

# IDENTITY IN POST-SOVIET ERA – BASED ON THE NOVEL “KHADIJAH, NOTES OF A SUICIDE BOMBER”, BY MARINA AKHMEDOVA



**Bulbul James**  
Research Scholar  
Centre of Russian Studies  
Jawaharlal Nehru University  
New Delhi  
bulbul.james@gmail.com

**Abstract:** The breakup of USSR has created an identity crisis in Russia. Before the collapse, the U.S.S.R was considered as the leader of the Communist revolution universally and was a multicultural and multinational state. However, soon after the breakup of Soviet Union, the Russians were faced with the question “Where do we belong?”. They struggled to find out what ideology they should follow, where and how do they fit in the world spectrum and most importantly “Who are we?” The problem of identity crisis arose not just due to the need to redefine the idea of “Us” based on the newly formed political, social and geographical boundaries but also due to the rising ideological conflict as well as increase in geopolitical competition. A strong wave of nationalism engulfed the Northern Caucasus regions after the collapse of the Soviet Union and caused several regional conflicts. The Russian government was not able to establish peace in these regions and the worsening situation provoked the youth of these regions to join local and global terrorist movements. Not only this, there has been a sharp rise in the number of suicide bombers in these radical terrorist groups, which include women folk too. Most of the women suicide bombers are widows, who have lost their closed ones, especially husband or children in the violent conflicts.

It is to be noted that the main driving force which drives these men and women to join terrorist organizations is not only the threat to religion or nationalism, but also the need to protect their identity. This article explores the problem of identity crisis which arose in Russia due to the collapse of the Soviet Union. We have based this article on the novel *Khadijah, Notes of a Suicide Bomber* by Marina Akhmedova (2011) wherein the writer portrays the emotional, philosophical and mental turmoil faced by the main protagonists due to the breakup of USSR and how they deal with the problem of identity crisis.

**Keywords:** Identity, Modernization, Northern caucus, terrorism, Suicide Bombers, City life, Village life

Identity is the definition of existence and belongingness. It is a very complex term and cannot be created for once and all. It constantly changes as a result of the process of social transformation and interaction.

In psychological respect, the definition of identity depends upon the notions of I, ego, self or personality that are used like synonymous terms in social sciences, such as psychology, sociology and cultural anthropology. Erickson defines it both as “the permanent self-identification within the inside of the person and the reciprocal relationship of a principal character which always share with the others” (Erickson, 1967, p. 17). For Wheelis, it is “the feeling of the unity and wholeness which is based on the harmonization of the behaviour / actions and the value judgements of the people” (Wheelis, 1958, p. 27). For Fromm, it is “the feeling which is required to be an individual and obtained by having the identification with the other groups and persons” (Fromm, 1955, p. 134).

Identity is largely concerned with the question “who are you?” Our parents, friends, teachers, and the media help shape our identities. While this happens from birth, most people reach a stage in adolescence where maturing cognitive abilities and increased social awareness lead them to begin to reflect on who they are. This begins a lifelong process of thinking about who we are now, who we were before, and who we will become.

Identity can be of various forms i.e. it can be either cultural, ethnic, national etc., but according to writers such as Helga Kotthoff and Helen Spencer-Oatey, our identity is an important component of our self concept and it can be primarily of two types: personal and social. Personal identities include the components of self that are primarily intrapersonal and connected to our life experiences. Our social identities are the components of self that are derived from involvement in social groups with which we are interpersonally committed. Personal identities can undergo changes quite often due to the fact that as an individual grows, he can have many new experiences and acquires new hobbies and develops new interests. However, on the other hand, social identities do not change that often as they are more time consuming and require the individual to be interpersonally invested (Kotthoff Helga; Spencer-Oatey Helen, 2009).

The concept of identity is also fragile; it can be broken or strengthened depending on the circumstances. Conflicts cause destruction and disruption in various ways including that of an individual's identity. For instance in Russia, after the breakup of the Soviet Union, the belief of the Soviet identity was completely broken and distorted.

Prior to the collapse, the U.S.S.R was a multinational, multicultural state with the ideological mission to be the vanguard of a worldwide Communist revolution. The breakup of Soviet Union in 1991 plunged its former citizens into a profound identity crisis. Afterwards, the Russians foundered to find out who they were, what ideology they should embrace, and where they fit globally. The issue of Russia's identity is not a new phenomenon as the question “Who are we” has been addressed and raised by many Russian intellectuals and political leaders over many years. It especially affected the citizens of the 15 newly formed states as the people were faced with the dilemma of where they actually belong. The demographic distance between the Russian heartland and the other Soviet Union republics, gave rise to the issue of ‘We-They’.

Due to the dissolution of USSR, ethnic groups faced a serious identity crisis mainly because of the unstable fluctuating national identity. The breakup of USSR caused a major blow to the identity of the former Soviet citizens - political, ideological, religious, ethnic, etc. The Post-Soviet society is characterized by rapid and deep changes all across political, economic and cultural

levels. The identity crisis affects the ethnic groups of the former USSR to different degrees. Two groups are hit particularly hard: politically, the Russians (as the former dominant nation of a defunct state), and culturally, the various Diaspora groups since the unitary Soviet state is now being replaced by nationalizing states in which they stick out as cultural anomalies. The twenty five million Russians living outside the Russian Federation, 'the new Russian diaspora', straddle both these categories, and might be said to have received the blow of the post-Soviet identity crisis two-fold (Kolstø Pål, 1996, pp. 609-639). This group is the subject of this article.

It may be said that the former Soviet citizens have to make a choice between three types of identities: identifying with the culture dominant in the external homeland which is Russia; developing a new but still a core Russian self understanding, and lastly identifying with a culture which is dominant in the newly formed (residence) state.

This article is an attempt to understand how the dissolution of USSR led to the problem of identity crisis in the North Caucasian regions particularly Dagestan. The analysis on this topic will be based on Marina Akhmedova's novel "*Khadijah, Notes of a Suicide Bomber* (2011)" which describes the story of a young girl who lives the Northern Caucasus regions of Dagestan.

These regions have often been in news over a long period of time due to the constant warfare and terrorist attacks in opposition to the Russian government. "Conflicts in the former Soviet Union (FSU) have often been framed as struggles of emerging national and ethnic identities, territorial disputes, aspirations for self determination, and the tug-of-war between the former republics' thirst for sovereignty and Russia's desire to maintain its "sphere of privileged interests". (Katya Migacheva, Bryan Frederick, 2018, p. xi)

One of the most prominent issues which arose in the former Soviet regions due to the breakup, as noted by sociologists, was identity crisis. Zaid Abdulagatov, the Dagestani sociologist, explains about the paradoxical duality of the young generation's consciousness: during surveys, more than half of young Dagestanis talk about belonging to an Eastern culture, based on Islam. "When asking them which laws are higher: Sharia or secular, the majority says Sharia, but they do not obey it themselves!". The changes taking place in Russia as a whole, including anti-Caucasian sentiment, further push young Dagestanis to search for themselves in all-Russia society, thus further sharpening the already existing identity crisis (A. Yarlykapov, 2011, pp. 303-325).

The breakup of Soviet Union caused a sharp rise in terrorism in northern Caucasus regions. As Sufian N. Zhemukov points out, the inability of the Russian government to provide a solution to the rising instability in these regions has provoked the youth of these regions to join local and global terrorist movements. "Kremlin's actions have escalated the situation in the region by creating a notion of an ongoing civil war between the regime and the citizens and a civilization chasm between the citizens of other parts of Russia and the North Caucasus. These deepening divides have provoked many young people to join local and global terrorist movements" (Sufian N. Zhemukhov, 2018, pp 35-37).

The collapse of Soviet Union propelled the Russian writers of Post Soviet period to search for new values and new identities – at various levels, individual, societal, regional, state, ethnic or national. The writers base their literary works on the traumatic experiences of citizens of the

former soviet republics. The main protagonists are people who are in search of their real self, their real identity.

The present article is based on Marina Akhmedova's novel "*Khadijah, Notes of a Suicide Bomber* (2011)" (Marina Akhmedova, 2011, *Khadijah, Notes of a Suicide Bomber*), which chronicles the life of a young girl, Khadijah, who lives in a remote village of Dagestan. Marina Akhmedova is a Moscow-based journalist and writer. She is a staff reporter at the popular *Russky Reporter* magazine. Her stories focus on social and cultural issues. This novel was nominated for the Russian Booker, Russia's most prestigious literary award.

The novel holds a special place in the post soviet literature primarily due to the fact that it explores the issue of identity crisis through the portrayal of the main protagonist, Khadijah, as well as her husband Makhach. If, on one hand, Khadijah is compelled to leave her traditional village life behind to start a new life in the cruel fast paced city, and later on manipulated to become a suicide bomber, then, on the other hand, there is Makhach, Khadijah's husband, who also in the quest to find his own real self gives up his family life to become a terrorist. Through the story of Khadijah and Makhach, the author provides an insight into the problem of identity crisis faced by the youth of the conflict afflicted areas of Northern Caucasus and elaborates on how the breakup of USSR aggravates the ethnic, political and religion conflicts in these regions.

Akhmedova gives a profound description of a girl's quest to discover her identity, her real self and whether she is able to finally find who she actually is. Through Khadijah's portrayal, Akhmedova also attempts to shed light on the psychology of a suicide bomber, taking the reader through the myriad emotions which a suicide bomber goes through before taking the final step.

It is a multifaceted novel which can be regarded as a documentary about Caucasian village life and its variety of customs and traditions, but on the other hand, it's a narrative about the journey of a girl from her village, untouched by the winds of modernization, to the city and finally to Moscow where she discovers the harsh reality of world.

Besides detailing Khadijah's life, one more aspect of the novel, which presents itself from the title, is the topic of suicide bombers and tries to understand what goes inside the head of a suicide bomber who decides to take the most devastating step of his/her life. It raises the question of: What makes a woman, whose very nature is to give life, not take away, agree to do this terrible act?

Akhmedova's novel is a tale of absorbing interest which leaves a significant impact on the readers. It's a beautifully written first-person account which makes the readers sink deep into the inner world of the protagonist, Khadijah, a world full of archaic taboos, prejudices, myriad customs and rituals, medieval Islamic traditions that have survived till this time of fast paced modernization. The highly detailed and vivid descriptions of life in a distant Muslim region compel us to think that somewhere these rigid dogmatic notions and traditions would fade under the pressure of globalization but unfortunately, their end will result in violence and anger.

The novel is written in the form of a diary which Khadijah has maintained since her childhood, wherein she documents her day to day life, her deepest emotions, doubts and feelings. The

diary holds the key to Khadijah's world; her family, her village and the city life. She is an orphan who lives in the house of her overbearing maternal grandmother and her frail, weak and discreet mother. Her father died in an accident at work, and his relatives refused to provide shelter to her mother and her child since it was not a boy. This forces her mother to return to her parents' house, situated in a remote North Caucasian region of Dagestan. After a few years, Khadijah's mother dies too as she cannot bear the pressure of getting remarried again. Khadijah is brought up by her grandparents. She has a volatile relationship with her grandmother as she is constantly criticized and is made to feel like a burden.

Khadijah's usual life takes a drastic turn when she turns 17. Her middle class relatives take her away to the capital city of Makhachkala, and get her enrolled into the university with one and only aim of finding her a better match since a wife with university degrees is a prized catch. All of a sudden, her simple monotonous village life takes a sharp turn when she finds herself in the whirlwind and unknown city life far away from her secluded village life. She goes through huge emotional transformations and falls deeply in love with her classmate, Makhach. The new found love compels her to take the unthinkable step of eloping away with him, getting married without betrothal and without the permission of relatives, naively hoping that they will be finally accepted. Unfortunately, Khadijah's happiness is short lived as her young husband, who is a member of the anti-government Islamist guerrilla group, is killed by Russians, during a 'cleansing raid'. He leaves behind a pregnant Khadijah who is extremely vulnerable. Still mourning over her husband's death, she falls under the influence of her husband's friends who are member of extremist group. Khadijah is told that the only way to acquire peace and overcome the pain of the tragedy is to strictly adhere to the Islamic code of conduct. But the times are tough, the war is on and young men leave their lands and families behind to fight the Russians, while women fulfil their duty by becoming suicide bombers. The Mullah tells Khadijah about a much faster way to reconcile with her beloved and that's to give up her life in a suicide attack; that she should oppose to the evil which destroyed her happiness by taking lives of Russians who took her husband's life. Khadijah becomes a pawn in the hands of the more powerful and comes to Moscow to perform the act. The novel ends with the description of Khadijah entering Moscow metro, during the rush hour, and wearing an explosive belt under clothes.

The village life in Dagestan is archaic. Although the whole world seems to be engrossed in the wave of globalization and modernity, the region where novel is set seems to be completely cut-off from reality. The rigid traditions and customs remain intact and untouched by the modern world, patterns of life and thought processes are such deeply embedded that it feels as if the village is untouched by progress.

Time stood still here, and everything is exactly the same as it was a few generations ago. Superstitions and rituals, daily chores and duties to keep the husband and his family happy, honor, pride and shame go hand in hand. From the very beginning, Khadijah's world revolves around how to become a dutiful bride and never to go against the customs of society. Her angst of not being able to live as per her wishes is echoed in the lines, <Grandmother so often said that we would be ashamed of the people. I think people just come to us, to check whether we live correctly or not. And if it is wrong, we should be ashamed of them and I always thought - we do not go to anybody, we do not check what they are doing. Let them do what they want,

it's their home > (Marina Akhmedova, 2011, Khadijah, Notes of a Suicide Bomber, p 10). As one can see, the girl is always under the pressure to be obedient, to be right.

<There is nothing in the house to provide moral support; there are no books at all only the Quran as grandmother thinks «reading books is not required. If you become smart, no one will marry you> (Ibid., p 40)

Hence, what opens before us is the narrowness of the human mind regarding the fate of a woman. It's like a clockwork program- first comes marriage, followed by looking after household and then children. Today when the whole world has been engulfed in the wave of modernization and globalization, we are presented the ordeal of women who are still living under the cruel chains of ancient and suffocating customs and rituals. Marina Akhmedova captures the lives of women who even now live in backward times, having no connection with their self, who live as per the rules dictated by the society. There is no concept of freedom, no concept of self identity. Khadijah's life is so secluded that even if her young mind raises questions, searches for answers, she is constantly rebuked and reproached.

When Khadijah moves to the city, she is happy; at least she will have a way to carve her own identity. Who knows she might be able to study and live on her own terms and conditions? But unfortunately, the city life changes things, only superficially. Her aunt lives a comfortable life but it's all pretentious. Khadijah is sent to university, but for the only purpose that a degree will help her catch a husband: <"Why a diploma?" She asked. "You cannot put a diploma to your husband's relatives. Give them a good dowry." - Still you should have a diploma! So I tell you, how else! Now in the city, you don't know, everyone wants the bride to have a diploma. She will get married, will not work anyway but still an educated bride is a prestige> (Ibid., p 07 ).

In this world, Khadijah is just like an object which is meant to be sold off. Even in the so-called modern world, Khadijah is like a bird in the cage. She is warned not to wear jeans, not to talk to boys. It seems as if only her surroundings have changed, i.e from the village, she has arrived in the city, but the harsh customs and traditions follow her. As Khadijah's tells about her grandmother's views, <She believed that the institute I will communicate with the guys and will get spoiled > (Ibid., pg 40)

All around Khadijah, exists a fake world where people unabashedly flaunt their wealth; everything can be bought and sold. But what turns out to be completely real for Khadijah is her love for Makhach. As per Khadijah, this was the only way to break out from the hopelessness surrounding her. Makhach is the son of a very rich general, but he himself is burdened by the unlawful deeds of his father, who has built his material wealth through fraud, theft and bribery. Makhach feels guilty and wants a way out. An escape is provided by the so called "fighters of purity in faith" (guerrilla organization), who compel Makhach to hate his father and all the wrong doers.

The author through her portrayal of Khadijah describes the tragic conditions which compel women, who are mothers, sisters or widows of the martyrs, to become future suicide bombers and in what way "the cleansing of minds takes place." These women are in immense psychological distress, and are vulnerable and therefore, they can be easily manipulated in the name of religion. They are promised eternal heaven and reunion with their near ones. <One

movement of your finger - and you are in paradise – I hear Aslan’s voice in my ears> (Ibid., pg 144). For these people, who have lost everything, they finally agree to take this step, and become instruments of death.

Khadijah agrees to perform the terror attack with only one hope that this is her way to reunite with her husband. She thinks about the innocent, unborn baby, but Fate gives her no other option. She was alone, abandoned by her husband’s family, and was made to feel like a shame on the society. The only voice that she could hear was of God, but unfortunately that voice was also manipulated and distorted by the people surrounding her. The tragedy of the unfortunate girl evokes acute pain and hatred for her hypocritical “owners” and towards those who take advantage of her misery and use it to create terror. Khadijah is, in reality, a pawn, a puppet in the hands of these people, for the simple fact that she could not ever decide for her life and her decisions. Her short life was never her own.

Khadijah and Makhach are caught in turmoil to find where do they belong and lose their lives in the struggle to search and establish their real identities.

### **Conclusion**

After the downfall of the Soviet empire, all the newly independent states had to set out on a journey of nation building which comprised of giving a definition to the question of “Who are we” and nurturing the national identity of the citizens i.e their sense of belonging to a distinct community and state building. Most of the newly formed republics till today have been struggling to put an end to destruction and disharmony which was caused by the breakup of USSR. The people living in these regions tend to become emotionally vulnerable and they have a strong need to secure and preserve their identity and roots. During these troubled times, innocent people fall prey to the devious plans of extremist groups which offer a new identity based on religious faith and higher spiritual values.

In addition to this, quite a few regions, in the Post Soviet space, face enormous social problems wherein the local population does not see opportunities to improve their lives, and it becomes easier to talk about great injustice of the state, and call for “real fighters” in the name of religion- even though no religion in the world supports or calls for bloodshed and violence.

The main characters of Marina Akhmedova’s novel, Makhach and Khadijah, are prey of the changing volatile world, deeply affected by the collapse of the Soviet Union. They both suffer from a severe identity crisis which makes them take extreme steps of ending their lives. Akhmedova, through their portrayal, shows how innocent people are convinced that acquiring arms and killing is the only way to attain heaven. They belong to the young generation whose consciousness is easy to manipulate precisely because of the social and political injustice and moral and spiritual emptiness.

“Many students of Russian nationalism agree that Russians--as the traditionally dominant imperial group--have had only a vague ethnic awareness and have identified primarily with the state, rather than their ethnic group. This follows from theories that relate the rise of nationalism to the emergence in a modernizing multi-ethnic state of a single standardized culture that allows even perfect strangers to easily get along in formal contexts. Those who, for whatever reasons, cannot easily adopt this new culture or who are simply excluded from it by

the dominant group, are put in the humiliating position of a second-rate citizen struggling with hostile bureaucracy. These individuals become acutely aware of the difference between the standard culture and their own--that is, they become nationalists" (Eduard Ponarin, 1999, p 3).

## References

1. Ericson, E.H. The Problem of Ego Identity. In *Identity and Anxiety*. ed. M. R. Stein, New York: The Free Press. 1967.
2. Wheelis, A.B. *The Quest for Identity*. New York: 1958.
3. Hüsamettin İnaç and Feyzullah Ünal. The Construction of National Identity in Modern Times: Theoretical Perspective. *International Journal of Humanities and Social Sciences*, Vol. 3 No. 11. June 2013. Pp 223-231
4. Kotthoff Helga; Spencer-Oatey Helen. *Handbook of intercultural communication*. Berlin ; New York : Mouton de Gruyter. 2009. <https://open.lib.umn.edu/communication/part/chapter-8-culture-and-communication/> Accessed 20.09.2019
5. Kolstø, Pål (1996) 'The new Russian diaspora - an identity of its own? Possible identity trajectories for Russians in the former Soviet Republics', *Ethnic and Racial Studies*, 19 (3), 609-639
6. Migacheva Katya, Frederick Bryan. *Religion, Conflict and Stability in the former Soviet Union*. RAND Corporation, Santa Monica, California. 2018.
7. A.A. Yarlykapov, "Novoe islamskoe dvizhenie na Severnom Kavkaze: vzgliad etnografa," in: *Rasy i narody: sovremennye etnicheskie i rasovye problemy*, Nauka Publishers, Moscow, 2006, Issue 31, pp. 205-229; M. Shterin, A. Yarlykapov, "Reconsidering Radicalisation and Terrorism: The New Muslims Movement in Kabardino-Balkaria and its Path to Violence," *Religion, State and Society (Routledge)*, Vol. 39, Nos. 2/3, 2011, pp. 303-325.
8. Sufian N. Zhemukhov. *The North Caucasus: How Islam and Nationalism Shaped Stability and Conflict in the Region*. Religion, Conflict and Stability in the former Soviet Union. RAND Corporation, Santa Monica, California. 2018. Pp 35-37
9. Khadijah, Notes of a Suicide Bomber/ <http://www.litmir.net/br> Accessed 15.09.2019
10. Eduard Ponarin. Security Implications of the Russian Identity Crisis. PONARS Policy Memo 64 European University at St. Petersburg. June 1999 [http://www.ponarseurasia.org/sites/default/files/policy-memos-pdf/pm\\_0064.pdf](http://www.ponarseurasia.org/sites/default/files/policy-memos-pdf/pm_0064.pdf) Accessed 25.09.2019



## Идентичность в постсоветской эпохе, на основе романа «Дневник смертницы. Хадижа», Мариной Ахмедовой

**Аннотация:** Распад СССР создал кризис идентичности в России. До распада, СССР считались лидером коммунистической революции повсеместно и являлись мультикультурным и мультинациональным государством. Но вскоре после распада Советского Союза, Россияне столкнулись с вопросом «Где мы принадлежим?». Они изо всех сил пытались выяснить, какой идеологии они должны следовать, где и как они вписываются в мировой спектр и, самое главное, «Кто мы? Проблема кризиса идентичности возникла не только из-за необходимости переопределения идеи «Мы» на основе вновь сформированных политических, социальных и географических границ, но также из-за восстания в идеологическом конфликте, а также усиления геополитической конкуренции. Сильная волна национализма охватила регионы Северного Кавказа после распада Советского Союза и вызвала несколько региональных конфликтов. Российское правительство не смогло установить мир в этих регионах, и ухудшение ситуации спровоцировало молодежь этих регионов присоединиться к местным и глобальным террористическим движениям. Кроме этого, резко возросло число террористов-смертников в этих радикальных террористических группах, в том числе и среди женщин. Большинство женщин-смертниц - вдовы, потерявшие закрытых, особенно мужа или детей, в результате насильственных конфликтов.

Следует отметить, что главной движущей силой, заставляющей этих мужчин и женщин вступать в террористические организации, является не только угроза религии или национализму, но и необходимость защищать их самобытность. В этой статье исследуется проблема кризиса идентичности, возникшего в России из-за распада Советского Союза. Мы основали эту статью на романе Хадижи «Записки смертника» Марины Ахмедовой (2011), в котором автор описывает эмоциональные, философские и психические потрясения, с которыми сталкиваются главные герои из-за распада СССР, и то, как они решают проблему кризиса личности.

**Ключевые слова:** идентичность, модернизация, Северный Кавказ, терроризм, самоубийцы, городская жизнь, деревенская жизнь