

# The Problem of Own and Alien in Dovatov's Cycle "Suitcase"

Sara Mahbobzadh<sup>1</sup>, Liliya Harisovna Nasrutdinova<sup>1,\*</sup> and Girish Munjal<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Kazan Federal University, Russia

<sup>2</sup>University of Delhi, India

**Abstract:** The article deals with various aspects of the reception of the concepts "Own" and "Alien" in S. Dovatov's "Suitcase" cycle: material, ideological, philosophical, socio - and ethnocultural, etc. Special attention is paid to the reception of the categories of Soviet and official as not-Own. An important component of the problem of Own and Alien in the "Suitcase" cycle is also the attitude of the hero-narrator to Soviet and American culture. Widely articulated desire to associate his biography and professional activities allows us to conclude about the hero's attempt to position himself as a person outside the Soviet system. The appeal to the realities of culture helps the author to identify their value orientations and express their attitude to people and the world. Certainly, the significance of the problem of the correlation of Own and Alien in the literary heritage of S. Dovatov is predetermined by his status as a dissident writer and an immigrant writer. However, the writer is not characterized by a tendency toward the antithetic character of creating an opposition between Own and Alien. In the art world of S. Dovatov, there are no types of "stigmatized Alien" and "hostile Alien". Moreover, the model of his interaction with the world is defined as "Own among your Own".

**Keywords:** S. Dovatov, Russian emigrant literature, Own, Alien, autobiography, cultural associations.

## INTRODUCTION

Sergey Dovatov (1941-1990) – a famous Russian writer, one of the most prominent prose writers of the twentieth century. In the 30 years since his death, the writer's popularity does not decline, but on the contrary, increases. Moreover, his work (and personality) is popular not only in his homeland but also abroad. In Russian and foreign theaters, performances based on his books are staged, which are constantly successful. Furthermore, S. Dovatov has repeatedly become the hero of documentaries, feature films, and literary works. In St. Petersburg, a memorial plaque to the writer was installed, and in New York, the street was named after him.

The literary heritage of S. Dovatov, certainly, became the object of scientific research. In Russian literary studies, both monographic (for example, Sukhikh, I. 1996) and dissertation research on the writer's work dedicated to the peculiarities of language, poetics, the genre of the writer's works are known.

However, a study of the work of S. Dovatov in the context of Own and Alien's problems has not yet been conducted. At the same time, it is acknowledged that any person is in continuous search for social, national, religious, psychological, and gender identity. Defining the boundaries of Own occurs through the recognition of the boundaries of Alien and vice versa. For an emigrant writer this problem is particularly acute: on the

one hand, there is a need for self-identification in a new, foreign cultural space, and on the other, a desire to re-evaluate the values of past life.

## MATERIAL AND METHODS

The study of the specificities of the division of the world into Own and Alien is traditionally given a significant place in the humanities disciplines. A comprehensive methodological approach to this problem has already been developed, including cognitive, pragmatic, sociological, lingo-culturological, and ethno-psychological aspects.

At the same time, there are not many literary works in which the problem of Own and Alien is formulated and studied. This is a study of American literature (Shevchenko, Nesmelova, & Morozova, 2018); Shevchenko, Nesmelova, & Vysotskaya, 2019); Karasik, & Shchepacheva, 2015). which was originally formed as a multi-ethnic and multi-confessional.

In studies of Russian literature, the problem of Own and Alien inherently arises in the study of literary works which are based on the plot of the trip to another country. For example, R. Bekmetov and co-authors turn to the study of the "travel diary" by I. Goncharov "Frigate Pallada" (Spirchagova, Bekmetov, Spirchagova, & Yunusov, 2019)., Mratkuzina and Nasrutdinova analyze a complex of historical and literary texts that represent the perception of the image of India by Russian people. (Mratkuzina, & Nasrutdinova, 2015).

\*Address correspondence to this author at the Kazan Federal University, Russia; Tel: +79172711995; E-mail: Liliya\_nasrutdin@mail.ru

The methodological basis of the research was also scientific works, the authors of which turn to the study of the phenomenon of autobiography in literary works. On this point, articles devoted to the work of S. Dovlatov (Kolesov, Nasrutdinova, & Grishina, 2018)., as well as those addressed to the study of autobiographical trends in the work of other writers (Galimullina, Zinin, 2016); Afanasev, 2015)., can be equally relevant. It was important to identify ways of transforming real-life impressions, writer's life events into a literary subject.

Of particular interest are also scientific studies of the reception of the "Soviet myth" in modern literature (Shevchenko, Nasrutdinova, Dubrovskaja. S. 2017).

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

As is known, S. Dovlatov has repeatedly said that he considers himself a writer, and storyteller. Moreover, the plot basis of all his literary cycles, as a rule, are the vicissitudes of his own life, as well as stories from the lives of his relatives, friends, and acquaintances. Thus, the process of S. Dovlatov's literary works turns into a process of alienation from his own life. The result of this suspension is the transformation of a real biography into a literary plot, the separation of the hero-narrator from his prototype. Certainly, Dovlatov's books, with all their autobiography are not documentaries; they are called "pseudo-documentaries". Nevertheless, they describe thoroughly and reliably the way of life and world perception of the generation of the 1960s. Moreover, the writer's life path allows us to raise the issue of self-identification of a person of this generation in the Soviet reality and the status of an immigrant in the United States.

Already in a specific introduction to the cycle "Suitcase", in the episode where the hero-narrator talks about the circumstances of his departure from the Soviet Union, his rejection of arrogant Government officials is indicated. The deliberate alienation of the hero from everything official, the representation of himself as a person who has no relation to the state system, is already expressed at the level of vocabulary. The hero-narrator calls the officer of the VARD (Visa and Registration Department) a bitch. In this case, the use of obscene language clearly expresses not an attitude to a particular official, but a rejection of Soviet laws, according to which people leaving the country can take with themselves only three suitcases.

It would seem that the hero-narrator, due to his professional activity, is also part of the Soviet system. Moreover, he works as a journalist, that is, in doing editorial assignments, for his articles, he is looking for characters that satisfy the criteria of a real Soviet person. In other words, his work assumes the need to communicate the ideologies of the Soviet system to every reader, so that for every citizen the ideas of the state become their own. However, he is not so much a functionary as a victim of the regime: he suffers from the compromises he has to make; he does not take seriously official lies. He lives, like, in two worlds: in the external world, where the absurd reigns, and in his internal world, where thoughts and feelings are alive. For the hero-narrator, his journalistic activity is a crucial role. Interestingly, he asks the editor-in-chief of the newspaper to buy him a suit for official events. This costume can be perceived as a kind of mask that hides the true nature of the hero and allows him to write articles that are expected of him.

The fact that the hero perceives the correct, ideologically verified life of the Soviet person as an Alien is also confirmed by the choice of their social circle. Although he meets a variety of people in his line of duty, it is obvious that he is most comfortable among the marginalized people, among those who "drank every day" or "suffered from chronic binge drinking" (Dovlatov, 2013).

The peculiarity of the differentiation of people and phenomena by the hero-narrator in the context of the Own / Alien opposition is especially apparent when it turns to the "documentary" material – real people. Already the choice of these persons is informative for understanding both the hero and the epoch.

For example, Hemingway is often mentioned in the text. This American writer was the idol of the young S. Dovlatov, even in textbooks refers to the similarity of their style (Baevsky, 2003); (Igoshina, 2002). "And in the "Suitcase" cycle, the hero-narrator tries to find similarities even at the level of appearance and biography between himself and the man whose influence determined his career: both of them were in the army, were journalists, like to drink, were a boxer, do not hide their interest in women, and both of them are tall and with thick eyebrows. Assume that the similarity with the American writer to the protagonist of the "Suitcase" cycle is so important, since he was a representative of a different, non-Soviet culture, and for a person who is actively opposing himself to official ideology, this is very significant.

S. Dovlatov never hid how much he was attracted to American prose: Hemingway, Faulkner, and Sherwood Anderson. He wrote: "...Western and especially American literature has impressed us with its aesthetic brilliance, genuine attention to real human problems, and competence in the field of life material... I <...> willingly or unwillingly imitated American writers..." (Dovlatov, 1999). Thus, even in the Soviet period of the hero-narrator's life, it is American culture that is conceptualized as own, while the canons of socialist realism are alien to him.

From this point of view, we turn to the facts of mentioning in the text the name of another representative of world culture – the artist Fernand Leger. In the story, the hero-narrator is the owner of a French painter's jacket, which was given to him by a friend who previously lived in France and was friends with Fernand Leger. For the hero, it is very important to whom exactly this leather jacket belonged before. Knowing about the owner, he began to perceive the gift in a completely different way: at first, he saw only an old thing with disgusting spots of oil paint, and then even "regretted that they are few. Only two – on the sleeve and at the collar" (Dovlatov, 2013). It is very important to him that the jacket fits him: he is trying on himself the role and status of another well-known person in the world culture. The narrator remembers Fernand Leger's favorite words: «Renoir depicted what he saw. I depict what I understood ...» (Dovlatov, 2013). in tune with his own writer's credo.

It is significant that people who do not know the history of the jacket, for example, the editor of the publication in which the protagonist works, see it only as an "old cassock" (Dovlatov, 2013). Moreover, the person who holds a leading journalistic position did not even know about the existence of this French artist: "What is a leger? - the editor grimaced" (Dovlatov, 2013). Thus, references to the realities of culture can have a "differentiating function" (Nasrutdinova, 1998), dividing the characters into initiates and profane, "own" and "alien". Confident of these differences, the narrator does not indicate what is important in the image of Fernand Leger to himself, but that he was a member of the Communist Party" (Dovlatov, 2013). He is aware that the Executive worker of the Soviet era is ready to evaluate an unknown artist only by his biography, and not by the aesthetic merits of his works.

The differentiating function of references to the realities of culture is also evident in the scene of customs inspection: "the lid was covered with photos from the inside. Rocky Marciano, Armstrong, Joseph Brodsky, Lollobrigida in transparent clothing. The customs officer tried to tear Lollobrigida off with his nails. But as a result, only scratched" (Dovlatov, 2013). It is obvious that the customs officer either did not "recognize" the other people depicted in the photos or considered them uninteresting, he was attracted only by the bodily beauty of a half-naked woman.

For the hero-narrator, the selection of these photos is symbolic. Rocky Marciano – the remaining undefeated professional boxer, the absolute world champion. Joseph Brodsky is an iconic figure of the Russian underground literature. In the situation with Armstrong, we can talk about Neil Armstrong – an American astronaut who visited the moon, that is, a kind of symbol of the achievements of modern science, and about Louis Armstrong – an American jazz trumpeter and vocalist, that is, a symbol of alternative culture. And even the appearance in this series of photographs of Gina Lollobrigida can highlight not only the opposition of the physical and spiritual, intellectual, but also be a sign of the hero's dedication to mass culture, which does not fit into the canons of official art.

Equally symbolic are the items packed in a suitcase with which the hero-narrator leaves the USSR forever: "There was a decent double-breasted suit on top. <...> Next, a poplin shirt and shoes wrapped in paper. Under them – a velvet faux fur jacket. On the left – a winter hat made of a fake cat. Three pairs of Finnish crepe socks" (Dovlatov, 2013). After moving to the USA, the hero never took these things out of his suitcase. In his new life, he did not need them. Therefore, it can be argued that these things are identified with his past life, which at the new stage of life is perceived as Alien.

It is also interesting that the hero, who at first resented being allowed to take only three suitcases with him, eventually leaves with one. It turned out that the Soviet people do not have so much Own in material terms, private property.

In the context of considering the reception of the concepts "Own" and "Alien" by the heroes of S. Dovlatov's cycle "Suitcase", it is impossible to ignore their attitude to state property. The narrator notes that

even the most generous people never missed the opportunity to appropriate material objects that did not belong to them: "Beef carcasses are taken from the meat-processing factory. From a textile factory – a yarn. From the film equipment factory – lenses. Everything is dragged..." (Dovlatov, 2013). In fact, since the time of N.M. Karamzin, who answered "They steal" when asked about what is happening in Russia, did not change anything.

## SUMMARY

As a result of the analysis of the reception of the concepts "Own" and "Alien" in S. Dovlatov's cycle "Suitcase", it becomes obvious that in the perception of the hero-narrator, they lose the character of a strict binary opposition. Even though the semantics of these concepts is extremely broad (they include the material aspect-the concept of property, social and professional self-identification, acceptance/rejection of the Soviet ideology, and ethnocultural belonging), the border between them turns out to be passable. The hero-narrator, even without accepting or denying certain realities of Soviet reality, identifies them not as Alien-Hostile, but as Alien-Other.

It would also be interesting that in the art world of S. Dovlatov there are not only "hostile Strangers", but also "stigmatized Strangers". The writer is not characterized by a tendency to highlight or attribute certain features that are considered negative by society. A. Genis considered this particular feature of the heroes of S. Dovlatov to be defining for his writing style and philosophy of life: «Dovlatov loved the weak, barely tolerated the strong, despised judges and was condescending to vices, including his own» (Genis, 2016).

A solution to the problem of Own and Alien makes it impossible for the hero S. Dovlatov to exist according to the models "Alien among Aliens" or "Alien among your Own", despite his status as a dissident and emigrant. A typical model of self-identification of the hero-narrator of the "Suitcase" cycle is "Own among your own".

## CONCLUSION

The fundamental orientation towards the multiplicity of the invariants of Own and Alien, and the characteristic tendency for S. Dovlatov to their mixing and interpenetration, predetermined the specifics of the narrative manner of his works. Although the writer's

works are usually autobiographical, they are characterized by polyphony, multiple resonances of individual independent voices, and consciousnesses of the characters in work. Moreover, the autobiographical hero-narrator appears as one of the invariants of the writer's Self, that is, the incomplete spectrum of what S. Dovlatov identified as own is embodied in himself.

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