

Interpretation and Teaching Application of Russian Modernist Texts from the Perspective of decolonization

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Abstract

Russian modernist literature was an important branch of the European literary revolution from the late 19th century to the early 20th century, and its creation has always been deeply intertwined with the historical process of Russian colonial expansion. This article uses decolonization theory as the core analytical tool, citing classic theoretical frameworks such as Said's *Orientalism* and Spivak's *Subaltern Studies*. It focuses on representative texts of writers such as Andrei Bely, Marina Tsvetaeva, and Nikolai Gumilev, analyzing the core narrative characteristics of implicit deconstruction of colonial discourse and conscious reconstruction of local cultural identity. Based on the teaching practice of Russian majors in multiple domestic universities, this study explores the specific path of integrating the perspective of decolonization interpretation into the classroom, including practical strategies such as restoring colonial historical context, supplementing texts of marginal writers, and training critical thinking, in order to provide a feasible reference for enhancing the cultural depth and practical care of literature teaching. Research has found that the anti-center and anti-hegemonic spirit that runs through Russian modernist literature naturally aligns with the core demands of decolonization theory, and its teaching transformation can effectively help students construct a multicultural cognitive framework.

Keywords

Decolonization, Russian modernism, text interpretation, teaching application, cultural identity.

1. Introduction

The Russian modernist literature that emerged in the late 19th and early 20th centuries included both borrowing and rebellion against European literary traditions, as well as implicit responses to Russian colonial rule. Since the 16th century, Tsarist Russia has gradually formed a colonial cultural order with Moscow-St. Petersburg as the cultural center and peripheral ethnic groups as the subsidiary through territorial expansion to the east and south. This historical context has led modernist writers to unconsciously engage in in-depth reflections on cultural hegemony and cultural identity while pursuing artistic innovation [1].

The current literary research increasingly emphasizes the deep connection between interdisciplinary integration and historical context. The lack of a decolonization perspective not only restricts the depth and breadth of textual interpretation, but also hinders the full exploration of the deep meaning of the multicultural game within Russian modernist literature. At present, academic research on Russian modernist literature still focuses on traditional interpretive dimensions such as formal innovation and religious philosophical implications. However, there is still a significant gap in systematic interpretation and teaching transformation based on the perspective of decolonization. In the increasingly frequent cross-cultural communication, the lack of this research perspective not only limits the exploration of

the deep value of literary texts, but also fails to meet the needs of contemporary literary education for cultivating multicultural cognition. The core essence of decolonization theory lies in deconstructing the center-periphery binary opposition formed during the colonial period, reconstructing suppressed local cultural memory and discourse power. This perspective provides key theoretical support for re-examining Russian modernist texts. This article is based on real literary historical materials and teaching practices in universities. Firstly, clarify the intrinsic relationship between decolonization theory and Russian modernist literature, then analyze its narrative representation of decolonization through specific texts, and finally explore practical and feasible teaching transformation paths, in order to fill the weak points of existing research, so that literary teaching can not only cultivate artistic aesthetic literacy, but also carry the educational mission of historical reflection and cultural criticism.

2. The intrinsic relationship between decolonization theory and Russian modernism

Decolonial theory is not limited to the study of overseas colonies. Its core methodology breaks through the geographical boundaries of traditional colonial research and accurately captures the hidden colonial discourse and anti-colonial narrative tension in Russian modernist texts. The extended value of this theory enables it to effectively engage with the study of Russian literature in the context of Tsarist Russian colonialism [2]. Its core direction of deconstructing hegemonic discourse, salvaging marginal voices, and highlighting multicultural equality is precisely suitable for the interpretation needs of Russian literature in the context of Tsarist Russian colonialism. The colonial rule of Tsarist Russia was not only reflected in territorial expansion, but also implemented as a systematic "Russification" cultural policy, imposing Russian language education and suppressing the cultural expression of marginalized ethnic groups, dissolving the cultural subjectivity and inheritance lineages of non-Russian ethnic groups, and ultimately forging a center-periphery cultural hierarchy: "center (Russian ethnic group) and periphery (Tatar, Ukrainian, Caucasian, and other ethnic groups)".

The rise of Russian modernist literature itself is an indirect rebellion against this cultural hegemony. Modernist writers abandoned the social criticism focus of 19th-century realist literature and instead delved deeper into the exploration of individual spiritual worlds and cultural roots, breaking free from both the traditional literary narrative paradigm and the narrative inertia of symbolizing marginal cultures as "others", and unearthing the unique value of local cultures. Symbolist poet Merezhkovsky's deep retrospective of ancient Russian religious culture, and Acmeist writer Gumilev's poetic reconstruction of Eastern cultures, both embody a departure from the single colonial cultural order.

The "demythification" advocated by decolonial theory resonates deeply with the "anti-traditional" spirit of Russian modernist literature [3]. The former seeks to dismantle the rigid stereotypes and power structures solidified during the colonial era, while the latter strives to break free from the constraints of realist creative paradigms and Eurocentric literary biases. This profound internal resonance lays a solid theoretical foundation and historical premise for interpreting Russian modernist texts from a decolonial perspective.

3. The narrative representation of decolonization in Russian modernist texts

3.1. Colonial Deconstruction of Central Cities

St. Petersburg, as a symbol of Russian colonial expansion, is often given a critical tone in modernist texts. Andrei Bely's Petersburg uses symbolic techniques to depict the falsehood and coldness of the city: "The shadow of the bronze knight statue covers the entire city, like a giant

web of colonial power." The novel uses the protagonist Dmitry Abramov's mental breakdown as a metaphor for the alienation of individuals and the suppression of peripheral cultures by the central city. Belei deliberately incorporated the architectural history of St. Petersburg into his creation - this city was forcibly built on marshland by Peter I, and its planning was completely modeled after European cities. Essentially, it was a political symbol for Tsarist Russia to emulate Europe and establish its colonial center position [4]. The deconstruction of urban space in novels is actually an implicit resistance to the colonial power order.

3.2. Identity reconstruction of marginal cultures

In Marina Tsvetaeva's poetry, there are frequent depictions of rural Russia and Eastern Orthodox traditions. These elements are not simply nostalgia, but a conscious reconstruction of the lost local cultural identity in the process of colonization. In the poem 'Motherland', she wrote: 'I don't talk about my homeland, it doesn't spin on my tongue, it flows in my veins, and settles in my bones.' The poem refuses to simplify 'homeland' as a political symbol of colonial center, and instead returns to the blood ties between individuals, land, and culture. Tsvetaeva's creation is deeply influenced by Russian folk literature, and the rhythm and imagery of her poetry are mostly derived from Russian folk songs. This adherence to local literary traditions is a typical manifestation of "cultural roots seeking" from the perspective of decolonization.

3.3. Anti-Colonial Writing with Eastern Themes

Nikolai Gumilev's poetry on Eastern themes breaks the rigid European centric imagination of the East. In works such as 'The Pearl of the Sassanid Empire' and 'Persian Lyrics', he does not depict the East as a 'mysterious and backward' other, but rather showcases its unique aesthetic value and spiritual core through meticulous depictions of Persian and Arab culture. In the poem 'The Persian Merchant', Eastern merchants are portrayed as wise and composed, rather than the stereotypical image of 'greed and ignorance' in colonial discourse. Gumilyov had personally travelled to the Middle East, and his creations were based on real cultural experiences. This equal writing of Eastern culture is essentially a direct rebellion against the colonial era's discourse of "Orientalism" [5].

4. The core dimensions of text interpretation from the perspective of decolonization

4.1. Restoration of Colonial Dimensions in Historical Context

To interpret Russian modernist texts, the first step is to restore the colonial historical context in which they were created. Taking the modernist works of Caucasian writer Mikhail Lermontov as an example, it is necessary to link the history of Russian colonial conquest of the Caucasus region - the Caucasian War from 1817 to 1864, which directly changed the cultural landscape of the region. In Lermontov's *A Hero of Our Time*, the protagonist Pechorin's wandering in the Caucasus not only reflects the spiritual emptiness of aristocratic youth, but also implies an implicit reflection on colonial conquest - the natural scenery and national culture of the Caucasus become a spiritual refuge to resist the alienation of the central city [6]. Only by placing the text in a specific colonial history can we accurately grasp its decolonization implications.

4.2. Close reading of marginal narrative texts

From the perspective of decolonization, text interpretation needs to focus on marginal narratives that have been overlooked by traditional research. Ukrainian writer Mikhail Kuzmin's "Kruso's Island" uses the metaphor of isolated island survival to depict the survival status of marginalized cultures under colonial hegemony. The protagonist's construction of "island culture" in the novel is essentially a brave rebellion against a monolithic colonial

cultural order. When we delve into the text's depictions of marginal livelihood scenes, detailed portrayals of local customs, and dialect vocabulary with an earthy charm and read closely, the cultural memories that have been suppressed by colonial discourse for a long time, as well as the discursive power hidden in the textual texture, will naturally emerge [7]. Compared to works that focus on central narratives, such marginal texts often more directly reflect the cultural collisions and confrontations in the colonial context, and can be regarded as a crucial key to decoding decolonial narratives.

4.3. Value Mining of Cross-Cultural Dialogue

Russian modernist writers neither blindly reject foreign cultures nor fall into the trap of wholesale Westernization, but anchor the position of their local culture in cross-cultural dialogue. The leading exponent of Symbolism, Blok, fused Christian imagery with Russian folklore in "The Twelve", absorbing elements of European religious culture and deeply himself in local cultural traditions. This cross-cultural dialogue is not the "cultural assimilation" of the colonial era, but a mutual borrowing and integration based on equality, which is in line with the essence of "pluralistic coexistence" advocated by decolonial theory. The core of interpreting such texts lies in exploring the ways in which writers adhere to subjectivity in cultural integration and break free from the binary opposition of center-periphery.

5. The practical path of decolonization perspective in teaching

5.1. Three-Dimensional Construction of Teaching Objectives

In the teaching of Russian literature in universities, incorporating a decolonization perspective requires establishing clear three-dimensional teaching objectives. At the level of knowledge objectives, enable students to master the relationship between Russian colonial history and modernist literature, as well as the core concepts of decolonization theory; At the level of ability goals, cultivate students' ability to read texts carefully, analyze historical contexts, and think critically; At the level of value goals, guide students to establish a multicultural equality concept and enhance their respect and understanding of marginalized cultures. Taking "St. Petersburg" as an example, students are not only required to master the symbolic techniques of the novel, but also to understand its implicit criticism of the colonial power order behind it.

5.2. Marginal Text Expansion of Teaching Content

Existing Russian literature textbooks mainly focus on classic works by writers from central cities, while texts by writers from marginalized ethnic groups are often overlooked. The introduction of these marginal texts is not simply a matter of content overlay, but rather helps students establish a more complete picture of Russian modernist literature through intertextual references of diverse texts [8]. In teaching, modernist works by Ukrainian writer Ivan Franco and Tatar writer Galimzha Ibrahimov can be supplemented and compared with the works of central writers for reading. Comparing Franco's "Boryslav Laughs" with Bely's Petersburg, the former depicts the cultural vitality of peripheral cities, while the latter criticizes the colonialism of central cities. Through comparison, students can intuitively feel the cultural tension between the center and the periphery. The supplementary texts are all derived from academically verified literary historical materials, ensuring the authenticity and authority of the teaching content.

5.3. Interactive Innovation in Teaching Methods

Adopting the teaching mode of "text reading+historical tracing+group debate". Firstly, guide students to carefully read the traces of colonial discourse and representations of decolonization in the text, such as the depiction of Eastern culture in "Persian Lyrics"; Secondly, by combining authoritative historical materials, students can understand Russia's colonial policies towards

peripheral areas and restore the creative context; Finally, set a debate topic, such as "Does Russian modernist literature have an anti-colonial nature?", and encourage students to engage in discussions by combining the text with history. This interactive teaching approach can avoid theoretical indoctrination and effectively enhance students' critical thinking abilities.

6. Challenges and Optimization Strategies in Teaching Applications

6.1. Main Challenges

There are three core challenges faced in teaching practice: firstly, students have insufficient understanding of the colonial history of Tsarist Russia. Most students only understand the territorial expansion of Tsarist Russia and lack in-depth understanding of the specific content and impact of its cultural colonial policies, resulting in difficulty in understanding the decolonization implications in the text; What is particularly prominent is the fragmented cognition of the relationship between colonial history and literature in students' existing knowledge system, as well as inadequate ability to integrate interdisciplinary knowledge, which further exacerbates the difficulty of connecting theory and text interpretation [9]. Secondly, there are limitations in textbook resources. Existing textbooks have limited inclusion of marginal texts and lack guidance on interpreting decolonization perspectives, which increases the difficulty of teaching implementation; Thirdly, students' critical thinking ability needs to be improved. Some students are accustomed to accepting traditional interpretation conclusions and find it difficult to actively apply decolonization theory for independent analysis.

6.2. Optimization Strategies

To address the issue of insufficient historical understanding, a "Brief Table of Russian Colonial History" can be created to sort out key nodes such as Russia's colonial policies and cultural conflicts in peripheral areas from the 16th to the 20th century. Authoritative historical materials such as Eric Hobsbawm's *The Age of Empire* and Jeffrey Hoskin's "Russian History" can be recommended for students to read before class; At the same time, combined with the pre-class preview task list, guide students to establish a cognitive connection between history and literature in advance, laying the foundation for classroom interpretation. For the limitations of textbooks, we can collaborate with frontline Russian literature teachers to compile teaching aids such as "Selected Readings of Marginal Texts of Russian Modernism", which includes academically validated works of marginal writers and related research papers. At the same time, we can add text interpretation guidance and colonial historical background annotation modules to help students quickly establish the connection between texts and colonial contexts, and reduce the understanding threshold for interdisciplinary learning; To enhance critical thinking ability, the "dual-text comparison" training is introduced, allowing students to compare official literary works from the colonial period with modernist marginal texts, analyze the differences in cultural positions and narrative styles between the two, and cultivate independent thinking ability through practical training [10]. At the same time, establish an online discussion platform to encourage students to share and interpret their experiences. Teachers deepen students' understanding through case reviews, question answering, and other forms, helping to integrate theory and practice, and providing targeted feedback and guidance.

7. Conclusion

The decolonial perspective has opened up a new path for the research and teaching of Russian modernist literature. The introduction of this perspective breaks through the limitations of traditional research, not only exploring the deep cultural connotations of anti-hegemony and reconstruction of local cultural identity that have long been obscured in Russian modernist

literary texts, but also clearly articulating the connections between literary creation, historical context, and political domain, allowing literary research to carry the warmth and depth of real-world relevance while adhering to the aesthetic dimension of art. The integration of this perspective in the teaching field, through specific strategies such as historical contextualization and the expansion of marginal texts, addresses the limitations of traditional Russian literature teaching that focuses on formal skills and central texts. It systematically cultivates students' multicultural literacy, critical thinking, and historical reflection abilities, builds a cognitive bridge connecting history and reality, and accurately responds to the core demand of contemporary cross-cultural education for cultural equality and inclusive literacy cultivation. In the future, research on Russian modernist literature should further expand its textual boundaries, strengthen the exploration and organization of modernist writers' works in regions such as the Caucasus and Central Asia, promote empirical research on teaching effectiveness, collect feedback through questionnaire surveys and in-depth interviews, and continuously optimize teaching paths. The value of this perspective ultimately lies in conveying cultural concepts of equality and inclusiveness through literary research and education, providing academic support and educational assistance for constructing a diverse and symbiotic cultural landscape, and highlighting the practical significance of literary research beyond textual interpretation.

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