela gets unhappier and unhappier. With Pechorin out hunting, Bela ventures out of the fortress, only to be captured by her erstwhile Circassian admirer, who plunges a dagger in her back. Injured, Bela is brought back to the fortress and she dies after a couple of days of severe sufferings in the arms of Pechorin. Bela's story ends tragically.

Bela's story has several points that are typical of colonial romantic encounters depicted in fiction; especially the fiction in English and French languages in the 18th and 19th century. In fiction, especially poetry and even in the so called 'scientific study' of cartography colonies are always depicted as women, who are conquered and subjugated by the European males.² Any claims on these women by the colonized males are given up (or should be given up) for the redemption of these women lies with the European conqueror³. A sentiment, echoed by Pechorin, when he says, "A wild Circassian girl should consider herself lucky to have such a nice husband as he because according to their way of thinking, he was, after all, a husband." There is a total disregard for the wishes of the girl, her likes and dislikes or if there are any claimants other than him, to her affection. Bela's Circassian suitor Kazbich is disregarded by Pechorin, as a "bandit, who deserved to be punished". Kazbich is termed a 'bandit' only because he is seen as resisting the Russian invasion.

Once kidnapped and captured, Bela has very little choice but to give in. Going back to her father is a no option at all. As Pechorin rightly points out, she would either be killed (for the disgrace she brought upon her family) or she would be sold off in the thriving slave trade.⁴ Like the colonies invaded forcefully, Bela has no option but to make the best of the given situation and cooperate.

Throughout the narrative, Maxim Maximytch and Pechorin keep denigrating Asia and Asians, painting a black picture of the Asians and attributing several vices and negative features at times contradictory, to them, such as laziness and acquisitiveness, greed, stealing, cheating and so on. But if we take a closer view of the behaviour of Pechorin and also to a certain extent of Maxim Maximytch, we find that they are behaving much in the same way, for which they are criticising the Tatars and other Caucasian tribes. Pechorin denigrates the mountain people for their attitude towards women, but in forcefully abducting Bela he imitates the self same marriage ritual of the mountain people, which requires the bridegroom to kidnap the bride. Azamat, Bela's brother is criticised for being greedy and stealing things, but then Pechorin's behaviour is almost like that of Azamat, stealing a thing that takes his fancy.

This behaviour of Pechorin displays all the symptoms typical of colonial schizophrenia. With respect of colonization Russia has a unique position, since it was simultaneously a colonizer and colonized. In the 17th, 18th and the early 19th century Russia was expanding its territory and colonizing Central Asia and parts of Northern America. It was playing a role of a colonizer in these territories. At the same time it was undergoing a process of enforced colonization (or Europeanization) within its territory. The process of

colonization (or Europeanization) was carried out by an Emperor and the noblemen surrounding him who were ethnically more European (mainly German) than Russian.⁵

This process of Europeanization was the second colonization of Russia, the first being the occupation and domination of Russian territories by the Tatar-Mongols. The occupation by Tatar-Mongols did not invade cultural or intellectual space of the Russians. There was a cultural exchange between the Golden Horde and the Moscow principality and there were relations marked by strife but its impact was not as great as the second colonization. The second colonization of Russia did not physically occupy the Russian territory, but it invaded the psychological and intellectual space of the Russians. The violence associated with colonization was present even in this case; not unleashed by the Colonizer but perpetrated by the Emperor, who was colonized. The ruler of the country, 'Imperator' Peter in this case undertook to westernize the country from within. The measures he adopted were cruel and barbarian. Also the westernization he sought was limited only to importing western technologies and not western social institutions. This selective westernization was schizophrenic. Language played an important role in this colonization. To quote Frantz Fanon, "To speak means to be in a position to use a certain syntax, to grasp the morphology of this or that language, but it means above all to assume a culture, to support the weight of a civilization"⁶ Hence fluency in Western European languages like French, German and English was sought. Fluency in these languages was considered to be directly proportionate to the level of 'civilization'. Those, who were privileged to have access to this process of 'Westernization/Civilization' were few in number. Those having undergone this process for all intents and purposes were 'almost' Westerners. They were alienated from their roots, from their societies but they were not 'natives' of their adoptive cultures either. It is quite interesting to observe the interaction of such westernized people with those of their compatriots, who had not undergone this process of 'Westernization/Civilization' or those, who have undergone this process to a lesser degree. Those who were completely alien to the process of Westernization were viewed as 'naïve', 'simple', 'emotional', in short intellectually underdeveloped and inferior. The relationship between the 'naïve', 'simple' native and his 'superior', westernized counterpart was marked by a condescending, patronizing attitude from the side of the Westernized.⁷ If we take a look at the relationship between Maxim Maximytch and Pechorin we can see a similar pattern. Pechorin's attitude towards Maxim Maximytch is patronizing. He is playing the role of a 'Superior'. Maxim Maximytch on the other hand adopts the same position and imitates Pechorin's attitude towards him, when he is commenting upon Asia and Asians.

The process of external Colonization undertaken by Russia was mainly across land. Russia had a long history of contact with the Caucasus. Russian expansion in that region began in 1553 with the victory of Kazan.⁸ For the next hundred years or so Russia was competing with Turkey and Persia for gaining supremacy in that region. But the aspect of Russian affairs in Caucasus underwent a marked change since

the time of Tsar Peter the Great. The plans of Peter the Great as expressed in his Will were pursued by Empress Catherine II and by 1813 Russians were firmly entrenched in the Caucasus. This expansion of Russia went almost unnoticed by the other Western European powers that were busy expanding by the sea. The history of Russian expansion in the Caucasus and Central Asia is remarkably similar to the consolidation of the British Empire in India.⁹ The Russians, like the British in the 18th and 19th century India, consolidated their position by actively participating in the feuds amongst the local princes, sharing and collaborating with the existing powers and gradually filling in the power vacuum. The aims of both the expanding powers were more or less similar. Pechorin's words in 'Bela' almost unconsciously echo the expansionist aims of the Tsarist Empire, "As soon as I can, I shall set out – but not for Europe, God preserve! I shall go to America, to Arabia, to India!" Why to these places? Because they promised wealth and adventure.

But there was some qualitative difference between the colonization of India by the British and the colonization of Caucasus and the Central Asia by the Tsarist Russia. The British colonization of India was colonization by a maritime power. The Colonizer and the Colonized did not have adjacent boundaries, shared histories of conflict or cultural exchanges between them. On the other hand, the history of engagement of Russia with the Caucasus and Central Asia went back to the 12th century. When the rest of the Europe was having renaissance Russia was under the Tatar-Mongol domination. It was a Muslim domination. It was by sharing power and colluding with the Tatar-Mongol Golden Horde that the Moscow principality rose and gained upper hand over its other Russian and European rivals. As Golden Horde disintegrated in the 15th and 16th century the power vacuum was filled by the Moscow principality. Many of the Tatar nobles chose to serve the rulers of Moscow. Hence in case of expansion of Tsarist Russian Empire in the south, unlike the British Empire, there were shared histories, cultural exchanges as well as marriage bonds between the Colonizer and Colonized. Many families of Russian nobility and not only nobility have surnames of Turkic or Arabic origin such as Aksakov, Arakcheyev, Akhmatov, Baksakov, Bakhtin, Bulgakov, Bukharin, Yermolov, Godunov, Karamzin, Karmazov, Korsakov, Kutuzov, Nazarkin, Rakhmaninov, Yusupov etc.¹⁰ In fact in this case there was a reversal of roles of the Colonizer and the Colonized. The erstwhile Colonized turned a Colonizer and started advancing towards the South and the East.

This change in status from Colonized to Colonizer and the new enforced European identity are responsible for Pechorin's attitude towards Bela. But Pechorin's attitude towards Bela is not typical of all the Russians. Maxim Maximytch shows lot of warmth and sympathy towards not only Bela but other Circassians too. Maxim Maximytch at times echoes the opinions of the Europeanized elite but his attitude is refreshingly different than that of Pichorin. It is through Maxim Maximytch that the Reader gets to know about Bela's spirited efforts to resist advances of Pechorin or Kazbich's love for his horse. In fact Maxim Maximytch almost condones Kazbich's behaviour when he kills Bela's father and steals his horse. Maxim

Maximych also shows a great respect to Bela's religious feelings. Bela on her death bed expresses doubts, whether she'll be able to meet Pechorin in the next world, owing to the differences in their faiths. Maximych offers to baptize her, but Bela makes a choice to die in the same faith in which she was born. Maximych respects her wishes, gives her a decent burial and does not mark her grave with a cross. His grief over her death is more genuine than that of Pechorin.

'A Hero of Our Times' takes a refreshingly different line on religious differences compared to other texts of colonial fiction. This is especially noteworthy since the religions in question are Christianity and Islam. One of the Pechorin's arguments to Bela is as follows: "Believe me, Allah is the same for all races, and if He allows me to love you, why should he forbid you to return my feelings?" One cannot help but recall at this point, the famous remark of U.S. Lieutenant General William Boykin's "I knew that my God was bigger than his" describing his battle against Muslims. Absence of this attitude on the part of Pechorin could possibly be due to the shared histories mentioned earlier as also due to the presence of Islamic people within the Russian society.

Abduction of Bela is momentous but her seduction and capitulation take a long time to come about. Pechorin learns her language. He presents several convincing arguments, buys a lot of presents for Bela, hires a Tatar woman to tame Bela and bring it forcefully to her that now she cannot belong to anyone else but Pechorin. The final capitulation of Bela comes when one morning she sees Pechorin attired as a Circassian. He is ready to renounce everything for her and also ready to set her free. As remarked earlier Bela's capitulation results Pechorin distancing himself from her and her eventual death. In its tragic end Bela's story again shows a remarkable connection to other romantic encounters in colonial fiction.

The engagement with the Colonized was regarded as dangerous in colonial fiction. Any kind of sympathising with the 'natives' is viewed as potentially unhinging.¹¹ A tale that comes up to the mind of an Indian reader is 'Beyond the Pale' by Rudyard Kipling. The tale starts with the following words: "*A man should, whatever happens, keep to his own caste, race and breed. Let the White go to the White and the Black to the Black. Then, whatever trouble falls is in the ordinary course of things – neither sudden, alien nor unexpected. This is the story of a man, who wilfully stepped beyond the safe limits of decent everyday society, and paid for it heavily*"

Trejago, a British officer living in a cantonment in one of the numerous North Indian cities knows 'too much' about the Natives, refuses to keep away from the Natives. He wanders away from the high roads of cantonment into the labyrinth of allies in the Native town, hears a couplet from a local love song and completes it displaying his knowledge of local folklore. This is how he comes to know a young Hindu widow, who is kept in strict purdah. He becomes her lover. But their clandestine meetings in a cow shed are discovered and both are punished severely. Trejago escapes a fatal wound while Bisesa's, the young

widow's hands are chopped off. The story kind of repeats Kipling's own lines, "The East is East and the West is West, and never the twain shall meet"

The British tried to maintain a distance between the Colonized and the Colonizers and did not encourage social or sexual contact, albeit unsuccessfully. But several examples of heartbreak and tragedy can be found in the 19th century British literature or even popular British media. The Kashmiri Song from the 'Garden of Kama' written by Adele Florence Cory under the pseudonym Lawrence Hope is one such example.

What might have been true of the British in India might not have been true of the Russians in Caucasus. There was a history of intermarriages, also social or sexual contact with the Colonized was not forbidden. So then, why did Bela have to die the way she did?

The answer to this question might be found in the very type of the novel that 'A Hero of our Times' is. The Hero is an epitome of teenage male fantasies. Like a romantic hero of a fairy tale, Pechorin too cuts a dashing figure. He travels to exotic places, beautiful women fall for him, he faces adventures and calamities and emerges unscathed from them. He displays all qualities characteristic of a typical masculine hero – daring, nerve, affinity for violence and a ruthlessness bordering on cruelty. Such macho hero is essentially lonely. Any engagement or a long term relationship with the feminine is perceived to be detrimental to the macho virility of the hero. Hence the 'Hero' can never enter the banal realms of marriage or any long term commitment. Thus Bela, having served her role in establishing the 'Hero' on the pedestal of a hero, has to die. Continued existence of Bela would have been problematic – for the 'Hero', for the plot and for the novelist.

In fact a real life encounter between a Russian army officer and a Chechen girl, very similar to Pechorin and Bela's story, has a very different end. We have an account by Lermontov's contemporary, a Decembrist and a man who showed exemplary courage in the Caucasus – Aleksander Bestujehev Marlinsky. Marlinsky's account tells us a story of his comrade Jakoubovitch, a favourite officer of General Yermolov who kidnapped Menate, a daughter of a Chechen nobleman during a raid on a Chechen village. Jakoubovitch was wounded in the skirmish. Menate tended him but refused to give in to his entreaties of love with the following words: "To love thee! And what wouldst thou make of me? A plaything, which thou wouldst send back, one day, to my father; and which my parents would not take back (...) Love cannot be bidden. And you are too good a master to force me to love you". Upon which Jakoubovitch sends for the girl's father. Menate's father and her betrothed come to claim her and take her back (of course after verifying her chastity!)¹²

This brings us to the second term in the title of the present paper, 'love'. The term love in romantic fiction of colonial times represents something of a yearning towards the forbidden. Some times they are the tales of conquest. These fictional accounts usually have tragic endings, cautioning people not to breach the

barrier between the Colonizer and the Colonized. But maintaining the barrier between the Colonizer and the Colonized was a difficult task. In reality the barriers were breached and ways of understanding, accommodating and respecting the 'Other' were evolved.

As the real life account of Menate and Jakoubovitch demonstrates the love shows mutual respect for each other's positions. Recently the work by William Dalrymple 'The White Mughals', describing a real life romantic liaison between the British Resident of Hyderabad and his Hyderabadi Muslim wife has shown the extent of mutual give and take between the Colonizer and Colonized. The problems encountered are real but there aren't any stereo typical solutions to them. The identities too are flexible. Love in this sense, when based on mutual respect can help in tackling issues arising out of narrow definitions of identity.

¹ Ania Loomba Colonialism/post-colonialism, 2nd edition, The New Critical Idiom Series, Routledge, 2005, p.23

² 'The colonial contact is not just 'reflected' in the language or imagery of literary texts , it is not just a backdrop or 'context' against which human dramas are enacted, but a central aspect of what these texts have to say about identity, relationships and culture. (...) the woman/land analogy also employs a reverse logic as the riches promised by the colonies signify both the joys of the female body as well as its status as a legitimate object for male possession' Ania Loomba Colonialism/post-colonialism, 2nd edition, The New Critical Idiom Series, Routledge, 2005, p.65

³ An opera 'Englishmen in India', first performed in January 1827. 'The plot of 'Englishmen in India' would become typical of such productions. A young Indian girl is given into the care of an Englishman during a period of social unrest and rebellion. She grows up into a beautiful young woman, and falls in love with her English protector, much to the dismay of her Indian lover, who, nevertheless, eventually – and like a truly noble savage - gives up all claims to her, recognizing that her love for the Englishman is greater' Indian Music and the West, Gerry Farrell, Oxford University Press, 1997, p. 97

⁴ The Caucasus region was notorious for slave trade details of which are found in the following books : The Caucasus, Ivan Golovin, London, 1854, The Caucasus and its People with a Brief History of their Wars and a Sketch of the Achievements of the Renowned Chief Shamyl, Louis Moser, London, 1856.

⁵ 'The transformation of Russia, on the other hand, was not only inspired by the example of Western Europe, but many Westerners in the 18th and even in the 19th centuries played very important roles in the process. From the second half of the 18th century even the monarchs in Russia were ethnically more West Europeans (mostly German) than Russian. Thus, the next most important "reformer on the throne" in Russia after Peter I, Catherine II, was 100% German.' Philosophy as a free search for knowledge: the concept and its transfer to Russia and India, Sergei Serebriany, a paper presented at the First Asian Philosophy Congress, New Delhi, March 6-9, 2010

⁶ Black Skin White Masks, Frantz Fanon, tr. By Charles Lam Marksman, Pluto Press, London and Sydney, 1967, pp.17-18

⁷ We must keep in mind that around the same time in Russia an ideological battle between Westerners and Slavophiles was taking place. The Westerners extolled the rationality and scientific development of Western Europe and insisted that Russia should follow the example of Western Europe. While the Slavophiles pointed out that the people of Russia were spiritually richer, 'non-materialistic' and that further development of Russia lied on a path other than the Western European model.

⁸ The Caucasus and its People with a Brief History of their Wars and a Sketch of the Achievements of the Renowned Chief Shamyl, Louis Moser, London, 1856

⁹ The Caucasus, Ivan Golovin, London, 1854, p.14

¹⁰ Russian Culture between Europe (the West) and Asia (the East) Sergei Serebriany, paper presented in Seminar

¹¹ Ania Loomba Colonialism/post-colonialism, 2nd edition, The New Critical Idiom Series, Routledge, 2005, p.117

¹² The Caucasus, Ivan Golovin, London, 1854, pp.63-72