
Gender and the Episteme: (E)Masculation as a Tool of the Colonial Patriarchy

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In his personal narrative “The Failure,” Aydos Amantay (b. 1989) explores his multicultural identity as both a Kazakh and a native Beijinger. Like other Indigenous minorities in China, the Kazakhs of northern Xinjiang have faced strong assimilative pressure since the 1950s. Today, the imposition of Chinese language schools and the continuation of Han settlement programs in the region remain central to the state’s systematic push for assimilation. Set in the late 2000s, Amantay’s memoir reflects on his time in a small Kazakh community in Xinjiang serving as a Chinese instructor in a local high school. However, despite his initial excitement when—by a “stroke of good fortune”¹—he is given the opportunity to return to the grasslands and reconnect with his heritage, the experience does the exact opposite, reorienting his identity away from his roots. To Amantay, Kazakh women are helpless objects without agency, destined to do nothing more in life than marry and assume the burden of representing their “entire

¹ Aydos Amantay, “The Failure,” in *Chutzpah!: New Voices from China*, ed. Ning Ou and Austin Woerner (Oklahoma: University of Oklahoma Press, 2015), 109.

people.”² They are simple “nonsensical little girl[s]”³ with no other options or desires in life besides the ones offered and fulfilled within the limited scope of their village. These beliefs are so ingrained in Amantay that he conflates the girls with the physical landscape of northern Xinjiang, massing them together into a single indistinguishable and inanimate entity: “whenever [he] smelled that [grass] odor, [he] thought of Kazakh girls.”⁴ Regarding his heritage in this way allows Amantay to distance himself from what he perceives as Kazakh deficiency while ostensibly embracing his Indigenous identity. His desire to remain apart from the Kazakhs is also evident in the way he remains adamant that he is only in Xinjiang “as a traveler.”⁵ However, for all his best efforts to maintain this manufactured separation between himself and his indigeneity, he still feels inadequate—particularly when his hands are deemed to be “Just like a girl’s!”⁶ by the local Kazakhs. Altogether, he attempts to reconcile his incongruous thoughts and actions by emotionally, psychologically, and physically appropriating Aygelin, a young Kazakh girl who becomes infatuated with him during his stay. In doing so, Amantay projects his own feelings of emasculation that he has developed while living in Beijing on Aygelin, leveraging the power imbalance between himself and her to reinforce his perception of her lack of agency and affirm his own superiority as a male Beijinger.

Having grown up as a Kazakh in Beijing, Amantay is both assimilated into and shunned from Beijing’s urban landscape. Ironically, these two opposing forces push him towards the same end: his indoctrination into Chinese standards of masculinity. On the one hand, he thinks of himself as the quintessential Beijing man: “life in Beijing was fairly boring. On the weekends, my girlfriend and I went either to the bar and café street, Nanluoguxiang, or to the 798 Art

² —. 135.

³ —. 118.

⁴ —. 119.

⁵ —. 109.

⁶ Amantay, 117.

District. Or we went out for coffee. Life was so bland that we had to replace one kind of boredom with another.”⁷ To the average person, Amantay’s life sounds picturesque to a fault. He is the embodiment of the modern Chinese man—a consumer of the highest order. As professors Geng Song and Tracy K. Lee argue, “consumption marks status discursively and defines the identity of this social group [the Chinese middle class].”⁸ They contend that the externalization of one’s consumption is an essential component in the construction of the modern middle-class Chinese man. This man is financially stable, has good and tempered taste, maintains a high quality of life, and perhaps most importantly, always “gets the girl.” Song and Lee further maintain that “beautiful women are not only rewards for successful men but also an important indicator of their status.”⁹ This masculine paradigm is evident in Amantay’s description of his life in Beijing, as he wastes no time in informing readers of his relationship status: dating. In doing so, he upholds these Chinese standards of masculinity by commodifying his girlfriend—who remains nameless and faceless throughout the remainder of the story—and reduces her to just another thing that constitutes his identity as a Beijinger. On weekends, they eat and drink everyday delicacies like coffee and alcohol. Amantay is careful to point out that they do not gorge—they are not mindless and greed-driven like the ““explosive rich””¹⁰—but he is also shameless in flaunting the specific swanky areas they haunt, such as Nanluoguxiang and the 798 Art District. To him, it is the “boredom” of refined indulgence that provides safety and comfort through conformity. Although unfulfilling, Amantay still relishes his mastery over this “boring” lifestyle since he is an ethnic minority in a Chinese city.

⁷ —. 111.

⁸ Geng Song and Tracy K. Lee, “Consumption, Class Formation and Sexuality: Reading Men’s Lifestyle Magazines in China,” *The China Journal*, no. 64 (2010): 161, accessed November 10, 2022, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/20749251>.

⁹ Song and Lee, 169.

¹⁰ —. 166.

In spite of his adaptive capabilities, however, Amantay is not immune to the effects of being a Kazakh in Beijing. He recalls, “Whenever I walked alone down the streets or narrow alleys of Beijing, old women would often smile at me and say, ‘Welcome to China!’”¹¹ In three words from a stranger, all the time and effort Amantay has put into curating his image is undone. As Professor Louisa Schein contends, the perceived “backwardness” of China’s Indigenous minorities is inadvertently conflated with or viewed as a byproduct of femininity.¹² During interactions like these, Amantay is marginalized to the “narrow alleys” of a giant city—a city in which he does not belong—with no means of escaping the confrontation or the cognitive dissonance that accompanies it. Moreover, he has come to associate such comments as coming from the mouths of “old women.” As a result, the framework by which he deconstructs these moments is mired by colonial emasculation. It is a double slap in the face: first, his greatest flaw—his Kazakh heritage—is magnified tenfold in his mind. Second, this flaw is pointed out by none other than old Chinese women, individuals who are not only frail and wizened, but who—according to Chinese standards of masculinity—should hold no power over true modern Chinese men. Thus, in these moments, Amantay is both stripped of his Chinese masculinity and reminded of his status as the ethnic “other” within Beijing. In fact, he is not only emasculated, but feminized. Schein further posits that the feminization of the ethnic “other” is a direct result of the commodification of marginalized women who are often forced to serve as poster girls of their respective ethnic groups.¹³ Images of these women, almost always dressed in their traditional garb, are then circulated and objectified among broader Chinese society: “Not surprisingly, the opposition of modern-backward civilized-wild [are] tellingly revealed in the predictable

¹¹ Amantay, 121.

¹² Louisa Schein, “Gender and Internal Orientalism in China.” *Modern China* 23, no. 1 (1997): 89, accessed November 10, 2022, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/189464>.

¹³ Schein, 75.

association of the minority woman with nature.”¹⁴ Building off Schein’s idea, professor Anders Burman maintains that Indigenous women are even objectified within their own communities as “custodians of tradition,”¹⁵ further exacerbating the conflation of femininity with Indigenous inferiority. Despite his sanctimonious indignation at the belief that Kazakhs do nothing but “sing and dance,”¹⁶ Amantay still fails to recognize the ethnic slights he faces for the baseless and emasculating stereotypes they are. Consequently, he continues to internalize the narrative of Kazakh deficiency while clinging ever tighter to Chinese standards of masculinity.

Unfortunately, Amantay’s ignorance of—and subsequent failure to reject—the epistemic violence perpetrated by the Chinese against Kazakhs enables his own complicity in and perpetuation of said violence. Although Amantay claims he wants to reconnect with his Kazakh roots, his intentions are short lived and cosmetic as he begins to experience something he has never had in Beijing: power. This revelation, in conjunction with his resentment towards the discrimination he has faced as a result of his heritage, begins to manifest in his thoughts and actions. As defined by the late philosopher Michel Foucault, an episteme is the unconscious system by which knowledges are or are not deemed to be acceptable by a broader society.¹⁷ Epistemic violence, then, is the active repression of “inferior” systems of knowledges. Professor Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak expands on this idea, asserting, “The clearest available example of such epistemic violence is the remotely orchestrated, far-flung, and heterogeneous project to constitute the colonial subject as Other.”¹⁸ In his first encounter with Aygelin, Amantay “others”

¹⁴ —. 75.

¹⁵ Anders Burman, “Gender, Politics, and the State: Indigenous Women,” *The Wiley Blackwell Encyclopedia of Gender and Sexuality Studies*, (2016): 3, accessed November 10, 2022, <https://doi.org/10.1002/9781118663219>.

¹⁶ Amantay, 125.

¹⁷ Michel Foucault, *The Order of Things: An Archaeology of the Human Sciences* (London, England: Routledge, 2010).

¹⁸ Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, “Can the Subaltern Speak?,” in *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture*, ed. Cary Nelson and Lawrence Grossberg (London: Macmillan, 1988), 24-25.

her by infantilizing her. Although he is just five years older than her, he provides the following characterization: “She was wearing a skirt with a floral print that was too loud for its own good and a shirt that was somewhere between pink and purple. Two glowing cheeks in a baby-fresh face.”¹⁹ Clad in pinks and purples with a “baby-fresh face,” she is—in his mind—the picture of innocence and naivete. He does not bother to humanize or individualize her. Furthermore, in describing her skirt pattern as “too loud for its own good,” Amantay alludes to his more general belief that Aygelin is incapable of making beneficial judgements and decisions for herself. Consequently, unbeknownst to him, she becomes a broader symbol for ““a whole set of knowledges that have been disqualified as inadequate...naive knowledges...beneath the required level of cognition or scientificity.”²⁰ The implications of this are profound. On a preliminary level, the disqualification of Indigenous knowledges for being “inadequate” further emasculates Kazakhs’ standing within Chinese social hierarchies. On a deeper, secondary level though, this disqualification also takes away the sole means by which “true” Kazakhs—those who have not assimilated to Chinese standards—can express themselves. Particularly since Indigenous epistemes are feminized by the ethnic majority—that is, the colonizer or imperialist—Indigenous women are doubly oppressed. Moreover, they are left without any form of recourse: as Burman contends, “male dominance and the subordination of women are conceived by many as innate components of the dominant cultures imposed on Indigenous societies by means of colonialism.”²¹ Thus, the institution of masculine knowledge structures strips Indigenous women of their voices. Notably, Aygelin is also literally stripped of her voice throughout the story due to the language barrier between herself and Amantay.

¹⁹ Amantay, 112.

²⁰ Spivak, 25.

²¹ Burman, 4.

Amantay continues to suppress Aygelin's agency throughout the rest of his stay in Xinjiang and even after he returns home to Beijing. Driven by the exoticism of her character, his own Chinese standards of masculinity, and his supposed desire to reconnect with his cultural roots, he appropriates her as his own by fetishizing her. In doing so, he takes away her agency as an individual with a purpose beyond fulfilling his own emotional and psychological needs. Amantay is able to justify this relationship with Aygelin because—in his mind—she is “[his] entire people.”²² As such, she conveniently enables him to compartmentalize his Kazakh identity into one bite-size piece while also not being an individual with any real emotional and psychological needs or desires. Much as Lydia Liu asserts that the narrator in Lu Xun's “Regret for the Past” manipulates his dead girlfriend's, Zijun, inability to express herself for his own benefit,²³ so does Amantay. Aygelin, being the ethnic other, is unable to communicate in a meaningful way within the confines of the colonial episteme in which Amantay lives and recounts his story; in this sense, she is like Zijun. However, when Aygelin develops feelings for Amantay and decides to act on them—getting all dolled up and visiting him in his room one night—he rejects her. Yet even as he denies her emotional desires, he still gratifies his own: “It was the first time I'd ever seen her with her face so clean and made up. My heart quivered, and I realized she was actually quite pretty.”²⁴ The cruelty of exploiting her personal agency and then refusing to bear the burden of the consequences only further detracts from Aygelin's agency. Confused, hurt, but undeterred, she continues to express her love for Amantay right up until the end of his trip—all to no avail. Upon returning to Beijing, Amantay is thrown back into a world in which he is the ethnic other. Though he grieves for the loss of Aygelin, he does so not because

²² Amantay, 135.

²³ Lydia He Liu, “The Deixis of Writing in the First Person,” in *Translingual Practice: Literature, National Culture, and Translated Modernity; China, 1900-1937* (California: Stanford Univ. Press, 1999) 168.

²⁴ Amantay, 120.

she is a person for whom he cares, but rather because she is a symbol of the person he might otherwise be if he were not Kazakh. He reflects, “I love you, Aygelin, but this is the world we live in. It doesn’t care that a man left you and went to Beijing. None of it should have been that way.”²⁵ In the same way Liu argues that the narrator in “Regret for the Past” “conveys a profound sense of futility”²⁶ at the end of the story, Amantay characterizes his own situation with Aygelin as futile. In doing so, he is able to manipulate the essence of Aygelin into something that affirms his own internal narrative of epistemic superiority while also minimizing the inconvenient fact that he is Kazakh. He allows himself to continue loving her without committing to her or the indigeneity inherent to her identity. Insofar as he is a man from Beijing, he does not have to take responsibility for the violences he has perpetrated because—within the colonial episteme—they are not violences: they are simply facts of life. Therefore, his performative grief over the fact that they can never be together is little more than another way to exploit her silence.

In essence, the intrinsically gendered nature of the colonial episteme enables its own perpetuation. Given the precondition that Indigenous groups are generally placed under tremendous assimilative pressure, accessibility to knowledges deemed “valuable” by the ethnic majority becomes essential to the question of survival in every sense of the word—on a practical and personal level. Amantay serves as a textbook example of the egregious gendered effect that accessibility to the colonial episteme has on Indigenous peoples’ lives. As a Kazakh raised in Beijing, he has been subject to Chinese intellectual structures his whole life. These structures promote his indoctrination into broader Chinese society by relentlessly imposing the notion of Kazakh deficiency upon him—a gendered notion that simultaneously renders the ethnic other as

²⁵ —, 143.

²⁶ Liu, 170.

feminine and the dominant group as masculine. As a result, he is able to express himself within mainstream knowledge structures—unlike Aygelin, who does not have access to these structures as an Indigenous woman. This accessibility enables Amantay to find empowerment by embodying the lifestyle of the modern Chinese man and being an individual in his own right. In doing so however, his identity becomes predicated on the repression of his Indigeneity as a feminized and inferior collection of knowledges—and therein lies the true tragedy. Social politics is not a zero-sum game played by hollow pawns; there are real human consequences to the epistemes in which people live, learn, and interact. Hence, in an age where self-expression is accorded increasing importance in all aspects of life, the issue of decolonizing these epistemes is more important than ever.

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