11.

M. Iu. Lermontov's 'Hero and Bela': Love in the Time of Colonisation

Anagha Bhat Behere

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

This resulted mainly from expansion across the globe by Western Europe from the second half of the fifteenth century. By the end of the nineteenth or the beginning of the twentieth century, Western Europe had extended its influence across the globe, touching almost all mankind. The physical expansion of Western Europe was accompanied by the exponential growth of capitalism as well as the tremendous development of science and technology and culture. All these three factors were interdependent and interconnected, each facilitating the development of the others. Non-Western humanity had to come to terms with it and adjust to it. This whole process of adjustment was colonisation in my opinion. In some cases like India, there was accompanying physical occupation of territory. But it should also be borne in mind that the actual control of Indian territory and the administration of colonial power were brought about by the British with active participation from Indian agents, who knowingly or unknowingly contributed to the process of colonisation. In the case of some other countries like Russia and Japan for example, the process of colonisation was internally motivated. So I have used the term 'colonialism' here in the sense of a device used for encountering the 'alien' or the 'other', and the reaction of the 'other' to such encounter. Colonialism in this sense encompasses various spheres of human activity including the socio-political, economic, and even psychological.

Another term in the title that needs some explanation is 'love'. I have taken into consideration the interaction between men and women in colonised 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 will discover in the course of this presentation.

A Hero of Our Time, a novel by Mikhail Iurievich Lermontov, is remarkable. Set in the early

[1] Ania Loomba, *Colonialism/Postcolonialism (The New Critical Idiom)*, 2nd edition (Routeledge, 2005), p. 23.

nineteenth century, the main events of the novel unfold in the Caucasus region of Eurasia. The entire novel has the tsarist Russian expansion into the Caucasus and Central Asia as its backdrop. The novel has an interesting structure. It is a narrative within a narrative. The first narrator, or the narrative self of the author, is travelling through the Caucasus. The novel starts ostensibly as a travelogue. In the course of these travels, the first narrator comes across an old military hand, Maksim Maksimych, in the Caucasus. The second narrator, Maxim Maksimych, tells a story to the first narrator in which the protagonist, the hero of the novel Grigorii Aleksandrovich Pechorin, makes his 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 into possession of Pechorin's diaries and notes. From 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 the memoirs and confessions of the third narrator. All three narrators, namely the author's narrative self, Maksim Maksimych, and Grigorii Aleksandrovich Pechorin are travelling on the Military Georgian Road (Voenno-Gruzinskaia Doroga), a military supply line that fed the tsarist Russian expansion through the Caucasus, Central Asia, and beyond.

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

The entire novel *A Hero of Our Time* can be analysed as a piece of literature expressing the colonial experience peculiar to Russia but in the present paper, I focus on the first chapter of the novel entitled 'Bela', which describes a romantic encounter between Grigorii Aleksandrovich 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 Maksim Maksimych, the second narrator, and is recorded by the first narrator or the author's narrative self. Grigorii Aleksandrovich Pechorin, a young and probably rich nobleman from St. Petersburg is demoted and sent to serve on the Caucasian front under Maksim Maksimych. In terms of class and education, Pechorin, a member of the Europeanised elite in St. Petersburg, is much above Maksim Maksimych, who is an ordinary army captain. During his stay at the military fortress, Pechorin and Maksim Maksimych attend the wedding of a mountain chief's daughter. The younger daughter of the chief, Bela, catches Pechorin's eye. Through Maksim Maksimych, he also comes to know of the intense desire of Bela's brother, Azamat, to possess a beautiful horse belonging to another Circassian and that Azamat has offered Bela in exchange for the horse. This Circassian, Kazbich, is also Bela's suitor. Pechorin abducts Bela, in collusion with her brother Azamat. Pechorin buys her brother's compliance and silence by helping him steal the horse from Kazbich. Bela is held a

captive in the fortress, in spite of protests from Maksim Maksimych. Pechorin engages in an incessant seduction campaign and Bela ultimately gives in. With Bela's capitulation, the thrill of the chase is over for Pechorin and he loses interest in her. Bela becomes unhappier and unhappier. With Pechorin out hunting, Bela ventures out of the fortress, only to be captured by her erstwhile Circassian admirer Kazbich, who plunges a dagger into her back. Injured, Bela is brought back to the fortress and she dies after a couple of days of terrible suffering 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 the English and French languages in the eighteenth and nineteenth century. In fiction, especially poetry and even in the so-called scientific study of cartography, colonies are always depicted as feminine, conquered and subjugated by the masculine European. '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.'[2] Any claims to these women by the colonised males are given up (or should be given up) for the redemption of these women lies with the European conqueror. 'An opera, *Englishmen in India*, was 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.'[3] This is 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 not an option at all. As Pechorin rightly points out, she would either be killed (for the disgrace she has 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.

Pechorin, throughout the seduction, makes proclamations of love. He tells Bela that 'Allah is

---

[2] Ania Loomba, *Colonialism/Postcolonialism (The New Critical Idiom)*, 2nd edition (Routeledge, 2005), p. 65.
[3] Gerry Farrell, *Indian Music and the West* (Oxford University Press: London, 1997), p. 97.
[4] The Caucasus region was notorious for its slave trade, details of which can be found in the following books: Ivan Golovin, *The Caucasus* (London, 1854); Louis Moser, *The Caucasus and Its People with a Brief History of Their Wars and a Sketch of the Achievements of the Renowned Chief Shamyl* (London, 1856).

the same for all the races, and if he allows me to love you, why should he forbid you to return my feelings?'. He also declares that he loves her so much that he is ready to give anything to cheer her. But that 'anything' does not include Bela's liberty to make the choice of loving him or not. That Bela has taken his fancy is reason enough for him to abduct her. He also expects Bela to love him in return. He justifies her abduction by citing 'love' again and says that after seeing how he loves her, Bela would also come to love him. The entire behaviour of Pechorin, which he says is guided by 'love', smacks of aggression, possessiveness, and disregard for the woman in question.

Throughout the narrative, Maksim Maksimych 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 Maksim Maksimych, we find that they are behaving much in the same way as that for which they criticise the Tatars and other Caucasian tribes. Pechorin denigrates the mountain people for their attitude towards women, but in forcefully abducting Bela, he also displays the same attitude towards women and 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 to colonisation, Russia has a unique position, since it was simultaneously the coloniser and the colonised. In the seventeenth, eighteenth, and early nineteenth centuries, Russia was expanding its territory and colonising Central Asia and parts of Northern America. It was playing the role of a coloniser in these territories. At the same time, it was undergoing a process of enforced colonisation (or Europeanisation) within its territory. The process of colonisation (or Europeanisation) was carried out by an emperor and the noblemen surrounding him who were ethnically more European (mainly German) than Russian. 'The transformation of Russia, on the other hand, was not only inspired by the example of Western Europe, but many Westerners in the eighteenth and even in the nineteenth centuries played very important roles in the process. From the second half of the eighteenth 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 percent German.[5]

This process of Europeanization was the second colonisation of Russia, the first being the occupation and domination of the Russian territories by the Tatar-Mongols. The occupation by the Tatar-Mongols did not invade the cultural or intellectual space of the Russians. There was cultural exchange between the Golden Horde and the Moscow Principality and although relations were marked by strife, its impact was not as great as the second colonisation. The second colonisation of Russia did not physically occupy the Russian territory, but it invaded the psychological and

[5] Sergei Serebriany, 'Philosophy as a Free Search for Knowledge: The Concept and Its Transfer to Russia and India', paper presented at the First Asian Philosophy Congress, New Delhi, 6-9 March, 2010.

intellectual space of the Russians. The violence associated with colonisation was present even in this case; not unleashed by the coloniser but perpetrated by the emperor who was colonised. The ruler of the country, 'Imperator' Peter in this case, undertook to Westernise the country from within. The measures he adopted were cruel and barbaric. Also, the Westernisation he sought was limited only to importing Western technologies and not Western social institutions. This selective Westernisation was schizophrenic. Language played an important role in this colonisation. 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 'civilisation'. Those who were privileged to have access to this process of 'Westernisation/civilisation' were few in number. Those having undergone this process were to all intents and purposes '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 Westernised people with those of their compatriots who had not undergone this process of 'Westernisation/civilisation' or those having undergone this process to a lesser degree. Those who were completely alien to the process of Westernisation were viewed as 'naïve', 'simple', 'emotional', and in short, intellectually underdeveloped and inferior. The relationship between the 'naïve', 'simple' native and his 'superior', Westernised counterpart was marked by a condescending, patronising attitude on the side of the Westernised.[7] If we take a look at the relationship between Maksim Maksimych and Pechorin, we can see a similar pattern. Pechorin's attitude towards Maksim Maksimych is patronising. He is playing the role of the 'superior'. Maksim Maksimych 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 colonisation 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 competed with Turkey and Persia to gain supremacy in that region. But Russian affairs in the 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 sea. The history of Russian expansion into the Caucasus and Central

[6] Frantz Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*, trans. Charles Lam Marksman (London and Sydney: Pluto Press, 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 and 'non-materialistic', and that further development of Russia lay on a path other than the Western European model.

[8] Louis Moser, *The Caucasus and Its People with a Brief History of Their Wars and a Sketch of the Achievements of the Renowned Chief Shamyl* (London, 1856).

Asia is remarkably similar to the consolidation of the British Empire in India.[9] The Russians, like the British in eighteenth- and nineteenth-century India, consolidated their position by actively participating in feuds amongst the local princes, sharing and collaborating with the existing powers, and gradually filling 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 colonisation of India by the British and the colonisation of the Caucasus and Central Asia by tsarist Russia. The British colonisation of India was colonisation by a maritime power. The coloniser and the colonised 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 twelfth century. When the rest of Europe was enjoying the Renaissance, Russia was under 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 the upper hand over its other Russian and European rivals. As Golden Horde disintegrated in the fifteenth and sixteenth century the power vacuum was filled by the Moscow Principality. Many of the Tatar nobles chose to serve the rulers of Moscow. Hence, in the case of expansion of the tsarist Russian Empire in the south, unlike the British Empire, there were shared histories and cultural exchanges as well as marriage bonds between the coloniser and colonised. Many families of Russian nobility and not only nobility have surnames of Turkic or Arabic origin such as Aksakov, Arakchev, Akhmatov, Baksakov, Bakhtin, Bulgakov, Bukharin, Ermolov, Godunov, Karamzin, Karmazov, Korsakov, Kutuzov, Nazarkin, Rakhmaninov, Iusupov, etc. In fact, in this case, there was a reversal of roles of the coloniser and the colonised. The erstwhile colonised turned coloniser and started advancing towards the south and the east.

This change in status from colonised to coloniser 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 Russians. Maksim Maksimych shows a lot of warmth and sympathy towards not only Bela but other Circassians, too. Maksim Maksimych at times echoes the opinions of the Europeanised elite but his attitude is refreshingly different than that of Pechorin. It is through Maksim Maksimych that the reader comes to know about Bela's spirited efforts to resist the advances of Pechorin or Kazbich's love for his horse. In fact, Maksim Maksimych almost condones Kazbich's behaviour when he kills Bela's father and steals his horse. Maksim Maksimych also shows a great respect for Bela's religious feelings. Bela on her deathbed expresses doubts about whether she will be able to meet Pechorin in the next world, owing to the differences in their faiths. Maksim Maksimych offers to baptise her, but Bela makes the choice of dying in the same faith in which she was born. Maksim Maksimych 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

[9] Ivan Golovin, *The Caucasus* (London, 1854), p. 14.

than that of Pechorin.

A Hero of Our Time 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 Pechorin's arguments to Bela is this: '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 Lieutenant General William Boykin of the U.S. that '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 and also due to the presence of Islamic people within Russian society.

The 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 many presents for her, hires a Tatar woman to tame Bela, and brings it forcefully home 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 into 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.

Engagement with the colonised was regarded as dangerous in colonial fiction. Any kind of sympathising with the 'natives' is viewed as potentially unhinging.[10] A tale that rises in the mind of Indian readers 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, refusing to keep away from them. He wanders away from the high roads of the cantonment into the labyrinth of alleys 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 cowshed are discovered and both are punished severely. Trejago escapes a fatal wound while the young widow Bisesa's hands are cut off. The story is a kind of repetition of Kipling's own lines: 'East is East and West is West, and never the twain shall meet.'

The British tried to maintain a distance between the colonised and the colonisers and did not encourage social or sexual contact, albeit unsuccessfully. But several examples of heartbreak and tragedy can be found in nineteenth-century British literature and 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

[10] Ania Loomba, *Colonialism/Postcolonialism (The New Critical Idiom)*, 2nd edition (Routeledge, 2005) p. 117.

the Caucasus. There was a history of intermarriages, and social or sexual contact with the colonised 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 novel that *A Hero of our Time* is. The hero is the epitome of teenage male fantasy. Like the romantic hero of a fairytale, 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 the qualities characteristic of a typical masculine hero—daring, nerve, affinity for violence, and a ruthlessness bordering on cruelty. Such a macho hero is essentially lonely. Any engagement or 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 placing the 'hero' on his pedestal, has to die. Bela's continued existence 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 — Aleksandr Bestuzhev Marlinskii. Marlinskii's account tells us a story of his comrade Iakubovich, a favourite officer of General Ermolov who kidnapped Menate, a daughter of a Chechen nobleman, during a raid on a Chechen village. Iakubovich 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 this, Iakubovich sends for the girl's father. Menate's father and her betrothed come to claim her and take her back (after verifying her chastity of course!)[11]

This brings us to the second term in the title of the present paper, 'love'. The term 'love' in the romantic fiction of colonial times represents something of a yearning for the forbidden. Sometimes they are the tales of conquest. These fictional accounts usually have tragic endings, cautioning people not to breach the barrier between the coloniser and the colonised. But maintaining the bulwark erected between coloniser and colonised was a difficult task. In reality, the barrier was breached and ways of understanding, accommodating, and respecting the 'other' were evolved.

As the real-life account of Menate and Iakubovich demonstrates, real love shows mutual respect for each other's positions. Recently, a work by William Dalrymple *White Mughals*, describing a real-life romantic liaison between the British Resident of Hyderabad James Kirkpatrick and his Hyderabadi Muslim wife has shown the extent of mutual give and take between the coloniser and colonised. The problems encountered are real but then there are no stereotypical 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.

[11] Ivan Golovin, *The Caucasus* (London, 1854), pp. 63-72.