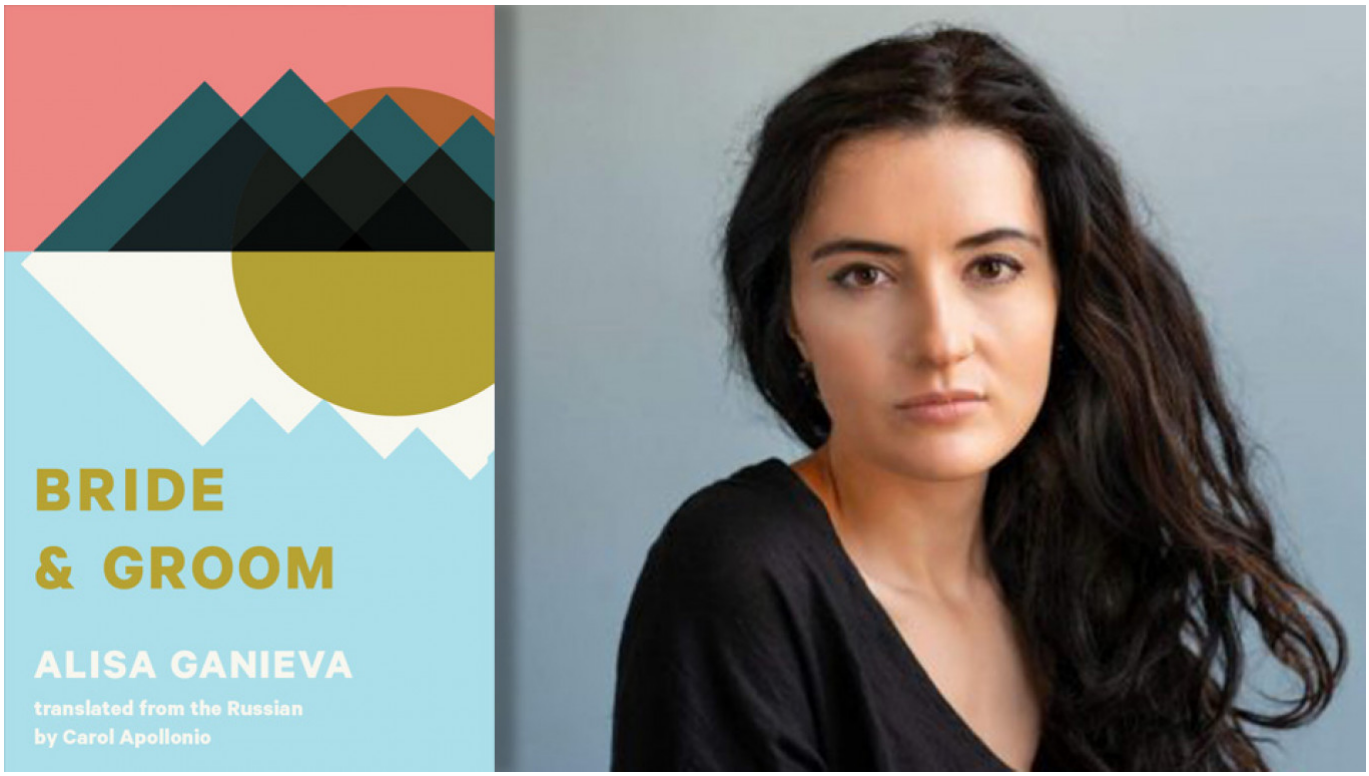
The Moscow Times
30 YEARS
INDEPENDENT NEWS FROM RUSSIA

Love in Dagestan: Alisa Ganieva's 'Bride and Groom'

Translated from the Russian by Carol Apollonio

By Sarah Kapp

July 27, 2019



Alisa Ganieva **Press Service**

Alisa Ganieva first came to literary prominence in 2009 when her novella, "Salam, Dalgat!," which she wrote under a male pseudonym, won the prestigious Debut Prize. The novella portrays a day on the streets of the Dagestani capital of Makhachkala, and the writer astonished audience members and jurors alike when she revealed her female identity at the award ceremony.

Though born in Moscow, Ganieva grew up in Dagestan, a predominately Muslim republic in the North Caucasus region of southern Russia. Located between the Republic of Chechnya and the Caspian Sea, Dagestan has been marred for decades by a simmering civil war that has seeped through the Chechen border, as well as a growing radical Islamic movement.

In 2002 Ganieva moved to Moscow to study literary criticism at the Maxim Gorky Literary Institute, and she has lived in the Russian capital ever since. Like a writer in (self-imposed) exile, Ganieva often finds herself between two cultural identities. In Kremlin parlance (now pejorative), she is a "person of Caucasian nationality." Among her Dagestani compatriots, she is a traitor who denigrates her native region in both her literary and journalistic work.

The complications of such estrangement fill the pages of her fiction, which satirizes the parallel xenophobic mentalities and newly fashionable conservatism of both her native region and Moscow. Her first full-length novel, "The Mountain and the Wall," which was short-listed for the Yasnaya Polyana award in 2013, tells the story of a rumor that the Russian government is going to a build a wall to close off its Caucasian republics to the south.

Her second novel, "Bride and Groom," a 2015 Russian Booker finalist, which was recently translated by Carol Apollonio (Deep Vellum, 2018), continues the writer's exploration of these regional tensions—but through the unlikely framework of an Austenian marriage plot. The narrative alternates between a young woman (told in first person) and man (told in third person) who, though not acquainted at the outset, seem fated to marry—not just because of the novel's title, genre, and a narrative structure gradually leading them together, but because of the parallels between them. They are both returning to their rural hometown in Dagestan from Moscow in order to appease their parents and get married, and they both view their native traditions with varying levels of skepticism while being inextricably rooted in them.

Patya is a twenty-five-year-old woman who has been working for a year in a Moscow courtroom basement. For Dagestani standards, she is already a "little long in the tooth for a bride," so her mother, a modern-day Mrs. Bennet, has summoned her home and arranged multiple visits to other local families with eligible bachelors.

Marat, meanwhile, is a promising Moscow-based lawyer. Though his situation is not as dire as Patya's—as a man, he will be able to return to Moscow if he wishes, and he does not face dwindling marriage prospects due to his age—his parents have given him a deadline. His father has already sold a car in order to reserve a banquet hall that can hold a thousand people. The only thing missing is a bride!

The novel has all the fixings of a modern-day Dagestani comedy of manners, rife with the mishaps of My Big Fat Greek Wedding and the providential air of a Pushkinian tale (think "The Snowstorm"), where chance, more than love, serves as the arbiter of fate.

However, the novel's matrimonial framework, which allows Ganieva to pick apart the Dagestani customs connected with marriage, and, by extension, the cultural landscape to which they belong, proves to be more of a vehicle than an end. Irregularities disrupt the love plot's kaleidoscope of prying aunties, watchful neighbors, and spurned admirers. Allegorical dreams, a drunken séance, and an eerie encounter between Patya and a potential suitor in the novel's beginning foreshadow deeper spiritual dimensions, while the imprisonment of a local Godfather-like figure in the protagonists' hometown—the "omnipotent" Khalilbek, who continues to wield power from behind bars—points to a corrupt government system that can extend its tentacles at any moment. Further complicating matters are the deadly flare-ups between the local central mosque and an oppositional mosque "across the tracks."

Though the two novels could not be more different, readers may be reminded of Jeffrey Eugenides's "The Marriage Plot." If Eugenides's novel explores the viability of the marriage plot in an age of short-lived encounters and female economic independence—an age in which marriage has lost its stakes, and therefore, its potency as a plotline—Ganieva's novel grapples with the powerlessness of its protagonists amidst old social (and political) structures that persist in a new post-Soviet age of faux democracy and social media.

This clash of old and new reverberates in the novel, where a new generation of women, in contrast to their mothers, wear headscarves, communicate with suitors via text, and join online groups such as the "Beautiful Dagestani Muslim Babes." And characters speak in a mishmash of contemporary Russian, Dagestani slang, and Arabic salutations.

Having translated "The Mountain and the Wall" and therefore already experienced with Ganieva's multi-lingual prose, Carol Apollonio skillfully renders the rough-and-tumble atmosphere of the original, including local slang. For example, in the Russian text, Marat's friend Rusik has "a fancy way of talking, with no local accent, like a proper Russian." In the original Russian, however, he talks like a khokhol, a word some readers may recognize as a derogatory term for Ukrainians, but that in Dagestani slang, as Ganieva makes clear in an interview, can be used to refer to ethnic Russians. And while the original edition released by AST Publishers provides glosses for the Dagestani and Arabic phrases that punctuate characters' speech, the English edition preserves them in italicized transliteration without glosses. But while addition of footnotes would have allowed the translator to preserve some of the interesting linguistic dimensions of the text, these are likely to have had narrow appeal and risked overcrowding the novel.

Apollonio's translation keeps the pace of the Russian original, wherein both the marriage plot's end and the community's true perpetrators become all the less clear as we barrel towards Marat's deadline.

Ganieva's "Bride and Groom" will appeal to readers interested in learning about a notorious but little-known region of Russia, as well as the Victorians among us who are in the mood for a marriage plot with a twist.

"All right, now, look," began Marat's mother. She got her glasses out of her housedress pocket and smoothed out the piece of paper with its list of vetted brides. "First on the list: Bariatka's daughter."

"You've picked a fine one to start with. She can't put two words together," protested Marat.

"What, you need her to go up onstage and give speeches? Very funny, Marat. The main thing is for her to have a conscience, and not be someone who only cares about grabbing stuff for herself. Like this one klepto bride that Zarema told me about ..."

"Mama ..."

"She's from Zarema's village. Turns out, first she accepts a proposal from some guy, then after he gives her a pile of gold, she takes off with it to a different village and marries someone else. Now her family can't show their face in public. They're trying to raise money to compensate the first bridegroom."

“Now that’s just ridiculous. Zarema obviously dreamed the whole thing up, she’s certainly capable of it. Who cares about the gold anyway?”

“What do you mean, who cares? I’ve already put away a hundred thousand for your bride. And I’ve scoped out a store in the city. I’ll go there with her, let her choose whatever she wants for that amount. It’ll give me a chance to check out her taste. If she goes for big shiny tchotchkes that you can see from three kilometers away, we’ll beat a quick retreat. Why take up with some gypsy fool?”

“Anyway, with Bariatka’s daughter, it’s obvious at a single glance that she’s a fool.”

“What, you’ve talked with her?”

“I saw her web page. She’s constantly posting selfies. And other pictures—kittens, children reading the Qur’an. And her status: ‘I’m the hottest girl alive from Region Zero Five.’ And she’s a member of ‘Beautiful Dagestani Muslim Babes’ … Cross her off!”

Mother sighed in bewilderment, bit her lip, held her pen briefly above the line with the Muslim Babe, then drew a line through her name.

“Next?” yawned Marat.

“What are you yawning for?” Mother gave him a sideways look.

“One conversation with Sabrina, and you’ll never yawn again—that’s how smart she is.”

“Now what? Who’s this Sabrina of yours?”

“Oh, she’s a clever one! Like a professor! From the Shakhov family. Her father’s a military officer, mother’s a cardiologist, her grandfather was a theater director. The girl is made of pure gold. Honors grad, medical school.”

“Do you have a photo?” asked Marat, half-joking, half-serious. His mother was obviously armed and ready. She reached into her pocket and drew out a photograph. A thin-lipped, thick-browed beauty looked haughtily out at him.

“Where did you get the photo?” Marat was surprised.

“I asked Firuza from the Avenue.”

“And how did Firuza get her hands on it?”

“Firuza’s late husband was Shakhov’s brother. And her son Shakh, your classmate from law school, is Sabrina’s cousin.”

“So she’s Shakh’s cousin. Do they live in the city?”

“Right downtown. We’ll go see them tomorrow.Their uncle died six months ago from a heart attack, so there’s a good reason to stop by. We’ll express our condolences, and the two of you can have a look at each other.”

“All right, then, we’ll give it a try. Who else do you have on the list?”

“Luiza’s niece. Luiza talks so much about her. She was in a dance troupe as a child and now she’s studying economics. I saw her at a wedding—she’s as thin as a reed! And she recognized me and ran over to give me a hug and a kiss, though the last time I saw her she was just a little girl. Now that’s what I call good breeding. We’ll go to the Abdullaevs’ engagement party, you can have a good look at her there.”

“Just give me her name, I’ll do an Internet search and find out whether she’s fish or fowl.”

“I’ll show her to you in the flesh! To hell with that Internet of yours!”

“All right, who else do you have up your sleeve?”

“There’s one from Aselder’s office …”

“From Father’s Institute?”

“Yes, they have a young specialist there, a political activist, works there as a secretary. I didn’t want to put her on the list until I had a chance to see her in person. I went specially to Aselder’s office and had a look: a sharp girl, alert, professional. She’ll go far. Runs a little cosmetics business on the side, right there in the office.”

“Well, Mother … not much to choose from there …”

“What do you mean, ‘not much’? Do you have any idea how many I had to sift through? I looked far and wide. I wanted Muishka’s daughter, but her neighbors didn’t have a single good thing to say about her. Then I thought of the Kurbanovs, but it turns out they’re really tight with Khalilbek. That’s an immediate veto.” She fretted. “All these years you couldn’t come up with even one girl, and now you have the nerve to criticize me! Anyway, here, you know this next one: Zaira.”

“Cross her off immediately.”

“What do you mean, ‘Cross her off?’ She’s one of us, from right here in town, a sensible girl.”

“She wears a headscarf.”

“Not a hijab though! I myself can’t stand the ones who cover up, but what’s wrong with a scarf? It’s cute.”

“And she prays. Don’t make me even think about it.”

“So, did Rusik turn you against girls who pray? Your father prays, doesn’t he? And, inshallah, he’ll go on the hajj.”

“Mama!”

“All right, all right, I’ll cross her off.”

“Khadizha!” A woman’s voice was hard in the yard. “Are you home?”

Marat's mother started, tucked the paper and Sabrina's photo into her pocket, and called back brightly:

"Is it you, Zarema? I'm here, come on in."

Marat got up and headed off to the bathroom before the guest came in.

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