



Identity Challenges in Post-Soviet Russia: A Critical Analysis of Denis Gutsko's novel “Without a Trace”

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Denis Gutsko is one of the most popular contemporary Russian writers. The novel “Without a Trace” was written in 2004. This work is considered an autobiographical work. The main protagonist of the novel Mitya belongs to a Russian family who first lived in Georgia and later moved to Russia. There are many similarities between the protagonist and the writer, both the main character and the writer, have a slightly noticeable Georgian accent, both have a slightly noticeable Georgian accent, navigating an alien post-Soviet environment characterized by linguistic and cultural diversity. but they are not Georgian, they speak Russian in Georgian accent. Both of them find themselves in an alien environment after the fall of the Soviet Union both felt themselves a quest for identity in a foreign is one of the central themes of the novel. This was the one of major crises after the disintegration of the USSR.

The novel delves into themes of identity crisis amidst the disintegration of the USSR, portraying the quest for belonging in a shifting world. This paper is an attempt to study the themes of identity crisis and the quest for belonging depicted in the novel “Without a Trace,” through the lens of the protagonist, Mitya, and his experiences navigating cultural and linguistic barriers.

Keywords: Without a Trace, Identity, Denis Gutsko, Erstwhile USSR, own & alien,

Denis Gutsko was born in 1969 in Tbilisi, where he graduated from high school. In 1987, he entered the Geological and Geographical Faculty of Rostov University with a degree in ecology and applied geochemistry. He served in the Soviet Army and participated in the settlement of the Armenian-Azerbaijani conflict as a conscript soldier. After the collapse of the USSR, he was practically a stateless person for several years. Currently, he works as an editor of the DSTU (Don State Technical University) information service. He is a regular contributor to the magazines October, Znamya and Friendship of Peoples. Winner of the Sholokhov Prize, the Boris Sokolov Prize (2005, for the novel “Russophone”), the Booker Prize – Open Russia (2005, for the novel “Without a Trace”).

He is the author of several novels, several novellas, and short stories, including “There, by the Rivers of Babylon”, «Там, при реках Вавилона», «Сороковины» “Sorokoviny”, «Бета-самец» “Beta Male” (was on the short list of the Russian Booker Prize in 2013), «Машкин Бог» “Mashkin God”.

The novel “Without a Trace” is broader than a purely military theme: Gutsko, apparently, is gradually sinking into the everyday life of a common person in the erstwhile USSR. Critics considered that the novel turned out to be excessively autobiographical. The novel “Without a Trace” caused a lot of controversy. The main character, Mitya Vakula, grew up in Tbilisi and went to school there. Later, he studied at Rostov University. After that, he joined the army. When he returned home, he found Tbilisi had changed and become

stranger and even hostile. Due to having an intercultural background, Mitya loses his identity and becomes a stranger in his own country due to this conflict between the former republics of the USSR. Mitya loses his sense of identity as he becomes an outsider in his own nation due to the contention between the former Soviet countries.

The author tells the story of a typical Soviet person who suddenly lost ground from under his feet: after the collapse of the Soviet Union, many citizens of a multinational country turned out to be residents of the near abroad, including the protagonist of the novel, Russian-speaking with a Georgian accent. The novel has a strong and very emotional ending when the hero realizes his routine life as a betrayal. He betrayed everything - the ideals he once believed in, the country he lives in, the self he could have become.

The sudden fall of the USSR led to a serious identity crisis for Russia. Russians, who were living within the USSR territory found themselves out of their motherland. In an event, Putin talked about how disintegration affects the life of Russians, *“The collapse of the Soviet Union was a major geopolitical disaster of the century. As for the Russian nation, it became a genuine drama. Tens of millions of our co-citizens and compatriots found themselves outside the Russian territory. Moreover, the epidemic of disintegration infected Russia itself. Russians went to bed in one country and awoke in different ones, overnight becoming ethnic minorities in former Union republics while the Russian nation became one of the biggest, if not the biggest, ethnic groups in the world to be divided by borders.”*¹

Through the work writer tried to describe the nuances and aftermath of various identities of citizens and how these crises affected the lives of millions of inhabitants of post-Soviet Russia & CIS countries, because of ethnic, political, and religious conflicts.

The disintegration of the USSR became one of the main reasons for the migration of people from one country to another. Which gave birth to complex regional, ethnical, problems. This socio-political change affected Russians as well as non-Russians alike. The Russian Empire and the Russian state developed together, and there had never been a Russian nation-state until the fall of the USSR. After this colossal political change, a new identity and a new role had to be found for Russia.

The term identity is explained in such way:

*“Identity is “people’s concepts of who they are, of what sort of people they are, and how they relate to others.”*²

*“A person's identity, as we know is a sum of essential attributes and ethnicity, primordial or situational. The primordial factor connotes the characteristics a person is born with. The situational factor, on the other hand, relates to a specific place, the specific situations and set of circumstances, which each individual or ethnic group encounters with. The situational factor very evidently reflects in the identity of the relocated mass, the diaspora. They are faced with the challenges of assimilation, be it behavioural assimilation, cultural, socio-economic assimilation, retaining their primordial identity”*³

Identities are “relatively stable, role-specific understandings and expectations about self” (Wendt 1992, 397)

“Identity is used to describe the way individuals and groups define themselves and are defined by others on the basis of race, ethnicity, religion, language, and culture” (Deng 1995, 1).

We can say, Identity defines who we are as a person and how we see ourselves in the world. This usually includes our beliefs, values, interests, personality characteristics, experiences, culture, and other factors that shape our self-awareness and define our personality.

¹ Makhan Saikia, "New-found identity in post-Cold War Russia", 2017. <https://www.dailypioneer.com/2017/columnists/new-found-identity-in-post-cold-war-russia.html> Retrieved on 22.12.18

² Michael Hogg and Dominic Abrams, (social psychologist), *“Social Identifications: A Social Psychology of Intergroup Relations and Group Processes”*; Routledge London, ISBN: 0-203-13545-8, 2006

³ Ranjana Banerjee, (2013). *“The Problem of Ethnic Identity and its Reverberation in Russian Literature (“Without a Trace” by Denis Gutsko and “Hurrabad” by Andrei Volos)”*, CRITIC No 11. A journal of the Centre of Russian Studies.

In the novel “Without a Trace” the protagonist feels disconnected from his identity and surroundings when he realizes that he is no longer considered a citizen of his own country. His sense of belonging and identity is ruptured. He feels extremely dejected and has deep desire for escape or transformation in response to the newfound statelessness. He is unable to reconcile his inner turmoil with the external constraints imposed upon him and on people like him. The feeling of hopelessness and frustration lingers, this is evident when he says,

“When one day you find out that you are no longer a citizen of the country in which you live, you learn not to be surprised how much in vain. When Lyuska sang the way, she did today, I wanted to die or live in a different way. But all he could afford was to smoke a cigarette in secret.”⁴

The novel has several autobiographical details of the writer. The main character and the writer share common experiences, such as adapting to communal living conditions, dealing with the absence of privacy in barracks, and the challenges of migration. Both have mothers who struggle with the cultural differences between Georgia and Russia.

Mitya faced several problems one of the most concerning problems was the chaotic process of registration of residency and passport. All the old passports were declared invalid, and the registration process was messy. Life without a residence permit would be unpleasant and indecent. Lack of a residence permit, despite having a passport, exposes a significant flaw in one's citizenship status, which only means that one will have to conceal himself from the authority and navigate the system extremely carefully as he can't acquire a new passport without prior registration of residency.

Mitya was extremely repelled by this mess. His whole family went through a lengthy time taking messy process in order to get themselves registered and eventually issuance of new passport.

The novel can be perceived as the story of the fall of a weak person, an ‘extra person’ in that quite textbook concept for Russian classical literature. However, the literary critic *Lev Danilkin* notes, unlike his numerous prototypes, Denis Gutsko's Mitya is generally not remarkable for anything special; there is no demonism of Pechorin (main character of the novel “The Hero of our Times”) in him, there is no charm of Oblomov, there is no refinement of Onegin's egoism (the protagonist of the Puskin's novel “Evgeni Onegin”)—there is simply nothing in him. The sluggish shell of a reflective loser moves from page to page, leaving the reader perplexed: he does not want to be pitied, understood, or justified.

Through the main character, the writer expressed the situation of the erstwhile USSR. All the old soviet passport was declared invalid and the reregistration process was a huge chaos. They waited for four hours, finally broke through, and passed, only to face another long wait to exchange their old Soviet passports for new Russian ones, along with the required residence permits. Despite Mitya's efforts, his application was rejected due to lack of registration, leaving him disheartened and uncertain about his future citizenship status. As we see in the novel:

“The queue starts at three or four in the morning, the list is in duplicate, and the reception is on Saturday from nine to one. Passport exchange. As usual in such cases, rumours swarmed: old passports would soon be invalid, and they would be fined. It was necessary to do this a long time ago, but as luck would have it, an emergency happened at work - people were sent on business trips, and there were no days off.” (The original novel in Russian and the translation from Russian into English by the author)

Life without a residence permit is unpleasant and indecent. A passport without a residence permit is an extreme of flawed citizens: *“Let's play hide-and-peek, gentlemen policemen.”⁵* It has always been like that. However, in the era of democratic renaming, registration was called ‘registration’. One cannot do it without earlier registration.

Mitya was asking himself: *Is life without registration unpleasant and indecent?*⁶

⁴ Денис Гуцко, (2004) «Без пуги-следа» «Without a Trace», жур: Дружба Народов (№ 11 и 12)

⁵ Денис Гуцко, (2004) «Без пуги-следа» «Without a Trace», жур: Дружба Народов (№ 11 и 12)

⁶ Ibid.

Her Mom completely washed down and took their passport, he needed it in person. But this issue did not seem to him is urgent. Especially when he had free time - two days a month. Finally, when he got the passports were delivered.

They stood for four hours, broke through, and passed. Now it was necessary to stand the same amount to get passports - old, Soviet - with a new residence permit and immediately, having attached everything necessary: receipts, photographs, statements, - to hand over passports, old Soviet ones with a new residence permit, to exchange them for new Russian ones, so that later, paying the state duty in Sberbank again and again having written an application with a request to register, hand over these new Russian passports for registration of the required registration in them.

When Mitya went to the office with his Soviet passport, his application was rejected: ⁷

"You weren't registered," and lowered her eyes.... - And the passport, they said, will not be changed.

He smiled rubbery, pulled out a form and looked at it. "Register," it was written in red pen and daubed over with a red pencil. My stomach, as usual, reacted to the trouble with an anxious rumble. Mitya put the form back in, shifted the passport from hand to hand."⁸

After the disintegration the registration of the citizenship was done. But it was temporary for that time. The citizens of former USSR were not aware about that:

"And the registration in the ninety-two is temporary. – So what if it's temporary?"

In ninety-two, so what? She put her hands on the table like a teacher. - A new law has been issued on citizenship. - Yes? They grinned from the corridor: "And he hasn't even heard of the law!" "According to this law, you are not a Russian citizen," she said."⁹

Mitya, was completely dejected by the messy, chaotic laws of the land and continuously tried to seek answers to the questions – who is he? Which country is he a citizen of? What is his identity?

- How am I not a citizen, huh?! How?! I've been living in Russia since eighty-seven! Then there was no mention of this very Russia - the entire USSR! Well?! And who am I now? Who! A citizen of what?...¹⁰

After living in Russia for a long time for Mitya it became mother land for him: "Mother Russia!" broke out inside. And thinking that, he bit his lip, as if he had said it out loud. But he was thinking: now everything will be different, now it should be different. Deduced formulas: "I am a Russian traveling to Russia. I am a man returning to his homeland." After returning the Georgia Mitya lacked something, he no longer felt at home. Determination shines in the eyes that are accidentally snatched from the crowd - the delight of determination. He listens "Georgia is for Georgians!" the speakers shout with such enthusiasm that those who listen to them are unaccustomed to drown in high emotions.

"Russian occupiers, get out to Russia!" A young priest with a transparent, scraggly beard announced the Catholicos's appeal through a megaphone: Whoever kills a Georgian will burn in hell forever."¹¹

And not the bombing, not the bland stew of potato peelings, not sleepless nights for three in a row - this wounded German remained her cruellest insult in the entire war. "Russian occupiers, get out to Russia! Mitya repeats to himself, looking at his grandmother's reflection in the dark glass of the closet.

"- Get out to Russia!" Well, he is in Russia. Why is the house still there, in Tbilisi? It should not be like this; it can't be like this!

- I can't get in for the third day. - What do you have? - A child. It is necessary to apply for citizenship urgently. And now they make a request at the place of birth. - Why? - Who knows them? Can you understand

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Денис Гуцко, (2004) «Без пуги-следа» «Without a Trace», жур: Дружба Народов (№ 11 и 12)

⁹ Ibid

¹⁰ Ibid

¹¹ *ibid*

that? I can't understand it. And he was born in Vladivostok. Can you imagine how long it will take until these people write and they respond? And he was invited for an exchange for three months. If we don't manage it in a month? - Well, you need to go to the boss. - Do you think so? - I know. Mitya decided not to go to the boss today. I decided-for no reason, at random, as in an unfamiliar card game - to start small, with a citizenship inspector. He liked the name, weighty and categorical: "Inspector-By-Citizenship."¹²

They stood at door number two for twenty minutes, but no one called them inside for the passport registration. For Mitya it became impossible to tolerate waiting. He tried to get in the registration officer room.

"Why again? Why am I here? Why did I end up here? Why, no matter how you resist, they will find you anyway, take you out, shake you and put you in the thick of it, in a row, in a column, in angry sweaty queues? Who's the last one? What are we standing for? For citizenship? How much do they give? Why is that? Why is this the only way? Repeatedly - no matter what we are called.

The Orthodox, the Soviet people, the Russians? And it will all be the same: the crowd, the Hodynka, the queue. An endless queue for a normal life. A queue that has long been a form of life. Who are you, another one? What is your number? The queue branches off from the queue, swells, starts a new escape. A new queue is growing. And sideways, and up, and down - they branch out, reaching for their office suns. What do they give? Citizenship. Do you need to?"¹³

Mitya felt sick with a heavy, dull indignation. He tried to suppress it, swallow it, turn away from it, as in childhood he turned away from strange scary shadows in the bedroom. Nothing helped him, just like in childhood. There was an itchy silence in the narrow hallway. The pressed people were silent. Talking here was as dangerous as smoking at a gas station. They sweated and were silent.

She returned with the same flourish, hooking her elbows, and splashing out of the kettle. Mitya blocked officer's way and asked:

"- Excuse me, when does the reception start?" - Suddenly, a deputy political officer came and loudly shouted out the numbers of the forms and sub-paragraphs of articles. Mitya asked:

"I don't have an insert, and my registration in ninety-two was temporary, but in general I've been living here since eighty-seven, I studied here at the university, did I serve in the army? The more he talked, the more disgusted he became with himself."

"I remember in 'ninety-two when that old law came out, I went to the passport office for an insert, but they didn't give it to me, they said it wasn't supposed to - just because of my temporary residence permit."¹⁴

The officer explained to Mitya that regarding citizenship new law has passed. And the registration is going according to that:

"According to the adopted law, a citizen of Russia is recognized as one who has a certificate of citizenship or a permanent residence permit for? She stammered, apparently forgetting the date. - In the ninety-two. You don't have either. Goodbye. - I have a permanent residence permit in just six months, even less. Is it really because of this? They didn't give me the insert then just because of the temporary residence permit."¹⁵

¹² Денис Гуцко, (2004) «Без пути-следа» «Without a Trace», жур: Дружба Народов (№ 11 и 12)

¹³ Ibid

¹⁴ Ibid

¹⁵ Денис Гуцко, (2004) «Без пути-следа» «Without a Trace», жур: Дружба Народов (№ 11 и 12)

And then? - You came to us from the territory of a foreign country.

- What kind of foreign language? Then there was one state, the USSR was called. Have you heard? Didn't you go to school? And then, after all, that old law said that everyone living on the territory of Russia who does not apply for renunciation of citizenship is recognized as a citizen.”¹⁶

In ninety-three, when Mitya got a job at Yuginvest, he felt like an attraction and closeness, “*And this is our Georgian Cossack.*”¹⁷ Everyone was extremely interested in his accent and “non-Russian habits.” The accent went in and out, gradually fading away like an echo. The habits remained. It was hardly possible to determine exactly what they were expressing, these non-Russian habits.

A young novelist (Denis Gutsko) tries to understand how, after the collapse of the “new Babylon”, a Russian speaking with a fusinian accent, lives in his historical homeland. What should the son of a Jew and an Azerbaijani do, when they are not accepted as a citizen? Being a stranger is scary.

The novel can also be interpreted as a portrayal of various social archetypes in post-Soviet Russia. Denis Gutsko avoids prescribing solutions and instead focuses on exploring the dichotomy between the familiar and the foreign. He is particularly intrigued by the process that incites xenophobia as a response to even the slightest societal instability.

In a multi-ethnic state like Russia, the loss of a unifying ideology during the disintegration of the Soviet Union prompted a shift towards nationalism as the cornerstone of state identity, despite its ambiguous definition. Initially, nationalism simply denotes a strong sense of national identity without inherently implying intolerance towards other ethnicities, cultures, or religions. However, intolerance arises when it becomes more convenient to exclude others rather than to search for common ground.

The novel highlights how individuals, in the absence of a clear unifying idea, are quick to question the legitimacy of those who appear, speak, dress, think, or behave differently but claim to belong to the same nationality. This portrayal delves into the complexities of identity, belonging, and the societal pressures that fuel discrimination and exclusion based on perceived differences.

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