

Petra Hůlová's representation of Mongolian women in "All This Belongs to Me"

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In 2002, at the age of 21, the Czech writer Petra Hůlová published *Paměť mojí babičce* (In Memory of My Grandmother), introducing contemporary stories of five Mongolian women's lives to Czech readers. The work brought Hůlová commercial and critical success and was published in Alex Zucker's English translation as *All This Belongs to Me* in 2009. The unusual thematic choice of Mongolia for a Czech writer was understood in relation to Hůlová's academic background as a Mongolist and her experience of staying in Mongolia for one year. Hůlová had to repeatedly refute this common assumption that the novel was based on her knowledge and personal experiences in Mongolia. Instead, affirming that "[n]o one in Mongolia would have told me these things" (Bade 2013), Hůlová highlights that *All This Belongs to Me* is not a representation based on real people that she had encountered in Mongolia but a fictional account that she had created based upon the Czech society that she knew.

This interesting exchange between the writer and readers about how the story on Mongolia had been created is well captured in one interview. The interviewer Jan Velinger asserts, encapsulating Hůlová's statements: "[I]t's common knowledge that the characters weren't based on Mongols you met, but actually on Czechs, and Czech realities." Hůlová herself further explicates:

This book is my opinion in a certain time, now or a year ago, how the life, how the world is. And for me it is about the relations, about love, about disappointment, about bitterness, about such feelings, basic feelings for me, and in Mongolia I think life isn't polluted – maybe not the proper word – polluted by artificial phenomena like in Europe. Media, advertising, career maybe, so, if I set the story in a Czech setting, I couldn't avoid writing about such things. But I'm interested in that, and I wanted somehow to write a rough, simple story about what life means to me (Velinger 2003).

Underlined in this statement is Hůlová's belief that the Mongolian characters represented in the novel share universal realities of any human beings, be them Czechs or others. At the same time, however, Hůlová emphasizes that she wanted to examine these universal realities of human lives in their "unpolluted" forms, and Mongolia was chosen because it was a less modernized place where typical phenomena of capitalist culture are less evident.

This envisioning of Mongolia as a location where a European writer can have more freedom in exploring human nature and life in their uncomplicated forms, what-

ever those mean, reveals traditionally Orientalist reasoning regardless of the author's decent intention. Indeed, although Hůlová herself notes that the expression "unpolluted" can be problematic, using the word to describe the difference of Mongolian and Czech society, identifying Mongolia in contrast to Europe in this way should be considered as a typical Orientalist understanding of Asia. Naoki Sakai's lucid explanation of how Asia "as a sign [...] would be too arbitrary unless it is paradigmatically opposed to the West (or Europe)" can be helpful here in examining Hůlová's juxtaposition of Mongolia against Czechia. According to Sakai, Asia's "seeming reality depends on the very constitutive exclusivity, so that Western and Asian properties/proprieties are not attributable to the same substance." In short, "it is impossible to talk about Asia positively. Only as the negative of the West can one possibly address oneself as an Asian. Therefore to talk about Asia is invariably to talk about the West" (793). Hůlová's idea of Mongolia as a place that lacks what the Czech Republic has, and yet at the same time that reveals the same universal human nature and relations, discloses a European writer's quite romantic, thus possibly problematic understanding towards an Asian country.

Hůlová's interest as a writer in exploring human life in its "uncontaminated" form through Mongolian women should not be ethically judged. However, it is important to note that the position she holds as a European writer representing stories of Mongolia immediately bestows her with a dubious authority on the Mongolian women that she is representing. This authoritative power is not so much an individual choice one can opt to exercise as an automatically given privilege and bondage acquired just by being a part of the Eurocentric knowledge system of the world. We understand by now, inspired by Edward Said's groundbreaking work *Orientalism* (1978), followed by rich postcolonial theories for several decades, that this power of a Western writing voice representing what is considered non-Western calls for our careful scrutiny. In this context, Hůlová's desire to create Mongolian female characters and represent their world cannot be analyzed outside the history of the Western writing self's representation of Asia and its complicity with Orientalism. In the following, I will first discuss the historical tradition of the West's stereotypical representation of Asian women and consider Hůlová's complicity in the tradition through her act of representation of Mongolian women. Then, I will examine *All This Belongs to Me's* five Mongolian female characters' densely related narratives, all written from each woman's first person point of view, which upon close reading reveal their struggle to embrace and hand down traditional Mongolian ideals of women. In the final section, I will seek to further address questions related to Hůlová's complicity in Orientalism, attempting to consider whether Hůlová's representation of Mongolian female stories expands the West's desire for "coexistence and humanistic enlargement of horizons," not the will "to dominate for the purpose of control and external domination" (Said 2003, xix).

HŮLOVÁ'S IMAGINED MONGOLIAN WOMEN IN THE HISTORY OF WESTERN REPRESENTATIONS

All This Belongs to Me is narrated by five Mongolian female characters across three generations. The mother Alta and her three daughters and a granddaughter each give an account of their lives from the first-person point of view, creating a heteroglossia of Mongolian women's voices. As one interviewer rightfully notes, "any reader who might be expecting a romantic picture of distant Mongolia will be disappointed" because the portrayed five women's lives all reveal quite harsh realities of modern-day Mongolia (Vaughan 2013). It is true that Hůlová's portrayal of Mongolia is far from a blatant expression of familiar Orientalist stereotypes involving Genghis Khan or exotic nomads riding horses. However, considered in the historical context of the West's fascination with representing Asian women, Hůlová's creation of Mongolian female characters calls for a further examination.

The stereotypical representation of Asian women has a long history in the cross-cultural representational space of the West. Widespread images of Asian women in Western cultures have fluctuated between two extremes: Asian women as submissive and oppressed victims of patriarchal culture and/or highly sexualized and exploitable objects. These stereotypical images are well exemplified in one of the most well-known Asian female characters in the West, Kiku from Pierre Loti's *Madame Chrysanthème* (1887) who has been reborn again and again in the name of Madame Butterfly or Miss Saigon for over a century. These Japanese, Chinese, or sometimes Vietnamese women working as prostitutes have revealed invariably similar characteristics as docile yet at the same time exotic and sexually exploitable objects. Despite these female characters' different historical and cultural backgrounds, they all willingly live and die to serve the white men's desire and fantasy about Asian women. The Asian-American feminist Lynn Lu elucidates the stereotypical images that have been attached to Asian women for centuries:

It's no secret that the exotic mysterious of our sex have long held a tight grip on the Western (male) popular imagination. A parade of familiar stereotypes populates our cultural landscape: concubine, geisha girl, mail-order bride, dragon lady, lotus blossom, precious pearl. In this environment, Asian women thirst for realistic and three-dimensional images of ourselves that will not dissolve like mirages as we draw near (1999, 17).

As discussed by Lu, repeatedly circulated and consumed stereotypical images of Asian women have generated critical awareness against yet another reproduction of such Asian women's images created by Western writing subjects.

It could be argued that Hůlová's complicity in the tradition of Orientalism is most obvious in the very fact that she has created a Mongolian world where every female character suffers from various forms of gendered oppression of Mongolian culture. It is true that the female characters of *All This Belongs to Me* are divided into girls forced into prostitution in the capital city of Mongolia and mothers/housewives fulfilling heavy domestic duties in the steppe, reiterating historically popular stereotypical images of oppressed Asian women. This emphasis on Asian women's gendered oppression should be considered in relation to the tradition of Orientalism. It is so because as Kathleen Uno notes "Orientalism [...] has marked notions of Asian households,

resulting in an exaggeration of both their patriarchal character and the subordination of women” (2003, 43). Ironically, this Orientalist rendering of Asian patriarchal culture in the West has often been found in Western feminist approaches that highlight Asian women as beings “trapped in the earlier phase of the development of feminism (too familiar and thus either dismissed or condescendingly told what to do next)” as Shu-Mei Shih lucidly notes in her examination of unequal encounters between Western feminists and non-Western women. According to Shih, Western feminists have exerted “power of arbitrarily conferring difference and similarity on the non-Western woman” in various occasions of transnational encounters (2005, 77–78). This power enables Western scholars and writers to represent Asian women in the global representational space as sometimes similar to them yet in most of the time as inevitably different objects that are in needs of feminist development.

Hůlová’s recent interview by Mark Reynolds interestingly reveals the similar logic of “difference and similarity” in the nature of represented Mongolian women. Questioned about how she became to create a story about Mongolian women in the first place, she explains:

I just imagined I was a Mongolian woman, and tried to describe the world through her eyes [...] Nowadays I see it as a very problematic project: how could I dare to do this? What would I think if, I don’t know, a guy from Japan came to Prague for one year and then wrote a novel about being a Czech? [...] [B]ut for many people it was I think a persuasive description of a place they’d never been to. I think I grasped something universal, and it does tell you something about the place. It’s an amazing culture and I speak the language and have a certain insight into the place and the mentality, but it was a very courageous act and I wouldn’t be able to do anything like that anymore (Reynolds 2018).

Although she acknowledges possible epistemological dangers in representing Mongolian women as a Czech writer, she also believes that her representation of Mongolian women and culture had an appeal to Czech readers because of both universality and uniqueness found in the represented world of Mongolia.

Despite the introduced positive reviews, one cannot help but raise a question: if the represented world was modeled after a Czech society that Hůlová knows of and also after the universal characteristics of human beings, what does it mean that they are represented in the exteriority of Mongolian women? Two key words, universality and difference become crucial ideas in discussing Hůlová’s representation of Mongolian women and the possibility of non-exploitative Western representation of Asia. Is there any relation between the Mongolian difference and the popularity the novel acquired in Czech? Is there a chance that Czech readers were consuming stories of Mongolian difference in the form of poverty, patriarchal oppression, and thus backwardness of Asian culture in general? Or could it be argued that Hůlová succeeded in staging Mongolian women in the global representational space in ways that resist Orientalist consumption by appealing to the universality of human nature? In the following, I will attempt a close reading of *All This Belongs to Me* and in the process seek to consider these important yet difficult questions.

MONGOLIAN WOMEN'S DIFFERENCES AND UNIVERSALITY

The Mongolian female characters in *All This Belongs to Me* are largely divided into two groups: the ones who choose to venture into the capital city, Ulaanbaatar and the ones who maintain the life in their family *ger* (traditional tent or yurt) located in the Red Mountains. This division is interestingly overlapped with another overarching theme of the novel, which is the discrimination against racially mixed Mongolians. The ones who head for the city are racially mixed daughters, the half-Chinese Zaya and the half-Russian Nara, whom their mother had from her extramarital relationships. The Mongol mother Altar and the youngest daughter Oyuna, whom she had with her Mongol husband, take full control of the family's traditional household in the steppe. Since the novel is divided into six narratives told by five female characters from one family, male voices do not occupy any dominant positions in the narrative. Ironically, though, male characters exert tremendous power upon most family women of the narrative, resulting in dramatic changes in the women's lives throughout the text.

This male dominance is possible because most female characters have internalized the patriarchal value systems inflicted upon them in Mongolian society. Indeed, what is interesting to note is that even though Hůlová presents these women's struggling lives trapped under the Mongolian patriarchal ideology both in the city and the steppe, she does not present the characters as actively condemning or challenging such ideology. As shown in the title of the English translation "all this belongs to me", taken from Zaya's observation on her life as an old woman, most female characters in general strive to conform to their given lives. Notwithstanding the continuous sacrifices and suffering caused by gender inequality omnipresent in their Mongolian society, they reveal their desire to belong and strive to claim their positions in patriarchal family systems of Mongolia through marriage. The results of such representation of suffering yet conforming and even optimistic Mongolian female characters are manifold, one of them being the possible minimization of the impacts of the fully illustrated pitfalls of patriarchal Mongolian culture. As David Bade notes in his analysis of *All This Belongs to Me*, many reviewers indeed consider that the strength of the novel resides in the fact that "none of the narratives of the five women are laments of lost and destroyed women" (2013, 143).

However, the "stunning affirmation of life by a complete failure" in Bade's words (2103, 143), cannot erase the fact that the Mongolian world presented through the narratives of five family women reveals a suffocating culture that does not render much room for the women to claim their agency. In the world of *All This Belongs to Me*, the patriarchal ideology governs the lives of both ostracized mixed-blood female characters and the ones who claim their Mongol Khalkah purity. Upon a close reading, it becomes evident that Hůlová succeeds in presenting the dauntingly oppressive society of Mongolia and how it completely dominates every female character's life.

For the main character Zaya, the life in the steppe when she was young is portrayed as a lethargic one that is far too removed from the "real life" happening in the capital city (Hůlová 2009, 128). Zaya's movement from the steppe to the city at age 16, however, is depicted as a backward step involving labor and sexual exploitation of her body. The city of Ulaanbaatar experienced by Zaya is so different from what she

naively imagined as a young girl: a place where she could only “do the rounds of the shops, gorge [...] on jelly doughnuts, buy [...] a soda or two, take a quick run through the Museum of the Revolution, and go home” (3). Zaya has been provided with only housing from her aunt, who has kept the secret of running a brothel from her family, yet she is oblivious to the excruciatingly arduous money earning life of the city she would soon face. Zaya’s city life becomes a tragic saga of her self-defeating struggles to avoid life as a prostitute, following the path of her aunt and her sister Nara.

After beginning to work as a helper in a small restaurant called a *gaunz*, Zaya soon becomes disillusioned from the fantasy towards the city life. She mulls over her exhausting city life: “The days flowed one into the other, and everything else but my worries at work was washed right out of my head – my family in the Red Mountains, my school, my fantasies about life in the City – all of it had drained away, and I knew it, but what could I do? I was here and I needed money” (34). The first sign of hope for independence and happiness in her city life emerges when she meets her potential suitor, Biamkhu from the restaurant she works for. Dreaming of her future with him, Zaya feels “grown up and independent for the first time since [she] had come to the City” (36). Unfortunately for Zaya, this brief moment of hoping for her happiness disappears overnight, however, as she comes to have her first sexual experience not with her suitor but with an old man, Mergen, who was living with her aunt and who later turns out to be her biological father. At the moment, Zaya describes this disturbing experience as “nothing”, insisting that it involved only her free will. However, in reality, this one-night sexual experience with Mergen causes a total disruption of Zaya’s dream for the future as she is driven out on to the street by her aunt, and the man she was dreaming of getting married to abandons her. Zaya’s first sexual experience under the influence of alcohol becomes a symbolic event in her life signifying an irrevocable path involving incest and “a bottomless black hole” (78) as well expressed in her much later confession as an old lady.

Overall, Zaya is represented as a character who can not challenge the patriarchal norms of her Mongolian society that constantly discriminates and ostracizes her half-Chinese heritage, an embodiment of her mother’s outright defilement of the family patriarch. Rather, Zaya is a woman who embraces patriarchal norms imbued in her mind, ironically, by her own mother who repeatedly insists that “[t]here’s no disaster greater for a woman. No punishment on earth more cruel” for a woman than not bearing a child (142). Zaya’s own sense of failure in achieving this claimed happiness for woman through marriage is well revealed when she retreats to the steppe, taking a schoolteacher job in her small hometown of Bashkgan *somon*. Her temporary return to the steppe, however, only provides her with a feeling of uselessness because as an unmarried grown woman, she cannot find much role to fulfil in the traditional household of her family *ger*. She herself cannot take the pressure of being judged as an unmarried woman in her hometown and feels that she really “had no choice but to try again” (66) in the city.

Zaya’s second attempt to survive in the city is much more challenging. If Zaya’s first city life experience was limited to the small *gaunz* where she worked and the house where she lived with her aunt and Mergen, being older yet without any home

or stable job, Zaya has to vigorously explore the labour market of Ulaanbaatar without knowing that even with these trials she would only end up in her aunt's brothel. What is intriguing to note is how Hůlová portrays Zaya's path to the life of prostitution as almost a mysterious yet unavoidable fate. In a similar way that she lost her chance of marriage by stumbling upon a bizarre one-night relation with her biological father, Zaya rejects a stable job offer and a place to stay she gets from her former boss of the *gaunz*. Quite unconvincingly, Zaya narrates: "I needed work. I needed money. Someone who wasn't me said no. It was me and it wasn't me. I regretted it right away" (69). As the result of dismissing the offer, Zaya has to face the harsh realities of endless labours without a permanent place to stay, and it does not take that long until she finally gives in and knocks on the door of her aunt's brothel.

Before Zaya heads towards life as a prostitute, however, she tries her best working in different sectors of the city's secondary labour market: "working at the candy stand, cooking in the school cafeteria, stamping letters at the post office, babysitting the Russian lady's blond little Nikolai, tearing tickets in a nylon jacket and cutoff gloves for the bus" (76). Interestingly, it is only through this brief description of Zaya's trials to survive in the city that the reader for the first time finally gets a glimpse into the possible lives of female migrants from the countryside in the city of Ulaanbaatar outside of the aunt's brothel and the small *gaunz* the two sisters worked in. Zaya seems quite capable, working at these various places, but she experiences obstacles being a country woman without much education or skills as the people in the city "weren't about to do the country girl any favors" (80). However, Zaya continues her lonely struggles until she finally feels that "[t]here was no way. But to do something that I considered revolting, that I could do" (76) and joins in her aunt's brothel following her sister, Nara.

On the surface, Zaya's life as a prostitute seems to be the result of her failed challenges to survive in the city, mostly due to the lack of resources necessary for a successful migration to the city. However, it should be noted that what causes Zaya's dead end is directly related to Mongolian patriarchal norms from which she is unable to break off. Despite the seemingly liberal attitudes that Zaya shows towards her life, she is a character who holds on to the patriarchal trope and fantasy that "[e]very girl should love her first guy" and get married with him (78). In this context, Zaya's failure in the city was almost predestined when she missed the chance to get married with her first suitor, Biamkhu. When she goes back to the steppe and gets a chance to live as a schoolteacher, it is the pressure and the shame she herself feels as an unmarried woman which forces her again to the streets of Ulaanbaatar.

The sense of failure Zaya feels towards her own life is especially highlighted through the constant comparison she makes with the married life of her youngest sister Oyuna. Different from Zaya, Oyuna in her narration continuously expresses the sense of pride towards the life she has led. What is important to note is that this pride of Oyuna is closely related to her heritage of being pure-blooded Mongol: she describes herself as having "sprang from two Mongol clans, proud and pure" (149). Different from her two sisters with biracial backgrounds, Oyuna with her heritage of Khalkah purity has been expected to continue her family tradition in the steppe ever

since her other pure-blooded Mongol sister died in a horseriding accident. Asserting that she “wasn’t nursed from [her] mother’s breast to leave her behind in a cloud of dust just as soon as [she] could stand on [her] own,” Oyuna fulfils her filial duty (149). Comparing her life with Zaya’s, Oyuna explicates how she became to embrace her parents’ patriarchal norms on ideal Mongolian women:

While Zaya was still doing the petty jobs of a country girl in the City, I became a wife and a woman to be reckoned with. Mama kept me on a short string and didn’t give me a moment’s rest. A woman’s fingers need to keep moving morning, noon, and night, flashing with dishes, stroking children’s cheeks, kneading dough, or giving relief to a man’s callused palms. I tell my girls that every day. Papa used to say that Mama’s hands never lingered. And that the first thing he noticed about her was those fluttering wings of hers. This is the woman I want, he said, and Mama wanted a good man to say the same of me (151).

As the heir of her parents, Oyuna’s world is completely governed by the traditional patriarchal duties women have to fulfil in the half nomadic culture of Mongolia. Despite “[her] dreams about the glittering lives of Zaya and Nara,” when Oyuna finally meets her husband, she is convinced that “he was worth” her obedient and repetitive life in the steppe and declares that she has become “self-sufficient and whole, because a woman without a man is like a crescent moon” (152).

Not unlike Zaya, Oyuna certainly is a character who is governed by traditional patriarchal norms of Mongolian culture, which more than anything emphasizes the role of wife and mother for women. As Franck Billé explains in his research on how Mongolian nationalism has controlled women’s sexuality, Mongolian culture “assume[s] that Mongolian women desire to marry, have children and work to help support the household financially [...] [and] women who do not adhere to these expectations are seen as selfish actors, and as examples of failed womanhood” (2017, 168). So, although their life experiences are dramatically different, Zaya and Oyuna actually share this Mongolian cultural belief in fulfilling women’s roles as it is well divulged in their upbringings of their own daughters. Unlike Nara who gave up the baby she got from working as a prostitute, Zaya gives birth to her daughter Dolgorma and attempts to fulfil the dream of forming her own family without a husband. As Nara criticizes, Zaya puts all her energy in taking care of her daughter while again “she was ignoring the most important thing of all. Who she was herself” (170). Interestingly, Zaya tries to inflict the patriarchal ideals of Mongolian women upon her city-grown daughter. By sending her back to the steppe every vacation, she hopes that her mother will teach Dolgorma how to live a proper woman’s life. However, when Dolgorma finds out that her mother has been supporting her by working as a prostitute, Zaya’s dream of fulfilling the ideal of Mongolian woman finally becomes shattered as her daughter severs her relationship with Zaya.

Oyuna disciplines her own daughter with the exact same preaching that she received from her mother Alta, who constantly argued that “[a]ny girl who doesn’t save herself for the father of her children will end up being sorry for it” (153). Just like her mother, Oyuna asserts that “I don’t know what all is coming her way, but all she’ll ever catch with bait like that is one good man. If she decides that she wants more, then she ruins her reputation. If she decides that she wants better, then all the boys

are spoken for, her youth is gone, and even a moneyless drunkard looks good” (158). Even though Oyuna’s world is quite confined to the small family circle around the *ger*, she affirms herself: “My family’s all I’ve got. It’s also all I’ve ever wanted, and I’m raising my daughters to be the same” (159), declaring to hand down the legacy that she inherited from her mother. Like her mother, she believes that “[a] woman should wait. For her own good. One day it’ll come, and from then on she’ll have everything taken care of” (152).

The mother Alta’s insistence upon conforming to the patriarchal norms seems quite ironic though, as most patently revealed in the presence of her biracial daughters. Indeed, the mother recalled in her daughters’ narrative is a presence who coerces her daughters and granddaughters, especially Oyuna, to live a life only as wife and mother. Despite love affairs, Alta herself has maintained the marriage with her husband whom she does not love. The mother’s own narrative, however, reveals what a painfully unhappy marriage life she had and also how she had “regretted” her decision to [t]o live with a man, to know what his every slightest gesture means, to one nod bring food, to another go and quiet the kids, to mend his slippers and stay by his sickbed till pale morning comes, to know every little wrinkle” (121). She even confesses that “bearing that man children was the saddest thing in [her] life”, but when she firmly announces that “it may’ve been [her] great fortune” at the same time (121), the paradox of her insistence upon marriage becomes somewhat answered. Alta had challenged the husband’s patriarchal authority by having illegitimate relationships and pursuing her own desire, and she was punished and disciplined by the husband who “smacked [her] across the face, dragged her onto the bed, and said he wasn’t letting her out of the *ger* until she could act like a proper woman again.” However, it was she herself who made the decision to stay in the marriage (86). Now as an old woman, Alta only wishes that her granddaughters “would take some lessons from [her] experience” (145) and lead “the decent life of a righteous woman, the only one that bears [...] children who know their father” (138).

Nara’s life seems to well explain the reason why the mother Alta so firmly believes in the importance of marriage in her daughters and granddaughters’ lives. Except for Alta, Nara is described as the only character from the five women of the family who actively challenges the patriarchal norms imposed upon Mongolian women. Indeed, it is very interesting how Hůlová portrays Nara, a character with her evidently Russian biracial features, as the woman who dangerously pursues her own desires of body and mind. In the other women’s narratives, Nara’s story almost appears to be a cautionary tale of what happens when a female does not conform to the Mongolian female ideals. Constantly ostracized as a non-Mongol because of her “bastard blood” from her Russian biological father, Nara is described to be “mysterious in a different sort of way” (73). As Zaya describes, Nara “ceased to be one of us – one of us women who knew their place: when it was proper to speak and where the driest *argal* was, what to do with a child who screamed all the time, and how to make milk tea as smooth as a new born camel’s tummy. Nara knew nothing of any of that” (73). The marked difference of her body becomes even more highlighted as she challenges the roles imposed upon Mongolian women.

Hůlová's portrayal of Nara as a woman who was born unfit for the patriarchal norms of the Mongolian household is further explored when Nara passionately falls in love with her cousin and becomes what Mongols call a "wild woman." Eventually, Nara has to be sent away to a family shaman to be cured out of her madness of love. Interestingly, Nara's passion for the man is indisputably akin to what her own mother Alta had experienced, yet while her mother was claimed back by the family patriarch and succeeded in reproducing his Mongol heir, Nara is sent to the city only to end up living a life as a prostitute. As Nara hopes in vain to "squeeze [...] out of [her] veins" (170) the blood of her Russian father, Nara's visibly non-Mongolian female body disables her to claim a space in her mother's Mongolian household. The representation of Nara as a wild woman outside the Mongolian patriarchal dominance and control makes her almost a symbolic figure of female defiance in the narratives filled with women who all try so hard to conform to the norms.

Many reviewers note that the female characters of *All This Belongs to Me* disclose highly respectable attitudes towards life, quietly accepting and acknowledging the fate they face. However, a close analysis of six different narratives from the characters reveals that the seemingly detached and quite compliant attitudes towards their life obstacles are in fact closely related to the women's lost battles against the patriarchal norms of the Mongolian culture. The lives of the mother, three sisters, and granddaughters are all governed by patriarchal ideology that the Mongolian culture imposes upon them, and each has to pay a high cost when she attempts to cross the line. The mother Alta's affairs with non-Mongol men in the end permanently have affected her two biracial daughters' turbulent life paths. The surveillance upon Oyuna, the only remaining pure-blooded Mongol daughter, has allowed Oyuna only a little world confined within the boundary of her husband's patriarchal dominance. In the end, Hůlová's portrayal of harsh realities of Mongolian females does not allow much room for any possibilities for changes when even the third-generation female characters are portrayed as having almost similar fates to the older generation women.

BEYOND THE BINARY OF EXOTIC OR MODERN MONGOLIA

Despite plausible doubts cast on the Orientalist rendering of Mongolia by the Czech writer Hůlová, many critics and reviewers seem to defend her from such an accusation. Bade argues that "Hůlová offers us Mongolia through the eyes of someone peering into the soul of Mongolia and seeing, not an exotic mystery, but the hard, harsh, and most unpleasant realities of the modern world, moving the reader to feel that Mongolia is indeed part of our world" (2013, 143). In a similar way, Bigosowa makes an interesting argument:

The author does not spin tales of the culture and customs of Mongolia. She shows us modern life, the contemporary modern pursuit of happiness, difficult relationships between family members. This makes the novel universal and does not focus only on introducing the reader to the intricacies of a different culture (2011 [Bade 2013, 152]).

As the above reviews assert, the close reading of *All This Belongs to Me* also demonstrated that Hůlová's Mongolia is far from being exotic in the sense of traditional Ori-

entalism. Rather, the reader outside of Mongolia is given a solemnly realistic glimpse into the lives of five Mongolian family women. However, it is also true that the reader is introduced to a different version of Orientalism in the form of exaggeration of Mongolian women's suffering under poverty and patriarchal oppression.

Of course, it is important to note that this family of women do not represent Mongolian women's lives as a whole. To argue that the portrayed lives of women from one family can be taken as the representative story of Mongolian women would be groundless. However, it is also true that any reader who is not familiar with Mongolia could feel curious about the proximity between the represented Mongolian world of *All This Belongs to Me* and the real, contemporary Mongolian society. It is especially more so, when every Mongolian female character is invariably suffering from the lack of better life choices, and no one really finds a breakthrough for better agency and independence in their lives throughout the novel. It is true that there is not a single appearance of female characters, not even a passerby, who are highly-educated or pursuing great career opportunities. The closest we have is the generous owner of the *gaunz* where the two sisters worked. When even the granddaughter Dolgorma, who has been better educated and economically well supported by her mother, is lured into a relationship with an older married man, the reader cannot help but wonder whether this repeated pattern of family women's lives is intended to be considered as a mere family curse or a probable reality of Mongolian society.

Indeed, Hůlová's exclusive focus on the five female characters' lives from one family does not really provide diverse pictures of contemporary Mongolia outside the boundary of the characters' lives. There are not so much descriptions on contemporary Mongolia that expose historical or cultural changes happening around the family women. For example, there is no concrete background information on the two of the most important thematic concerns of the novel: female migrants from countryside engaging in sex work in Ulaanbaatar and the discrimination against *erliiz*, racially mixed people in Mongolian society. It is known that Mongolia ended its communist regime and set up a democratic government in the early 1990s, and some research on Mongolian contemporary history would easily reveal that “[t]he economic transition from a centrally planned (Soviet-supported) economy to a free-market economy led to devastating consequences, including over 32 per cent of the population living below the poverty line” (Carlson et al. 2015, 305). It is also known that facing drastic changes in the 1990s, “Ulaanbaatar, the capital city, experienced severe increases in survival sex work among women, homelessness, migration of workers within and beyond the country” (305).

In the same context, the reader is not provided with the information that despite the law stating that “a child with either a Mongolian mother or father will be given Mongolian nationality, [...] [the] traditionally held belief [...] suggests that one's father must be of Mongol blood to be considered ethnically Mongolian” (Tumursukh 2001 [Carlson et al. 2015, 306]). Of course, the reader is constantly provided with indications about the palpable discrimination against mixed raced Mongols in the society. The pure-blooded Mongol mother Alta and Oyuna make statements about Zaya and Nara's status as *erliiz* (racially mixed person). Having to live with

her conspicuous Russian physical characteristics, Nara is most vocal expressing her wrath living as an *erliiz* in Mongolian society as we can see from her angry statement: “I could drill a hole in my head and still I’d know” the presence of the “bastard blood” (170). Even Zaya who, according to Nara, pretended “as if she’d left the word *erliiz* behind on the steppe,” finally confesses the ordeal she has faced as an *erliiz* for the first time in her life at the end of the narrative: “*Erliiz, erliiz, erliiz*, I say to myself when the rage come over me. Everything I’ve done in my life has been clouded by that” (192).

Provided with these descriptions of the characters’ emotions, the lack of above-mentioned socio-historical information on the actual treatments of *erliiz* people born from non-Mongol fathers might not be such an obstacle in recognizing the pains of the two *erliiz* sisters. It could be even argued that the absence plays an active role in making the reader fill in the lacking specificities by performing self-research on the related issues when he/she is really moved by the women’s narratives. Indeed, the omission of specificities of Mongolian socio-historical and cultural information can be considered as an intentional strategy taken by Hůlová for the purpose of making the novel be read not as an ethnography but as a universal story of human sufferings as she initially intended. Yet again, the dilemma on the part of the reader also inevitably arises as he/she is presented with contemporary Mongolian characters confined only within the boundary of a family circle but not so much with the information on the larger Mongolian society that can be presumed to have caused their struggling lives.

Given the fact that we are living in the revolutionary world of information, would the possibility of a reader falling into the epistemological trap of stereotyping Mongolian women (as beings who cannot avoid a life of prostitution when they fail to secure a husband) seem like a farfetched and irrelevant concern? Further research on contemporary Mongolia reveals that despite the increase of migrant sex workers in the capital city, the number of sex workers of Mongolia comprises approximately 0.1% of the whole population (Offringa et al. 2017, 1857). Interestingly, Hůlová herself expresses related thoughts about the possible negative effects of her representation of invariably suffering Mongolian women. Asked about local Mongols’ reception of the novel, she introduces a negative review of the book in the Mongolian press, which “disapproved that a foreigner allowed herself to write about prostitution and poverty in Mongolia.” According to Hůlová, the critic took her portrayal of suffering Mongolian females as her “denigrating Mongolia” (Flock – Vacula 2009).

Of course, these represented Others’ negative responses against a Western representational attempt should be considered in the historical context of Orientalism. Having suffered from repeated Orientalist images, Asians have been quite sensitive to, even obsessed with, the ways Asia has been represented by the West. One such example can be seen in Rey Chow’s analysis of China’s rejection of the American-based Chinese novelist Ha Jin. In his novel *Waiting* (1999), Ha Jin presents the story of a Chinese village woman Shuyu who faithfully waits for her doctor husband when he has actually tried to get a divorce from her over the course of 19 years. Despite the book having received the National Book Award in the U.S., Beijing Publishing

Group cancelled its plan to publish *Waiting* in Chinese translation when the criticism against the text was formed by the Chinese media. Liu Yiqing, a Beijing University professor, played a role in forming such negative reviews on the work when he argued that the success the book achieved in America was “part of a plot by the American media to demonize China by showing China’s backwardness and the stupidity of the Chinese people” (Chow 2002, 187).

Using Frantz Fanon’s term “ressentiment”, Chow explains Chinese people’s hostility against *Waiting* as the “psychic structure of a reaction to the injustice created by the coercive and unequal encounter with the white world” wrongfully directed to a diasporic Chinese writer (2002, 186). Despite the relevant criticism of Chow, I would argue that the Chinese people’s anxiety, caught within the prison of trauma caused by being constant objects of Orientalist rendering by the West, cannot be simply dismissed as “ressentiment” directed to a successful diasporic Chinese writer. Their accusation is not groundless considered in the context of repeated stereotypical representations of Asian women in the global representational stage. The popular images of Asian patriarchy and Asian women suffering represented in Ha Jin’s texts have certainly played a role in fascinating readers and critics outside of Asia. This rejection and criticism from the members of the represented cultural Others then should be considered as the double-edged sword result accompanying Western writers’ cross-cultural representational attempts.

It can be argued that the restricted portrayal of the Mongolian socio-cultural background works as a factor that both confirms and resists the charge of *All This Belongs to Me*’s complicity in Orientalist portrayal of Mongolian women’s oppression. By making the novel as a story of just one Mongolian family, without much social background, thus potentially universal in a sense that it can be the story of any given family across the globe, Hůlová to some extent overcomes the criticism that she could get for representing perpetually oppressed Mongolian female characters. While it joins the Western tradition of representing Asian women’s oppression, what makes *All This Belongs to Me* noteworthy is how its representation of Mongolian women defies the typical developmental ideology of modernity and Asian women. Most Western representations of Asian women that focus on the backwardness of Asian women’s status tend to associate women’s progress in relation to the degree of modernization, which is often understood as a process of Westernization. In *All This Belongs to Me*, modernity is represented as leaving their traditional household *ger* and moving into the city. As examined in the above reading, the movement towards modernity or the city, however, is not depicted as progress in the women’s lives. Hůlová successfully complicates the binary dichotomy of modernized city and premodern steppe by deconstructing the linear and developmental understanding of modernity often found in many Western feminists’ portrayal of Asian women.

Moreover, compared to the way how Mongolia has been represented in the Western literary field, Hůlová’s representation of Mongolia certainly is a new attempt in that it presents Mongolia as a coeval space of our contemporary world. As Bade’s research on Western representation of Mongolia well shows, the most dominant Western literary representations of Mongolia have been “either about the imperial era

– tales of Chinggis Khaan, Khubilai, the invasions of European and Asian lands – or [...] adventure tales for children, with the addition of stories in praise of the glorious new Mongolian communist society found in socialist literatures” (2013, 135). Bade acknowledges that Hulova’s *All This Belongs to Me* is meaningful in that it is one of the first Western representations of contemporary Mongolian society. Still, he raises an interesting question of whether these recent literary representations of modern-day Mongolia written by non-Mongolian writers “can lead a Mongolian reader to understand his/her own world better” (2013, 141). Indeed, for whom is this representation created?

Madeleine Clements’ review of *All This Belongs to Me* in the *Times Literary Supplement* suggests a possible answer to these difficult questions. Clements acknowledges that “this European author’s novel may seem to reinforce Western assumptions about the oppressed lives of women in developing countries” (2010). However, she gives emphasis to the fact that Hůlová’s “representations [...] are not straightforward.” This means that despite the fact that the representation of *All This Belongs to Me* is “an acutely observed account [...] of the lives of its semi-nomadic subjects,” still the represented Mongolia and Mongolian women reflect “ambiguous cultural hybrids” of contemporary Mongolia (Clements 2010).

I would like to conclude by revisiting what Said noted in the preface to the 25th anniversary edition of *Orientalism*. Stepping back a little from his charge of Orientalism upon most Western representations, he clarifies that “[t]here is [...] a profound difference between the will to understand for purposes of coexistence and humanistic enlargement of horizons, and the will to dominate for the purpose of control and external domination” (2003, xix). With this statement, he acknowledges the possibility of Western representations of cultural Others created as the results of efforts to expand the West’s horizons of cultural understanding of Others. More importantly, different from Said’s assertion made in the 1970s which claimed that since the Orient cannot represent itself, the Western “representation does the job, for the West [...] and for the poor Orient” (1979, 21), we are now living in the globalized world of information. Equipped with ever-advancing technology such as the Internet and translation apps and also faced with a more globalized world, we can easily listen to the Orient speaking for itself, if we only have the will to do so. It is also true that our changed world has made much room for critical intervention on the part of Western readers in their process of creating meanings out of the represented world of Mongolia. Considering that the power of literature may reside in its potential to actually move people to have meaningful changes in reality, readers who are moved enough by Hůlová’s portrayal of Mongolia would venture into exploring Mongolia and expand the horizon of their world view. In the process, they would certainly come across a heterogenous and always-changing Mongolia.

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Mongolia. "All This Belongs to Me." Petra Hůlová. Orientalism. Asian women. Representation.

This article examines the Czech writer Petra Hůlová's representation of Mongolian women in *All This Belongs to Me* in an effort to discuss possible epistemological dangers involved in such cross-cultural representation of Asia by a European writing self. Through a close reading of the text, the paper explores how the represented five Mongolian females from one family are invariably subsumed under the strong patriarchal ideology of their Mongolian society. This representation of Mongolian women's oppression is then discussed in the historical context of Orientalism, which has excessively exaggerated patriarchal culture of Asia and Asian women's oppression. Examining strategies Hůlová adopts to resist mere exoticization of Mongolian culture, the paper considers whether Hůlová's cross-cultural representation presents chances for opportunities for readers outside of Mongolia to expand the horizon of their Eurocentric world view.

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