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"NOT ONE OF THEM": EXILE, COLONIAL MEMORY, AND IDENTITY IN BANINE'S *PARISIAN DAYS*[1]

SHAFAG DADASHOVA
ADA University, Baku
sndadashova@ada.edu.az

Abstract: *This article examines the memoir* Parisian Days *by Azerbaijani French writer Banine, situating it within discourses of exile, gender, and postcolonial identity. Writing from the geographic and cultural periphery of the former Russian Empire, Banine offers a unique lens on the Russian émigré experience in interwar Paris. Her reflections reveal the persistent imperial hierarchies that shape the diaspora and foreground the complex negotiations of identity undertaken by women from colonized regions. This study argues that Banine's work introduces a counter-memory rooted in cultural hybridity, gendered displacement, and colonial critique. The author crafts a voice that resists both nostalgic imperialism and total assimilation and establishes exile as a site of critical agency and transformation.*
Keywords: *Banine, postimperial identity, Russian Empire, Parisian émigrés, cultural hybridity, in-betweenness*

1. Introduction: Framing gender and exile from the periphery

Exile is never a single-layered experience; it is a condition that reshapes values and forces individuals to reexamine who they are. Its meaning is deeply tied to time, place, and perspective. For many women from the colonized peripheries of the Russian Empire, exile meant more than displacement and loss; it became an opportunity for self-redefinition. Banine (Umm-El-Banine Assadoulaeff), an Azerbaijani French writer born in 1905 into Baku's wealthy oil elite, offers one such perspective. Her memoir *Parisian Days* (1947), a continuation

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of *Days in the Caucasus* (1946), captures the turbulence of leaving Azerbaijan after the Bolshevik takeover and resettling in Paris.

Unlike dominant White émigré narratives, Banine refuses to mourn a lost imperial grandeur. Instead, she probes the legacy of Russian colonialism and highlights the challenges of being a woman from the colonial margins in a community still bound by imperial nostalgia. *Parisian Days* is also a text that complicates familiar binaries: colonizer versus colonized, exile versus homeland, memory versus reinvention. Banine's autobiographical dilogy creates a picture of Azerbaijani society under Russian colonial rule in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. After the treaties of Gulistan (1813) and Turkmenchay (1828), the Caucasus went under the Russian Empire. For families like Banine's, wealthy landowners and oil magnates in Baku, colonial rule brought both opportunities and contradictions: access to Russian-language education, mobility within imperial institutions, and a cosmopolitan lifestyle that blurred, but did not erase, traditional identities.

Banine's story, however, extends beyond her privileged origins. After fleeing to Paris, she redefined herself as a writer in exile, establishing a reputation within the French literary world. Through her essays, novels, and memoirs, most notably *Days in the Caucasus* (1946) and *Parisian Days* (1947), she wove together reflections on displacement with a sharp critique of the imperial and patriarchal structures that had shaped her life. Her trajectory marks her as one of the few Azerbaijani women whose authorship and lived experience bridged the cultural worlds of the Caucasus and Europe.

Within postcolonial, feminist, and diaspora studies, scholars have increasingly turned their attention to how women from colonized and peripheral geographies narrate exile. Banine's *Parisian Days* stands at the crossroads of these conversations, offering autobiographical reflections that illuminate cultural displacement, gendered marginality, and the complexities of postimperial identity. An important theoretical touchstone here is Hannah Arendt's classic essay *We Refugees* that provides an early articulation of the existential rupture that accompanies exile. Arendt describes the experience of refugees as a twofold loss: "We lost our home, which means the familiarity of daily life. We lost our occupation, which means the confidence that we are of some use in this world" (Arendt, 1943, p. 69). This material and symbolic dispossession is omnipresent in all immigrant autobiographies, and it shows that displacement is more than a geographic concept but also a loss of social meaning and self-assured identity. Arendt's framework underscores how exile dislocates not only the body but the narrative of selfhood.

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Homi K. Bhabha's concept of cultural hybridity offers a theoretical lens for interpreting Banine's in-betweenness. In *The Location of Culture* Bhabha defines the "inter" as "the cutting edge of translation and negotiation, the in-between space, that carries the burden of the meaning of culture" (Bhabha, 1994, p. 56). Banine inhabits precisely this in-between space, wandering between Russian imperial culture, French modernity, and her Azerbaijani heritage. Her position exemplifies Bhabha's "third space," a site of cultural rearticulation where identity is not resolved but continually negotiated. This complexity is further illuminated by Svetlana Boym's distinction between restorative and reflective nostalgia. In *The Future of Nostalgia* (2001), Boym writes: "Reflective nostalgia dwells on the ambivalences of human longing and belonging and does not shy away from the contradictions of modernity" (Boym, 2001, p. 49). In contrast, restorative nostalgia aims to reconstruct the lost home and restore it to an imagined wholeness, often emphasizing collective identity, myth, and historical continuity. Banine's memoir embodies reflective nostalgia: it resists idealizing the past and instead highlights the contradictions of her position as a female subject shaped by both colonial subjugation and modern emancipation. Her refusal to romanticize either Baku or Paris exemplifies the discomfort, and clarity that reflective nostalgia provides, setting her apart from narratives driven by restorative longing.

Avtar Brah's influential work *Cartographies of Diaspora* (1996) introduces the concept of "diaspora space" as a critical site of intersectionality. As Brah notes, "Diaspora space is the intersectionality of diaspora, border, and dis/location as a point of confluence of economic, political, cultural, and psychic processes" (Brah, 1994, p. 181). Banine's life narrative operates within this space, where dislocation is simultaneously geographic, cultural, and gendered. Her transition from an elite Azerbaijani daughter to a mannequin in Paris charts a diasporic trajectory embedded in economic precarity, cultural reorientation, and gendered transformation. Lisa Malkki's anthropological study *Purity and Exile* (1995) further deepens the understanding of displacement as a lived, rather than merely legal, category. Malkki asserts that "refugee status is not simply a legal category but a lived experience that reshapes identity and belonging" (Malkki, 1995, p. 13). Banine's memoir testifies to this reshaping through her ambivalent relation to both her origins and her new environment. The narrative does not depict exile as a transition from one stable identity to another but as an ongoing recalibration of belonging.

Similarly, Edward Said's reflections on exile offer insight into the psychic cost of dislocation. In *Reflections on Exile* (2000), Said writes: "Exile is strangely compelling to think

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about but terrible to experience. It is the unhealable rift forced between a human being and a native place" (Said, 2000, p. 173). Banine's writing performs this rift, oscillating between irony and longing, critique and memory. Her disillusionment with both the colonial homeland and the imperial center reflects exile's double-bind: the impossibility of return and the insufficiency of arrival. The gendered dimension of this experience is sharpened by Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's provocative question in *Can the Subaltern Speak?* (1988). Spivak reminds us that even within critiques of empire, subaltern women are often spoken about rather than allowed to speak for themselves: "The subaltern cannot speak. There is no virtue in global laundry lists with 'woman' as a pious item" (Spivak, 1988, p. 287). Banine's memoir is a counter to this silencing. She asserts her voice not by claiming an idealized authenticity but by writing herself into a new subject position, ironic, fractured, and fully aware of the performative dimensions of gender and exile.

Finally, Shafag Dadashova (2024) argues that Banine's movement toward authorship is a deliberate act of resistance against both colonial constraint and patriarchal determinism: "France, which seemed to her as an incarnation of freedom, escape from collective decisions for her and interferences in her life. She dreams of a better life rebelling against certain aspects her Muslim heritage imposes" (Dadashova, 2024). This vision situates Banine within a genealogy of women who do not simply experience exile but use it to reimagine subjectivity outside the binaries of East and West, tradition and modernity.

Banine's text becomes a site of critical engagement with displacement, identity, and gendered resistance, a narrative that transforms exile from a story of loss into one of reflexive, ambivalent, and enduring agency. In *Parisian Days,* she writes:

> The huge region of my native Caucasus alone provided a considerable contingent of Georgians, Armenians, Azerbaijanis, Ossetians, Circassians and Chechens, to whom were added Ukrainians, Crimean Tatars and Gypsies from all the regions, Balts, many of them of German origin, and finally Russians. This disparate society formed a diverse mass, whose only common denominator was the loss of homeland, nationality, property and social status. (Banine, 2003, p. 87)

At first glance, this catalog might appear to illustrate what I call Banine's intersectional understanding of displacement. Yet it also reflects a deeper regional and imperial reality. The Caucasus had long been a multiethnic, highly diverse region, and under both Tsarist and Soviet rule this diversity was further reshaped by explicitly imperial settlement policies that

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introduced Russians, Ukrainians, and Balts into the region. Banine's phrasing, "this disparate society formed a diverse mass," thus documents not only the condition of shared exile but also the layered histories of coexistence, colonization, and coercion that preceded displacement. Her enumeration refuses to let Russian émigrés dominate the narrative of diaspora: she situates their fate within a broader colonial and multiethnic context. In this sense, her memoir destabilizes the notion of a singular "Russian exile" and instead reveals what Avtar Brah (1996) terms the diaspora space, where different histories of empire, migration, and loss converge. What's particularly striking in this passage is her inclusion of marginalized or often overlooked groups, Crimean Tatars, Romani (referred to in outdated terms), and the Balts, reminding us that imperial collapse affected many beyond the Russian elite. Her view of post-imperial exile is not nostalgic but structural: exile is not the tragic end of a golden age, but a systemically produced rupture, rooted in imperial expansion and collapse. By foregrounding the diversity of displaced peoples, Banine calls attention to the heterogeneity within what is often presented as a monolithic experience. She invites us to read the émigré condition not only through the lens of loss, but also through that of power, specifically, the uneven power relations that structured both empire and its aftermath. In this sense, the "common denominator" of loss becomes a ground for critical solidarity, but only once it is stripped of the romanticism that often cloaks imperial nostalgia.

As Banine makes clear, this apparent assimilation came at the cost of cultural dislocation. In *Parisian Days*, she reflects: "Me, Russian? Why not Papuan?... I did not hate the colonizers... but I kept my distance and did not want to be 'one of them'" (Banine, 2023, p. 51). On the surface, this appears as a categorical refusal of Russian identity. However, read through Homi Bhabha's theorization of mimicry (1994), the disavowal itself may be understood as symptomatic of mimicry's ambivalence: the colonized subject never fully reproduces the colonial norm, yet cannot entirely escape its imprint. Banine's vehement denial of Russianness paradoxically reveals the traces of her partial belonging, a belonging imposed through education, language, and cultural formation. In this sense, her "not wanting to be one of them" exemplifies mimicry's unstable dynamic, an imitation marked by difference, where rejection itself testifies to the lingering presence of the colonial model. Banine's account reveals that the Russian colonial project was not merely administrative or military but cultural and psychological. Russian was the language of instruction, of political legitimacy, and of cultural capital. As Harsha Ram has shown in *The Imperial Sublime* (2023), Russian literature and education played a central role in constructing a vision of empire that extended far beyond

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territorial conquest. For Banine, growing up with Dostoevsky and Pushkin did not erase her sense of foreignness but rather complicated it. Her memoir is filled with moments of cognitive dissonance: an admiration for Russian literature coupled with a refusal to internalize Russian nationalism.

Moreover, Banine contrasts her position with that of her grandmother, a woman who, though part of the same family, never learned Russian and "hated them with a passion" (Banine, 2023, p. 102). This generational difference marks the gendered dimensions of colonial assimilation. While younger women were often educated and groomed to navigate Russian society, older women remained custodians of local language, tradition, and resistance. The grandmother's refusal to speak Russian becomes a form of everyday decolonization, preserving the linguistic and cultural integrity of a colonized people. Banine’s memoir thus presents Azerbaijani identity under empire as fundamentally split. The elite classes were caught between the Russian imperial imagination and the Islamic, Turkic, and local traditions of the Caucasus. This fractured identity is not resolved in exile; rather, it follows Banine into the salons and cafés of Paris, where her voice, though often overlooked by the dominant Russian narrative, insists on articulating a different genealogy of exile, one that begins not with the fall of the Tsar but with the long history of imperial occupation in the Caucasus.

Banine’s journey from Baku to Paris reflects the fate of a wider generation of elite women whose lives were upended by geopolitical upheaval. The Bolshevik Revolution dismantled long-standing social hierarchies, leaving many women not only stateless and impoverished but also adrift in cultural dislocation. For Banine, this rupture was experienced in distinctly gendered terms: exile entailed the simultaneous loss of homeland, social standing, domestic security, and personal autonomy. She recounts how her father, once a powerful oil magnate, was imprisoned by the new regime, and how she herself, barely fifteen, was coerced into a marriage arranged to secure familial protection amid revolutionary chaos. “At fifteen I was thrown into the prison of a forced marriage”, she writes (p. 8). This line encapsulates the dual coercion faced by women during times of national crisis: political violence and patriarchal containment.

Lisa Malkki’s anthropological work (1995) on refugees underscores how displacement disrupts both geographic and symbolic belonging. In Banine’s case, the loss of nation is compounded by a shift in gender roles: from daughter of the elite to a foreigner in service labor, or, in Banine’s case, a foreign writer struggling to author her own voice. Marriage emerges repeatedly in her memoir as both a tool for survival and a reminder of limited options. While

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some women secured their futures through strategic alliances with wealthy French men, Banine critiques this as a form of commodified nostalgia, a way for aristocratic women to trade on their former glory in a market that now valued them only as exoticized remnants of a lost empire. As we see in the autobiography, Banine refuses to frame exile as a tragedy. Rather than mourning her losses, she reimagines exile as a space of possibility, an escape from patriarchal constraints. Her arranged marriage quickly collapses, and in Paris she begins to shape a life on her own terms. This refusal - of marriage, of imperial nostalgia, of romanticizing the past, marks a turning point in her self-conception. Exile, which disempowered so many others, becomes for Banine the paradoxical ground of her feminist awakening.

In this respect, Banine's perspective diverges sharply from that of male writers in the Russian émigré canon. Ivan Bunin, for example, often cast exile in elegiac tones, portraying it as the irretrievable loss of a vanished pre-revolutionary world. Vladimir Nabokov was more critical of crude imperial nostalgia, however in his *Speak, Memory* we can see selective celebration of aristocratic privilege and cultural refinement. Banine's approaches are different: she describes the past not with longing or redemption but with disillusionment and critique. For her, the collapse of empire did not shatter a utopia; it revealed the contradictions of a system that had always rendered her gender and nationality secondary. In Paris, Banine is frequently among a vast and varied community of Russian émigrés. These were the representatives of a displaced aristocracy, the intelligentsia, and military elites who had fled the Bolshevik regime and sought to recreate their past lives abroad. But Banine, whose identity is rooted not in the Russian metropole but in its colonial periphery, quickly distances herself from their performative nostalgia and cultural insularity. She observes, often with biting irony, how these former elites remain mentally imprisoned in a fantasy of "Holy Russia," clinging to a hierarchical worldview that has no relevance in their new lives.

"The Russians had created a ghetto of their own making," she writes, adding, "they accused the French of ignoring them, but in fact it was they who refused to integrate" (Banine, 2023*,* p. 93). This ghettoization is not merely a matter of language or custom, but a refusal to let go of an imperial identity that no longer holds currency. Banine's tone here is not mournful but sharply critical, she exposes the contradictions in their rejection of Bolshevism while maintaining the same classism, xenophobia, and chauvinism that fueled imperial power. In contrast to these exiles, Banine does not indulge in mythologizing the past. "I detested Russia, and never for one second considered myself Russian," she declares (Banine, 2023*,* p. 50). Her alienation is not only political but existential. She sees herself as doubly displaced: first by

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Russian colonialism, then by the Revolution that offered no redress to the non-Russian peripheries. In this context, the émigré salons and cafés of Paris become scenes of tragicomedy, where former generals and duchesses serve tea in worn-out dresses and recite Pushkin as if conjuring a vanished empire through verse.

Banine's critique is also gendered. She observes how the Russian émigré men retained the voice of authority, publishing memoirs and participating in political circles, while the women, many of whom were from the same aristocratic class, disappeared into invisibility. Some became governesses, other shopgirls, but none were permitted the symbolic power of public mourning or intellectual expression. In highlighting these erasures, Banine's memoir becomes an alternative archive of female experience in exile, one that refuses to romanticize suffering or elevate patriarchal memory. This memoir illustrates that exile for women is a site of both loss and gain. On one hand, displacement strips women of privilege, economic security, and symbolic authority, rendering many invisible or socially constrained. On the other hand, exile also creates spaces for agency, critical reflection, and personal transformation, allowing women like Banine to renegotiate identity, resist patriarchal norms, and claim autonomy. The tension between these losses and gains is not contradictory but constitutive: it is precisely the interplay of deprivation and possibility that defines the female experience of exile. Indeed, Banine underscores the irony of Russian women who had once occupied salons and courts now working as cloakroom attendants and seamstresses. "I knew former ladies-in-waiting... scurrying from kitchen to table for forty years" (Banine, 2023*,* p. 95). Her tone is not pitying but disillusioned. These women, she suggests, were not innocent victims but willing participants in an unjust social order that has now come undone. Yet even in their fall, they cling to the trappings of superiority, wearing worn-out furs and pearls, as if appearance could reconstitute authority.

What makes Banine's critique especially powerful is her refusal to position herself as superior. Her memoir is filled with moments of self-irony and ambivalence. She mocks her own attempts to conform to Parisian fashion and etiquette, recalling how her stepmother declared her appearance "so Baku" and promptly ordered her to the hairdresser (p. 107). In these humorous episodes, Banine reveals the pressures of cultural assimilation while maintaining a critical distance from both her inherited and adopted cultures. Her resistance to the Russian émigré mythos is also evident in her refusal to write in Russian. Despite pressure from émigré figures like Teffi, Banine insists on writing in French, aligning herself not with imperial nostalgia but with the present. This linguistic choice is profoundly political: it asserts

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a postcolonial voice that neither apologizes for its hybridity nor seeks validation through imperial languages. “I felt at ease in the West without denying my part of the East,” she writes (Banine, 2023*,* p. 102). This ability to inhabit contradiction, without seeking resolution, is the core of Banine’s feminist-postcolonial ethos.

In refusing the moral economy of the Russian émigré narrative, where suffering ennobles and nostalgia redeems, Banine offers a radically different model of exile. It is one in which memory is not sacred but contested, and identity is not inherited but chosen, often at great personal cost. As the article will further explore in the next section, this cost is particularly high for women, whose labor in exile becomes both economic and emotional, sustaining families and preserving fragments of culture even as they are denied authorship of its history.

2. Women’s roles beyond the imperial frame

Parisian Days illuminate the obvious divergence between male and female émigré experiences, revealing how exile reconstituted gender roles reproducing and unsettling patriarchal norms. While male émigrés often managed to retain symbolic capital, participating in intellectual salons, publishing political essays, and sustaining a performative image of dignified resistance, women, by contrast, were frequently relegated to the margins, tasked with ensuring communal survival through forms of labor that remained socially invisible.

It is worth mentioning that recent scholarship provides a more nuanced picture of interwar émigré life in Western Europe, which complicates the contrast between symbolic capital for male émigrés and marginalization of women. Marc Raeff (1990) shows that although a cultural and intellectual infrastructure (newspapers, schools, churches, artistic circles) was rebuilt in exile, not all émigrés were able to participate in these elite networks. Raeff acknowledges that many émigrés “did not ‘unpack’ their suitcases; they sat on their trunks” in hope of returning, before gradually adapting to new social realities. This image suggests material precarity and constrained agency, undermining any blanket claim that male émigrés broadly retained symbolic authority. Likewise, Michael Goebel’s *Anti-Imperial Metropolis: Interwar Paris and the Seeds of Third World Nationalism* (2015) attends to the everyday lives of migrant populations, showing that many colonial migrants and non-European émigrés did manual or precarious labor, shared housing, and depended on mutual aid societies, conditions that limited access to elite intellectual salons.

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Banine’s feminist lens aligns with postcolonial feminist theorists like Chandra Talpade Mohanty (2023), who underscores the need to interrogate how gender, class, and colonial legacies converge in shaping women's migratory trajectories. The labor performed by women in exile was often informal, precarious, and underpaid. It is worth mentioning that this labor was not only a means of survival; it also functioned as a form of silent scaffolding that supported the social and cultural life of émigré communities. Through these everyday acts, women became the bearers of fragile collective memory, preserving customs, stories, and communal bonds even as the grandeur of empire dissolved. Banine captures this dynamic in one passage, highlighting how displaced peoples, including women, recreate a sense of shared belonging:

> The majority of Russians prefer to mix among themselves. I should point out straightaway, though, that the same tendency can be observed among almost all displaced peoples. The memory of the distant homeland gnaws away at you, devours you, hurts you, so you recreate it on a tiny scale by talking, thinking and eating in Russian... You can sing the same songs together, recall the death of the same tsar, hate the Bolsheviks together, support one another with the same hopes and warm one another’s hearts, chilled by the misfortune of exile. (Banine, 2023, p. 94).

This description gestures toward the affective labor women were expected to perform, maintaining cultural continuity, tending to emotional wounds, and reproducing the rituals of “home.” Such roles rendered women the bearers of a fragile collective memory, even as they remained excluded from the political and intellectual production of that memory. Their suffering was not heroicized but naturalized; their endurance not commemorated but expected. They became, in Banine’s words, the “silent scaffolding” upon which émigré identity precariously rested.

Banine shows how gender expectations, shaped by imperial nostalgia, often grew sharper in exile. Women were expected to carry themselves with dignity among personal loss, to embody cultural resilience, and to hold together families whose male figures had lost their former status with the collapse of the old order. Exile was therefore not only a political and geographical break, but also a setting where patriarchal pressures deepened. At the same time, Banine does not portray this marginalization as purely disempowering. She points to its paradoxes. Exile was harsh, but it opened new possibilities. Economic need pushed women into the workforce, and while this work was often exploitative, it also offered a degree of independence that had been unthinkable back home. For many, earning a wage outside the

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household marked a dramatic shift in gender roles. In this way, exile was both a site of constraint and of transformation, and for Banine personally, it was quietly liberating. She shows a gendered economy of survival in which women carried the heaviest loads yet also found subtle ways to resist.

Banine herself negotiates these contradictions in a unique way: as a woman of colonial elite origin, she was spared the most menial forms of labor, yet she was not granted access to male spheres of political or literary recognition. Instead, she carved a space for herself in the cultural sphere by becoming a writer, but this too was fraught. Her decision to write in French, rather than Russian, alienated her from the émigré intelligentsia. “The Russians couldn’t forgive me for writing in French,” she notes (Banine, 2023*,* p. 102). In this act of linguistic self-assertion, Banine resists being confined to either nostalgic memory or colonial mimicry. Her writing thus becomes a form of labor, intellectual, emotional, and political. It is through authorship that Banine reclaims the right to narrate her own story, rather than be subsumed into the dominant narratives of either Russian loss or French exoticization. This resonates with Gayatri Spivak’s (1988) foundational question: “Can the subaltern speak?” Banine’s memoir answers not only that the subaltern woman can speak but that her speech often takes the form of irony, refusal, and disruption rather than overt resistance. Moreover, Banine’s reflections contribute to what feminist scholar Nira Yuval-Davis terms the “politics of belonging” (1997), the processes through which inclusion and exclusion are constructed along lines of gender, race, and nation. Banine is never fully “at home” in France, nor does she seek to be.

An episode from Parisian Days demonstrates Banine’s emotional estrangement and cultural dissonance in exile. Introduced to Lucien Grandot by her cousin Gulnar as a potential suitor, Banine finds herself in a situation where gendered expectations collide and collapse. The first question Grandot asks, “Do you like France?”, is considered by Banine, “aggressively stupid” (Banine, 2023*,* p. 105). She perceives it as a ritual of cultural affirmation that leaves no room for ambivalence and tersely responds with a gruff “yes”. Although she does love France, she refuses to conform to the role of conventional well-mannered foreign woman. This small act of resistance already destabilizes the power dynamic. “I knew our roles were reversed,” (Banine, 2023*,* p. 105) she writes, prefiguring her ironic dominance over the interaction.

But the deeper alienation unfolds when Grandot’s interest turns into overt Orientalist fantasy. His effusive monologue, “Ah, the Orient! Pierre Loti, the Bosphorus, the geisha…” (Banine, 2023*,* p. 106), reveals the extent to which Banine is not seen, but fantasized. When she retorts, “The geisha are Japanese,” her correction lands in a void; Grandot isn’t interested

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in facts but in the indulgent clichés that allow him to consume her identity as exotic spectacle. Banine's internal reaction, "It was enough to despise him in silence" (p. 106), becomes a quiet assertion of dignity in the face of humiliating objectification. Gulnar's role in this episode is also notable. Rather than protecting Banine, Gulnar ridicules her. "She's been in Paris for years, but you'd think she's just escaped from the harem" (Banine, 2023*,* p. 106). Gulnar draws a sharp contrast between her own self-fashioned Parisian "modernity" and Banine's supposed "backwardness". This betrayal functions on two levels: first, it undermines Banine's agency in front of Grandot, and second, it signals that among exiled women, too, there is a politics of visibility. Gulnar asserts her belonging by sacrificing Banine's.

The asymmetry of adaptation becomes stark. Gulnar has learned to thrive by performing Frenchness and accepting the social rituals of assimilation, including arranging romantic opportunities within acceptable Parisian circles. Banine, on the other hand, finds herself constitutionally incapable of such performance. The social and emotional codes around courtship, flirtation, and even conversation feel foreign to her not because she is repressed, but because the terms of participation demand a renunciation of self-respect and cultural specificity. Grandot's fascination is not with her, but with a fantasy of "the East" that dissolves her individuality. Thus, her inability to "naturalize" the relationship is not a failure, but a refusal. Banine cannot, and will not, submit to the commodified gender roles exile demands of women. In this moment, her emotional distance and social discomfort are not flaws, but acts of internal survival. Her body language, "hunched in my corner...less welcoming than a stone statue" (Banine, 2023*,* p. 106), becomes a form of resistance, asserting the right not to be charming, assimilable, or available.

In short, this scene illustrates how exile produces gendered expectations for adaptation: women are expected not only to labor but to be gracious, desirable, and modern. Banine's refusal of these terms isolates her further, but it also preserves her subjectivity. Her silence, sarcasm, and emotional withdrawal are signs of dignity that assimilation cannot offer. Focusing on survival strategies, silences, Banine deconstructs the romantic mythologies of both homeland and hostland. Exile is not, in her account, a site of suffering or cultural transformation, it is a fractured and gendered terrain in which women improvise belonging and agency in the face of exclusion.

There is a chapter in Parisian days entitled *White Emigration in the Wake of the October Revolution.* This chapter opens with Teffi's satirical story *The Small Town*, humorously depicting the Russian émigré community in Paris. Teffi satirically illustrates how the émigrés,

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who used to be elites, led fragmented lives full of bitterness, social division, and nostalgic idealism. Despite the humorous tone, Teffi herself and others like her suffered deeply from exile, poverty, and cultural dislocation. The chapter then broadens to reflect on the larger tragedy of the White émigrés, those who fled Russia after the Bolshevik Revolution and during the civil war. These émigrés came from diverse ethnic backgrounds (including Georgians, Armenians, Azerbaijanis, Ossetians, Ukrainians, and others) and spanned social classes. Their unifying trait was the loss of homeland, status, and identity. Estimates of their number vary wildly, from two to ten million, but the exact figure remains elusive due to chaotic and undocumented escapes across Russia's vast borders. Many emigrants didn't appear in official refugee statistics, some assimilated, married locals, or obtained other nationalities, while others escaped to places with little administrative oversight. An American observer, W. Chapin Huntington (1933), described this diaspora as a stateless "nation" with its capital in Paris and its members scattered across the globe, remarkably educated, yet lacking governance or formal representation. This "invisible nation" managed to preserve language, culture, and schools despite its fractured condition.

The chapter concludes by highlighting the introduction of the Nansen passport, a pioneering humanitarian solution. After a 1921 Soviet decree stripped émigrés of citizenship, Norwegian diplomat Fridtjof Nansen devised this passport to provide legal identity to stateless people. Sixteen nations adopted it in 1922, and it became a critical lifeline for countless displaced persons. Teffi shows how absurdity often coexisted with alienation in émigré life. The émigrés sharing the trauma of exile, clung to their old status and divisions, even during their struggle to survive. Despite high education levels and cultural sophistication, the émigrés were politically powerless, legally unrecognized until the Nansen initiative, besides, they were often viewed with suspicion or disdain in host countries. The text briefly notes that many Russian women married locals or disappeared from official lists, raising questions about gendered experiences of displacement, visibility, and adaptation. This narrative once again depicts how exile renders people invisible in legal terms, and how identity must often be reconstructed through international cooperation, exemplified by the Nansen passport.

3. Embodied exile and spatial displacement

Banine's physical movement through space, up seven flights of stairs to her small Parisian apartment, mirrors her symbolic ascent in Parisian society, albeit one fraught with

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anxiety and precarity. The malfunctioning lift becomes an allegorical device: it clunks, groans, and finally fails, leaving her to climb laboriously. This serves as an emblem of diasporic striving, fragile mechanisms of support give way, and one must ascend alone. Her claustrophobia in the lift and nostalgia for Mount Kazbek (invoked through the imagined image of Mont Blanc) further deepen the sense of estrangement. The mountain, emblem of her Caucasian homeland, appears in flashes, sublime yet unreachable, only to be replaced by the stifling reality of “the service stairs of a Parisian building” (Banine, 2023, p. 48). This spatial juxtaposition captures the layered nature of diasporic longing: exile is a vertical effort, a gasping ascent marked by fleeting visions of a lost origin.

Her dreams remain unabashedly extravagant: “I was already living in the most beautiful castles of Spain...my ambitions blossomed in the shade of their colonnades” (Banine, 2023, p. 48). These imaginary castles function not as escapism but as projections of potentiality. Here, Banine invokes a mode of what Svetlana Boym (2001) terms *reflective nostalgia*, a longing that acknowledges the impossibility of return and instead seeks meaning in contradiction. The flamboyant imagery of palatial ambitions, “glittering and strewn with the corpses of heartbroken admirers,” is not merely a fantasy of conquest but a performative inversion of the very power structures that once confined her. Yet this performance is deeply gendered. While her male counterparts in exile find power in authorship or political critique, Banine is offered only the symbolic capital of beauty and performance.

In *Parisian Days*, Banine recalls a turning point in her life: being accepted into a Parisian fashion house as a mannequin. At first, it feels like a lighthearted story of youthful dreams and ambition. But behind the humor lies something more complex, the traces of patriarchal control she carried with her from the Caucasus into the glittering world of Paris. Her reflections are laced with ambivalence: “It was obvious to me that a life worth living had to dazzle. I just didn’t know how it would do this” (Banine, 2023, p. 48). The imperative to “dazzle” speaks to the pressures of femininity in both the colonial and Western imaginary. The mannequin becomes both icon and instrument, a glittering surface that veils deeper questions of identity.

Perhaps the most poignant reflection comes later, when Banine compares her life to a Neapolitan ice cream: *“layers of different colours and flavours... so dissimilar, so different in inspiration, that it’s hard to imagine one and the same destiny behind them.”* (Banine 2023, p. 48). This metaphor, deceptively simple, encapsulates the central theme of postcolonial subjectivity, what Bhabha (1994) would call the "hybridity" of the in-between. Her identity is

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neither singular nor sequential but stratified, each layer bearing the imprint of a different cultural, emotional, and historical influence. And crucially, she does not romanticize this multiplicity. She is "annoyed rather than touched" by the thought of her ancestral connection. This irritation reflects the tension between inherited identity and chosen subjectivity, a core dilemma for diasporic women who must negotiate between tradition and modernity, visibility and dignity.

4. From veiled ancestor to fashion model: A genealogy of feminine disruption

Banine's reflection on her entry into haute couture is laced with irony, ambition, and self-awareness. She recounts her euphoric reaction to being accepted: "No one can imagine my joy, perhaps the greatest of my life; I was free and a mannequin, a combination that was more than I could have hoped for" (Banine, 2023, p. 48). The juxtaposition of "free" and "mannequin" immediately signals the contradictory nature of her liberation. To become a mannequin, an object designed for display, is paradoxically framed as emancipation. This duality sharply reveals the gendered condition of female visibility: to be seen is a form of agency, but also a form of exposure.

Her grandmother and mother, "veiled and legal minors all their lives," (Banine 2023, p. 48) represent a genealogical continuity of subjugation that Banine disrupts. "How could that grandmother, or mother, have imagined me parading dresses, some very low-cut, in front of strangers?" (Banine, 2023, p. 48). Here, Banine places herself in a critical lineage of feminine transformation, from veiled domesticity to public spectacle. Yet this is not a triumphant declaration of modernity's superiority; rather, it is a wry commentary on the absurdity of her journey from cultural invisibility to hypervisibility. She calls her younger self "the little Caucasian goose," (Banine, 2023, p. 48) a term tinged with self-deprecating humor. The metaphor signals her vulnerability but also her sense of being an actor in a European drama that exoticizes and commodifies difference.

The episode concludes with her entry into Worth, the famed fashion house. She recalls "the fateful morning" and how she "gulped down a café crème" (Banine, 2023, p. 48) before reporting for duty, an act both quotidian and charged with anticipation. Her vulnerability is underscored by the disdainful gaze of Madame Blanche, yet her presence there marks a radical departure from the trajectory dictated by her lineage. This moment, then, is not just the beginning of a fashion career but a critical juncture in Banine's self-fashioning. It marks the

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point where she consciously takes hold of her narrative, not as a passive subject of exile or a silent descendant of veiled women, but as a visible, mobile, and ironic agent within modernity's spectacle. Her entrance into haute couture, "with all the risks this role entailed" (Banine, 2023, p. 48), becomes a feminist reappropriation of space, even as it exposes her to new forms of objectification.

In this passage, Banine dramatizes the paradox of diasporic femininity: the freedom to perform modernity is shadowed by the histories of colonial and patriarchal constraint. Her tone oscillates between irony and introspection, ambition and anxiety. By placing her "Caucasian goose" self within the haute couture world of Rue de la Paix, she not only exposes the dissonances of exile but writes herself into its glittering, often absurd textures. The mannequin, the lift, the castles of Spain, and the layered ice cream all serve as metaphors for a self in flux, paraded, scrutinized, but ultimately self-articulated. The chapter *A Tale of the Unexpected* (Banine, 2023, p. 66) is particularly rich in its portrayal of this fractured identity, using the sudden reappearance of Banine's cousin Gulnar as a narrative device to juxtapose past and present, homeland and exile, and ultimately, to expose the tensions of cultural displacement and gendered selfhood.

Banine's life in Paris is marked by a calm, if slightly mundane, routine of modest comfort, characterized by "frugal" meals and artistic domesticity shared with her sister Zuleykha and her husband José. This tranquil scene is violently interrupted, quite literally, by Gulnar's dramatic entrance, an incursion from the past that symbolically ruptures the fragile boundaries Banine has constructed around herself. As Banine narrates, "when suddenly, and this 'when suddenly' isn't a literary device but literal accuracy," the violent grammar of the phrase foregrounds the intrusive, destabilizing nature of Gulnar's return. In postcolonial terms, Banine's condition is emblematic of what Homi Bhabha calls the "unhomely" experience, where the boundaries between the private domestic sphere and the public history of displacement collapse into one another. Gulnar is not merely a figure of familial reunion; she is a specter of a world Banine had tried to sever ties with, a world of early marriage, patriarchal constraints, imperial dissolution, and revolutionary trauma.

Banine reflects:

> I regretted not knowing what had happened to our close relatives, I wasn't a monster, after all, [but] this rupture with a world where I had known so much sorrow was good for me. (Banine, 2023, p. 68)

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Her ambivalence here is telling. The emotional detachment is not born of apathy but of necessity: survival in exile, especially as a woman, requires psychic distance from a past that continually threatens to engulf her. The metaphor of the recurring nightmare, “I was back in Baku, stuck to the bottom of a black hole…like a tombstone” (p. 68), reveals the subconscious weight of cultural trauma. Paris, by contrast, is represented as a space of relief, of “temperate” existence, climatically and ideologically, offering her a kind of neutrality from the ideological fervor and emotional turbulence of her Azerbaijani past.

5. Negotiating femininity in exile

Throughout the chapter, Banine presents her female selfhood as suspended between Gulnar’s flamboyant, unapologetic persona and Zuleykha’s more restrained, artistic sensibility. Gulnar emerges as a hyperbolic figure of performative femininity, dramatic, fashionable, multilingual, sexually liberated. She embodies a form of cosmopolitan womanhood that both fascinates and disturbs Banine. Her criticisms of the apartment, her immediate rapport with José, and her mastery of performance (including her use of a “magnificent lorgnette”) all mark her as a woman who has mastered the art of visibility, a sharp contrast to Banine’s cultivated inconspicuousness in exile. However, Gulnar’s arrival is not simply a disruption; it is a mirror, reflecting the suppressed parts of Banine’s own identity. Banine’s admiration for Gulnar is longstanding:

> Of my three small masters, I admired Gulnar in particular…She knew everything, saw everything, guessed everything and explained it all to me. (Banine, 2023, p. 69).

This childhood recollection reveals how female subjectivity for Banine is mediated through other women, not only grandmother, sisters and governesses but precocious cousins. Gulnar had been a formative figure in shaping Banine’s early understanding of the world and womanhood, even if her modes of cynicism and transgression were ultimately inaccessible to Banine’s more introspective temperament.

Here, we may draw upon Judith Butler’s theory of gender performativity (1990), which posits that gender is not a fixed identity but a set of repeated actions and stylized performances. Gulnar performs her femininity in excess, in both appearance and language. She jokes in French, makes grand gestures, and critiques the aesthetics of the Parisian apartment. Her

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multilingual flamboyance is a deliberate assertion of agency within the diasporic space, contrasting Banine's quieter, more assimilated presence. Yet Banine does not fully disavow her origins. Her description of Gulnar's charm and adaptive intelligence is layered with admiration and envy:

> She had that striking physique that captures the attention… she possessed to the highest degree that renowned, valuable charm that can be used to help or harm others. (Banine, 2023, p. 69).

This recognition of Gulnar's agency, though potentially self-serving, signals a broader meditation on the ways women navigate patriarchal and geopolitical constraints. Gulnar, unlike Banine, does not desire stability or belonging; she moves through cities, men, and roles with ease. But this ease, Banine implies, might come at the cost of deeper roots, of the vulnerability that accompanies attachment. The chapter subtly critiques the idea of Paris as a true refuge. While Banine experiences relief in the "temperate climate" of France, her narrative makes clear that she remains fundamentally unsettled. Paris is not a homeland, but a safe harbor. Her response to Gulnar's intrusion reflects not just surprise, but an undercurrent of anxiety, a fear of being pulled back into the gravitational field of the past. This ambiguity is central to her identity: Banine does not idealize her life in France, but she also refuses to romanticize the Azerbaijani world she left behind. She is, to borrow Gloria Anzaldúa's phrase (1987), a borderland subject, inhabiting a third space between the nostalgia of origin and the alienation of assimilation. This liminality becomes especially gendered when we consider that Banine's original displacement was partially enforced through marriage (at fifteen) and patriarchal obligation, and her subsequent life in France allows her new, if constrained, forms of self-determination.

The past for Banine is both intimate and foreign, a time (and identity) she has tried to forget, but which returns not as nostalgia but as confrontation. Diasporic identity, especially for women, is not merely about cultural hybridity or East-West binaries, but about wandering between belonging and loss, between feminine subjugation and self-fashioning, between homeland and hostland. In this sense, Banine's identity is not static but dynamic, constructed through memory, language, and the everyday performances of survival. Her Paris is not exile, but a middle ground, where being in-between is itself the only stable condition. The chapter ends not with resolution but with transition: Banine prepares to move in with Gulnar, a

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symbolic act that suggests the continued negotiation of her fractured, feminized, and diasporic self.

We witness Banine's in-between position not only episodically, but as a persistent and defining condition that permeates *Parisian Days*. Unlike her cousin Gulnar, who confidently adapts to Parisian life and performs Frenchness with flair, Banine inhabits a liminal space, feeling alienated both from the Azerbaijan of her childhood and the France of her adulthood. This in-betweenness is not merely a geographic or cultural displacement; it is a state of epistemic dislocation that positions Banine outside the coherent narratives of belonging offered by either her homeland or her hostland. Her life, as she presents it, is a series of oscillations between cultural codes, languages, and gender expectations, without full integration into any of them.

Banine scrutinizes her own identity through comparative reflection. She neither romanticizes Baku nor idealizes Paris. Instead, she interrogates both, exposing the patriarchal structures and orientalist projections that seek to define her. In this sense, Banine engages in what Homi Bhabha (1994) describes as the labor of the "interstitial subject", one who resists assimilation into dominant narratives while reconfiguring identity through fragmentation and hybridity. This makes her memoir not only autobiographical but profoundly theoretical in its form: a lived performance of diaspora as theorized by thinkers like Avtar Brah (1996) and Stuart Hall (1990).

This persistent in-betweenness is emotionally and intellectually taxing. As the memoir progresses, Banine grapples with exile not simply as a political reality, but as an existential condition. The loss of homeland and cultural coherence leads to a prolonged internal crisis. However, the final pages of *Parisian Days* offer a quiet, transformative shift, a moment of reconciliation, where she confronts her fragmented past and present through the act of writing itself. In a passage of luminous introspection, she writes:

> Searching for an answer, I lifted my head and studied the sky inhabited by a hidden God... miraculously, my heart grew as light as this flight of a bird in the clear sky. (Banine, 2023, p. 182).

This metaphorical lightness does not mark the erasure of pain but its sublimation. What she glimpses is not resolution, but the possibility of sustaining life through art, through the sensorial pleasures of the world, and through a new ethical relation to memory. The imagery of the bird in flight and the "wash of the sea" recalls both freedom and motion, suggesting that exile, though disorienting, need not be immobilizing. Banine's recognition that "life remains a

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precious gift" despite displacement echoes Edward Said's (2000) observation that exile can be "strangely compelling to think about but terrible to experience." In this moment, Banine begins to reframe exile not as pure loss but as a site of creative emergence. Crucially, this transformation is enabled through a gendered and transhistorical act of kinship. She invokes Aïssé, her "Caucasian sister in Paris," as a spectral guide. Aïssé, an 18th-century Circassian woman who also wrote letters from exile in France, becomes a symbolic interlocutor across time. This invocation of feminine literary ancestry marks a subtle yet powerful feminist gesture: Banine inscribes herself into a lineage of diasporic women who resist erasure through language. Her solution, "Why not try to write like Aïssé?", is therapeutic impulse, but also assertion of epistemic agency. Writing becomes a mode of survival, a form of political articulation, and a site of solidarity across temporal and spatial boundaries. In rising to write, Banine embraces what Judith Butler would call a performative authorship: identity is not reclaimed in exile but produced through its narration.

She concludes with a line that encapsulates the memoir's ethos: "Life was waiting for me. I had to go and meet it despite the burden of my reluctant heart." (Banine, 2023, p.182). This sentence reframes her earlier despair not as defeat but as a moment of suspended becoming. Hope becomes a strategy of endurance. In this way, Banine's conclusion is not a closure but an opening. Her reconciliation is not with homeland or hostland, but with the self-in-process. She accepts the fractured condition of her life as its defining truth. Rather than resolving her diasporic identity, she affirms its complexity, writing her way into a future no longer haunted solely by what was lost, but animated by what can still be imagined.

6. Conclusion

Banine's Parisian Days is more than just a personal account of exile; it pushes back against the familiar stories of imperial nostalgia, women's marginalization, and fixed ideas of cultural authenticity. What she offers instead is a voice shaped by in-between spaces, crucially neither fully Eastern nor Western, neither entirely subject to domination nor fully absorbed into assimilation. Through this unsettled position, she questions the very frameworks that try to contain her experience, showing how identity is constantly renegotiated through contradiction, irony, and performance.

Space, both material and symbolic, emerges as central to Banine's exploration of exile. Paris is not a neutral backdrop, but a terrain marked by safety and vulnerability, intimacy and

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exposure. From salons and service lifts to narrow staircases and crowded apartments, the city's architecture frames the movement of women's bodies and their negotiation of social hierarchies. In these spaces, women labor, assert autonomy, and navigate scrutiny under conditions that are at once enabling and constraining. Banine's attention to spatial dynamics underscores how exile is experienced corporeally: the body itself becomes a site of negotiation between freedom and surveillance, belonging and alienation. Paris thus appears not only as a city of refuge but as a network of boundaries that inscribe the exiled woman's constant tension between visibility and erasure. As somebody who came from a colonized corner of the Russian Empire, Banine's displacement was never a neutral one. She carried the double weight of imperial rule and patriarchal control, which she exposes both in her critiques of the Azerbaijani family structures she left behind and in her encounters with the Orientalist expectations of French society.

At the same time, *Parisian Days* is a meditation on the politics of memory. Banine dissects the ruins of empire not to mourn its demise but to expose its contradictions, opening space for alternative genealogies of belonging beyond cultural essentialism or national purity. Her trajectory from the veiled interiors of Baku to the salons and service lifts of Parisian fashion houses dramatizes the arc of postimperial femininity. Whether climbing claustrophobic staircases or rebuffing Orientalist suitors, she stages exile as both a material and symbolic struggle, where selfhood is rearticulated precisely through displacement. Her decision to write in French, to refuse both the language of the colonizer and the nostalgia of the colonized, is as much political as it is linguistic: it affirms the exiled woman's right to theorize her own condition and to transform fractured biography into a tool of critique. Banine's closing reflection: "Life was waiting for me. I had to go and meet it despite the burden of my reluctant heart" is more than a personal affirmation. It gestures to exile not as a condition of death but of deferred possibility. The memoir thus ends not in closure but in continuation: the act of writing becomes a refusal to be fixed in place, a refusal to be silenced by empire, patriarchy, or nostalgia.

In the final analysis, *Parisian Days* offers a rare counter-archive to dominant narratives of displacement. Through irony, ambivalence, and self-reflection, Banine illuminates the gendered textures of postimperial exile and demands that we rethink exile not only as a geopolitical aftermath but as an ongoing practice of identity, memory, and feminist defiance.

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Shafag DADASHOVA is an Assistant Professor at ADA University, Baku. Her research focuses on gender, postimperial memory, and identity in Azerbaijani literature. She is the author of *Azerbaijani Literature and the Gendered Narratives of Nationhood: Weaving Identities* (Routledge, 2025).

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