

Michela Romano

Interview with Egana Dzhabbarova

Egana Dzhabbarova is a poetess, a novelist, and PhD. She was born and raised in Ekaterinburg by Azerbaijani parents. Her life has been characterized by continuous moves from Russia to Istanbul, Baku and then Germany (with a year-long stay in Taiwan in 2022).

She is the author of the novels *Руки женщин моей семьи были не для письма* (*The Hands of My Family's Women Were Not for Writing*, No Kidding Press, Dzhabbarova 2023), *Дуа за неверного* (*Dua for the Infidel*, NLO, Dzhabbarova 2024), *Terra Nullius* (NLO, Dzhabbarova 2025) and of the poetry collections *Босфор* (*Bosphorus*, Dzhabbarova 2015), *Поза Ромберга* (*Romberg's Pose*, Dzhabbarova 2017), *Красная кнопка тревоги* (*Red Alert Button*, Dzhabbarova 2020) and the collection *Деколониальность: настоящее и будущее. Сборник статей* (*Decoloniality: Present and Future*, Gorizonta!, Dzhabbarova 2022). Her poems have been shortlisted for the Arkadii Dragomoshchenko Prize (2019) and published in international anthologies, such as *F-Letter* (Britain), *DEARS* (Switzerland), and *PENopp* (Sweden).

In this interview, Dzhabbarova reflects on autofiction as a form of resistance, on Russophone literature beyond the imperial canon, and on writing in Russian in the context of war, exile, and dissent. The interview was conducted by Michela Romano in May 2025.

Michela Romano: In the literary world you construct, the body is both the object and subject of observation and analysis, especially the female body. The body is detected, its codes are extracted, and the various social forces passing through it, such as patriarchy, colonialism, power, identity, stereotypes, norms, and languages, are closely studied. What is clear in your poetic vision is that concepts such as coloniality and decoloniality play a crucial role in the experimentation and creation of new meanings. The aim of this dialogue is to understand how your biography is intertwined with your works against the background of recent developments in Russophone literature.

Could you begin by telling us about your life journey and your relationship with literature? How does your work reflect your own inner world?

Egana Dzhabbarova: I've always loved reading—ever since early childhood. Words felt like the safest place on earth; they helped me make sense of events and my own emotions. I don't fully understand

why I was drawn to books—reading wasn't something encouraged at home. I think, in part, it was the influence of my grandfather, whose house had a small library, even if it was mostly medical books.

As a child, I signed up at the local children's library and began visiting it regularly. I loved picking out different books, especially Japanese or Spanish ones, and reading them while hiding behind a big armchair in the living room. I quickly developed a deep affection for Orhan Pamuk and devoured everything he had written. Around that same time—when I was about ten—I began writing stories of my own. I would fill school notebooks with tales that mixed imaginary events with characters borrowed from other books or invented by me.

My literary awareness began to deepen in high school and especially during my time at university. Studying philology pushed me to take literature and language more seriously. I began publishing my work as a student—first a short story, then poetry. Around that time, I also immersed myself in contemporary poetic practices and began reading writers like Lida Yusupova, Galina Rymbu, Oksana Vasyakina, Anna Alchuk, Warsan Shire, Athena Farrokhzad, and many others.

That period marked a turning point in my relationship with language: I realized that words could be radically different from one another, and still equally powerful, equally enriching. I hope that my writing, among other things, can become a space of empathy and coexistence for different human voices and experiences, including those voices that have previously been denied subjecthood.

MR: Your written work, including your poetry as well as the most recent novels you wrote, seems to absorb aspects of your biography, and vice versa. You are a composite of many things, each of which comprises a key part of your work as well, including religion, family, identity, language, and love.

The “particular” you describe always reverberates within society in general, and there is always a sort of movement of “expansion” towards the external world, as well as a “retreat” to your inner experience, your inner self.

Could you explain what you believe to be the function of literature? How does autofiction enter your literary world? What are the themes you feel closest to and that you consider fundamental?

ED: The question of autofiction is truly important and often provocative. Authors who write autofiction are frequently met with the same kind of criticism: that it's too raw, too personal, too entangled with trauma or suffering, and therefore somehow exploitative. I find such

accusations absurd. All literature, in one way or another, draws from the fabric of the writer's life; autofiction simply makes that connection more transparent.

That said, I believe it's crucial to remember that literature is not art therapy or emotional sublimation. A text shouldn't be a dumping ground for feelings—it should still function as a crafted aesthetic work, something shaped and purposeful, not just a private story laid bare. Good literature gives more than just personal confession; it offers reflection, insight, resonance.

For instance, in my first novel, I wasn't just telling a story—I was trying to represent the experience of living with a serious illness, to reflect on the patriarchy embedded in cultural systems, to question what we inherit beyond biology. In the second novel, I explored masculinity and how it affects men, as well as the relationship with one's country and city, among other themes.

It's difficult to name just one set of topics that define my work. But I would say that recurring motifs include: the relationship with culture and language, the relationship with the body, and the notion of inheritance—both tangible and intangible.

MR: In your view, how can autofiction be leveraged as a strategy to resist political repression? How do you deal with the vulnerability that this type of writing usually triggers?

ED: I believe it's no coincidence that many authoritarian regimes and dictatorships are hostile to autofiction or attempt to censor it. This genre often gives voice to the lived experiences of marginalized and oppressed communities—those who are systematically denied the right to speak or to be represented. In that sense, autofiction is a form of resistance.

At the same time, this kind of writing is incredibly vulnerable. It demands honesty—sometimes to the point of confession—and that isn't easy for me as a writer. In fact, I often wish I could write in a less exposed way. But perhaps this openness is simply the nature of my writing, something I can't (and maybe shouldn't) escape.

MR: On this matter “Дѹа за неверного” (*Dua for the Infidel*, Dzhabbarova 2024), your last novel, among others, seems to strike this delicate balance between intimate personal family experiences and the broader destiny of Russia. How is this story, in particular, related to you, to Russia, and, more generally, to the broader world around you?

ED: I first conceived this novel many years ago, but it's clear to me now that all those years were necessary—to live through grief and the loss of

my brother. In many ways, it was his death that pushed me to examine our relationship more closely, to look at it with care and attention. Through that process, I came to understand something unexpected: my brother was, in many ways, a reflection of the country I was born and raised in.

His complicated relationship with that country—with his origins—may ultimately have played a role in his death. Alongside this personal story, the novel also explores my own relationship with Russia. I had just returned from a year in Taiwan, and that distance allowed me to see things I hadn't been able to see before. In 2022, I was fortunate enough to find a job at National Chengchi University [in Taipei] and work there as a teacher of Russian as a foreign language. It was an amazing and happy year, but, unfortunately, circumstances forced me to return to Russia. After my return, I focused on writing my second novel and realized that, to some extent, my return was inevitable. It was impossible to write about my brother outside of Russia.

MR: Your perspectives on minorities, queer and feminist issues are mirrored in your poetry contributions and prose such as “Ф-письмо: Новая русская феминистская поэзия” (F-Letter: New Russian Feminist Poetry, Rymbu et al. 2020) and the novel “Руки женщин моей семьи были не для письма” (The Hands of My Family's Women Were Not for Writing, Dzhabbarova 2023). If we take decolonisation to consist of more than merely geographical events, how is it possible to decolonise a culture, a language, or a gender? What is the role of feminist literature in this decolonizing process?

ED: It is important to distinguish between *decolonization* as a political process—in which a colony gains independence—and *decoloniality* as an ongoing critical practice of rethinking dominant norms and recovering suppressed aesthetic and experiential frameworks.

At the same time, it's worth acknowledging that the concept of decoloniality is not without its critiques—Tuck and Yang's well-known article “Decolonization Is Not a Metaphor” (Tuck et al. 2012) is a striking example. Nonetheless, I believe that decoloniality—as a reconfiguration of aesthetic, academic, cultural, and sensory norms—is of vital importance.

In this sense, the emergence of new experiences, languages, and voices in literature and culture—voices previously denied the right to be heard or to exist—is essential. Alternative imaginaries and modes of perception that have been excluded from the canon are crucial for re-

shaping the world and unsettling coloniality as a dominant framework of values.

From this perspective, a feminist lens, or writing that emerges from within feminism, should also be seen as contributing to the resistance against coloniality, challenging inherited structures, and expanding the space for new forms of knowing and feeling.

MR: How have you navigated this process in your own life and work? Do you still “want blue eyes”?¹

ED: Studying the works of postcolonial theorists and decolonial thinkers has, in many ways, been a liberating experience for me—or more precisely, it has prompted a shift in how I relate to myself, my cultural heritage, and the forms of internalized coloniality I carry.

What matters deeply to me is the ongoing process of reassembling my own aesthetics in writing—allowing the text to become a space where multiple practices, experiences, languages, and bodies can coexist.

MR: In an essay published online in 2024 for Swedish Penn entitled “Between” you affirm having begun

to love [the Russian] language, because it gives me literature. It gives me Virginia Woolf, Marina Tsvetaeva, Ursula Le Guin, Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, Warsan Shire, Athena Farrokhzad – they speak and their fancy Russian words hit me with an arrow of recognition. I read all letters by Tsvetaeva in one gulp, as people drink vodka, and would [will] forever remember a phrase she wrote February 25, 1931, in a letter to Anna Teskova: ‘Here I am not needed. There I am impossible’.²

Can you expand on this reflection by explaining the role of the Russian language in your life, particularly with respect to the influence of the wartime situation of Ukraine? I am referring to texts such as “мёртвое тело языка” (*The Dead Body of Language*, 2022).³

ED: It so happened that Russian became the primary language of my writing, my work, and my everyday life. I was born and raised in Russia, and world literature first reached me through Russian translations. Yet

¹ The topic of eye colour is addressed in the novel *Руки женщин моей семьи были не для письма* (*The Hands of My Family's Women Were Not for Writing*, Dzhabbarova 2023), where the desire to have blue eyes instead of brown is construed as a way of escaping imposed body canons and conforming to a more broadly acceptable and admired appearance.

² <https://www.penopp.org/articles/between> [accessed 1 December 2025].

³ Poem by the author. See <https://discours.io/expo/poetry/anything/russian-poetry-against-violence> [accessed 1 December 2025].

in recent years, political events have laid bare the historical violence embedded within the Russian language—violence stemming from the legacy of a former (or perhaps ongoing?) empire and its relationship with other nations.

Still, I want to believe that the Russian language can become a tool for dialogue—or rather, dialogues—a space of attentive listening and mutual respect. I'm reminded here of the well-known debate between two African writers, Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o and Chinua Achebe, on the use of the English language in literature. I feel close to Achebe's belief in the potential of English to serve meaningful purposes. At the same time, he never abandoned his native language, even within novels written in English, always retaining expressions rooted in his own linguistic heritage.

I'd like to believe that something similar might one day be possible for Russian—that it, too, could become a language of coexistence rather than domination.

MR: Definitions about Russian/Russophone literature continue to proliferate and become more complex each day. Nevertheless, how do you see the distinction between Russophone literatures and Russian literature? Is this a relevant dichotomy when speaking about a literature of dissent? How do you feel about belonging to the body of literature of resistance?

ED: The distinction between Russian literature and Russian-language (Russophone) literature lies primarily in their relation to the centre—to political authority, to the cultural canon, and to language as an institution. Russian literature, especially in its imperial and post-imperial formation, has historically operated as a state-driven and national project, where language and literature were closely tied to ideas of identity, mission, and power.

Russian-language literatures, by contrast, often emerge outside the centre—on its geographical, political, or cultural peripheries. These are literatures written in Russian but not necessarily “within” or “for” Russia. They may be produced by authors from Central Asia, the Caucasus, Ukraine, Belarus, or diasporic communities. What defines them is a multiplicity of perspectives, a direct engagement with trauma, displacement, and the deconstruction of linguistic norms and cultural dominance.

When it comes to the literature of dissent, especially in today's political context, I believe this dichotomy is not only relevant but also essential. It highlights the fact that the Russian language is not the property of a

single state, and that writing in Russian can be a tool of resistance rather than complicity. Russian-language literatures that stand in opposition to militarized or authoritarian regimes create alternative spaces—for memory, empathy, critique, and reflection.

For me personally, belonging to this literature of resistance is also a poetic, ethical, and embodied position. It is a space where language aches, where it undergoes doubt, translation, and reimagining. I write in Russian, but not from “within” Russia. The Russian language for me is a space of tension, of searching, and of hope, not an instrument of power. I do not reject the language, but I do refuse to accept it as fixed or neutral. I try to rewrite it from within the personal experience of the language, to let other bodies, voices, and experiences enter its frame. That, to me, is the essence of Russophone literature: to create multiplicity where there used to be a single sanctioned truth.

MR: As the current situation continues to influence the role of literature written in Russian, as well as that of the writers themselves, do you think that a new genre of anti-war literature has emerged? If yes, what are its main features? What do you think should be the role of writers in this emerging context?

ED: On the one hand, we are indeed witnessing the emergence of publishing houses operating outside of Russia and openly releasing anti-war works—such as Freedom Letters, Vidim, Babel, and Meduza. On the other hand, I believe it is still too early to clearly define the genre of anti-war literature; this requires time and deeper critical reflection.

At the same time, it is impossible to ignore how profoundly the current political situation has affected the literary landscape. We now see the rise of so-called Z-writers who actively support the war, organize their own festivals, and publish pro-state books. Unlike most anti-war authors, they remain within the country and receive financial and institutional backing.

Yet if the 20th century has taught us anything, it is that increased political pressure often triggers the emergence of anti-war texts, independent publishers, and underground literature (samizdat). In moments of historical rupture or catastrophe, writers inevitably find themselves in a position where they must bear witness—recording the era, testifying to its horrors, and refusing to forget its victims.

MR: In one of your latest contributions, “Самая темная ночь” (*The Darkest Night*, 2025) for the book *Nein!: Stimmen aus Russland gegen den Krieg* (*Nein!: Voices from Russia Against the War*, Lebedew 2025) edited by Sergej Lebedew you speak about January 2024 and the urgent

need to escape, to the point that your leg started to become responsive again despite the chronic condition affecting it. Indeed, constant movement seems to be the narrative thread of your life, as you cross borders, and borders cross through you.

Can you describe your experience of leaving Russia and whether you identify yourself as part of this latest wave of migrant Russian/Russophone writers?

ED: In truth, it was such a deeply traumatic experience that I still find it difficult to speak or write about it. In that sense, I believe the short story I wrote offers a fairly complete account of those events—it was, in fact, written during that very same period, while I was in Istanbul.

For me, prose became a way to process that experience. My third novel will, in many ways, explore the themes of migration and homelessness. Leaving felt like a raw and aching wound; for a long time, I dreamed of home, and even now, I sometimes wake up surprised not to find myself “back there.”

As for the second part of your question, I think it’s important to view this process from a distance: does this so-called “wave” exist, and who defines it? In some ways, I am part of it; in others, I truly don’t know where this path will lead—or how, or if, it will end.

MR: Finally, according to the information I found, it appears that you now live in Germany. How do you feel about your life there, and how do you envision your future projects, including the project of constructing your own life, your literary work, and the combination of the two that your creative work so brilliantly expresses? Also, in which languages “do you exist now”?

ED: By a twist of fate, I ended up in Germany, and it has been far from easy. On the one hand, I found myself in a space of silence—without the language, unknown, and seemingly unnecessary. For most of my time here, I have lived in very difficult everyday conditions.

On the other hand, I haven’t lost hope. I’m learning German, and it has already begun to seep into my poetry. If all goes well, a German edition of my first novel will be published this autumn. I like to believe that this is just the beginning of my creative journey in this new place.

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Materials and Discussions