The Settled Sorrow of Saddle:
the Buryat Ethnic Identity in the Poetry of Bair Dugarov

The aim of this dissertation is to explore the Buryat ethnic identity represented in the poetry of Bair Dugarov, and at the same time to define the place and role of the poet, his poetry in the post-Soviet Buryatia. The Buryat literature studies remain underrepresented in the contemporary global scholarship. The Buryat writers and their literary works rarely served as a main subject of a PhD thesis in English before. As for the Buryat academia, the topic of ethnic identity expressed in literature in general, and in the poetry of Bair Dugarov in particular, is studied only in a fragmentary way, demanding broader perspectives. At the same time, anthropological and ethnological studies of post-Soviet Buryatia and Buryat ethnic identity continue to ignore the analysis of literary works. Focusing on general tendencies, such researches pay less attention to specific personalities engaged in ethnic identity construction. All the above mentioned predetermined the interdisciplinarity of my research, which lies in balancing between literary analysis of the poetry of Bair Dugarov and examination of broad historical and cultural context of Buryatia.

The Buryat people are an ethnic group living on the shores of Lake Baikal on the territory of Ethnic Buryatia. The Buryats represent the major northern subgroup of the Mongolian people and are one of the largest ethnic groups of Siberia. Before entering the Russian Empire in the late 17th-18th centuries, the Buryats were firmly integrated into broader Mongol culture. Common territory, same cultural and religious practices, pastoralism, as well as one literary language within many centuries provided relative unity of the Mongolian world, its historical and literary traditions. The Soviet period has brought rapid advancements in social mobility, education levels and urbanization, but at the same time it was marked by an attempt to discredit the past of the Buryats. Following the policy of that

1. The term Ethnic Buryatia emphasizes the fact that the Buryat people live not only in the Republic of Buryatia, but also in neighboring Irkutsk Oblast and Zabaykalsky Krai (see Nowicka, 2015)

2. According to the census of 2010 the Buryats are the second largest ethnic group of Siberia (461 389 people).
time, the Soviet scholars were presenting the rapid modernization as a transition from backward past to the advanced present and future. Such policy could not but produce the identity confusion and transformation for people across the Soviet Union, including the Buryats. The situation changed after the fall of the USSR. In the 1990s ethnic identification started to be forwarded to the core of social and political discourse. This form of collective identification replaced Soviet and class identities terminated with the collapse of the USSR. Politicization of ethnicity and ethnic mobilization have become the major features of post-Soviet ethno-national movement in Buryatia.

The choice of a Buryat poet Bair Dugarov and his creative activity as the subject of research was predetermined by the fact that he can be considered as one of the leading poets and public figures who actively participated in the revival of historical past of the Buryats in the 1990s. While the majority of scholars focus specifically on the poems of Bair Dugarov omitting broader historical and cultural context of post-Soviet Buryatia, I, in turn, investigate both: (1) the reflection of Buryat traditional culture, ethnic identity in his poetry, and at the same time (2) try to fit the poet into the context of his historical period and identify his role in the national and cultural revival movement of post-Soviet Buryatia. From such perspective I put two types of questions. First, I want not only to delineate the major images and motifs applied in his poems, but to reveal to what extent do they refer to the Buryatness, the ethnic identity of the people, and how far his academic background became reflected in the poetry. Tracing the reflection of the Buryat traditional culture and historical development in his poetry I aim to define the new patterns of his creative world, and to explain what history narration is he creating in his poems, how the modernistic soviet reality gets along with the nomadic past of the Buryats in his poetry. Secondly, I examine how his poems are perceived in the contemporary Buryatia, how ordinary Buryats, scholars, entrepreneurs and officials are applying his poems and images, and thus, try to define his place in the contemporary Buryat culture. In order to answer these research questions, I not only analyze the poetic collections of Bair Dugarov, but also appeal to archival documents, statistic data, media discourse, further supporting my findings with interviews with the poet and other public figures of Buryatia.
My research could not but touch the issues of insider and outsider researcher’s positionalities. Being Buryat, however performing the research about Buryat ethnic identity in Poland, I actually found myself in-between of both: I neither fully belonged to local Buryat scholars, nor could be referred to the Western ones. Another layer of my mixed researcher’s identity emerged due to the state of the Buryat culture. As a result of historical development and years of Soviet acculturation, I, as well as many other Buryats, could not speak the Buryat language and shared general ignorance in history and culture of my native people. Nevertheless, I think that the most important benefit of being an insider for me was the fact that I could more closely render the underlying folkloric or cultural meaning of Dugarov’s poems without stereotyping or underestimating them. I could put myself on a place of an ordinary reader of his poems, who is a contemporary Buryat, speaks Russian instead of Buryat, and learns with great interest the hidden pages of Buryat history through his poems. I could feel it myself that the poetry of Bair Dugarov inspired and brought out pride for Buryatia. The nomadic images of a horse, the steppe, etc. were perceived so dear, but lost, and caused nostalgia about the past of the Buryats. At the same time, my studies abroad helped me to develop some characteristics of an outsider. In such a way, I learned to alienate myself from the ‘field’ so that my familiarity with the Buryat community did not prevent me from recognizing the patterns. My dissertation is, thus, an attempt to find a balance between both: interpreting the poems as an insider, and recognizing patterns as an outsider.

The dissertation is divided into four chapters. Chapter I represents an overview of Buryat literature development. Following the contemporary discourse of Buryat history reconsideration, I start with the description of all-Mongolian literature (13th-17th centuries). Folklore, historical chronicles, didactic literature and Buddhist works were general for all Buddhist world of the Central and East Asia, Tibet and India. The analysis of such pieces of Mongolian literature as The Secret History of the Mongols, an epic about Geser, and The Namtar of Milarepa is determined by further application of their images and motifs in the poetry of Bair Dugarov. As I show it in the next chapters, these literary monuments influenced a lot on the growth of Dugarov as a poet, and in many aspects predetermined his poetic road. I proceed with the review of proper Buryat literature tracing how genres and motifs of the all-Mongolian period became adopted to the Buryat context, and at the same
time examine the new topics arisen under the new local conditions. Following the chronology, I continue with the analysis of Buryat national literature in Soviet times, which can be characterized by reorientation to Russian and generally European literary tradition. Among the review of new genres and works by Buryat writers and poets I also consider the phenomenon of Buryat literature in Russian language as the language choice for poetic self-expression becomes crucial for the poet under research too.

Chapter II is dedicated to the analysis of ethnic identity construction during the post-Soviet period, as well as the role of Bair Dugarov in it. I outline the major components and symbols of Buryat ethnicity, such as ties to Mongolia, Buddhism, Shamanism, ties to Russia, etc., and trace their correspondence to the development of Buryat literature in general and the biography of Bair Dugarov in particular. In this Chapter, I show that Dugarov is not merely a poet whose poems inspired the Buryats in the critical time of the collapse of the Soviet Union, but also a successful scholar, and a significant public activist whose work at the Union of Writers in the 1990s impacted on ethnic identity revival among the Buryats. Following the idea of “invented traditions” by Eric Hobsbawm, I try to show that Bair Dugarov was among of the creators of these traditions. In such a way, Dugarov initiated and organized a seven-year program (1989-1995) of literary and folklore events devoted to the 1000 anniversary of the Buryat national epic Geseriade. This event has become the most vivid in the cultural life of Buryatia in the 1990s. The main idea of the celebrations was to unify all the Buryat people, living in three regions of Russia. According to Dugarov, “Geseriade became to a certain extent an embodiment of national consciousness growth, return to spiritual roots and sources, revival of ancient customs and traditions …” (Dugarov 1998, 102). His activities on promotion of Buryat chronicles of the 19th century, other literary monuments in old-Mongolian, their translation and reprinting during 1990s also impacted to national and cultural revival movement and returning to Mongolian roots. Development of image of Bargudzhin Tukum, the mythological ancestral home of Genghis Khan becomes again reflected in his public activities as he wrote the libretto to the music-choreographic performance The Echo of Bargudzhim Tukum Land (2012). These and other actions of Dugarov show his concern on future of his native people and the destiny of Buryatia.
Chapters III and IV represent the literary analysis of Dugarov’s poetry. Both chapters aim to expose Dugarov’s personal interpretation of the historical past of the Buryat people in the context of Eurasian space, the spiritual connection with Mongolia and wider – Central Asia. I argue that the image of a nomad becomes central for the poetry of Dugarov. Further on, this image is tied up with the motif of route. There can be outlined at least two levels of this route: vertical (temporal) and horizontal (spacial), which predetermined the structure of my analysis.

Chapter III is aimed to trace the route of the nomad through time. After years of Soviet ethnic and linguistic denial the reconsideration of historical memory turns into the life purpose of the poet. Thanks to Dugarov’s profound academic knowledge of Buryat history and culture, each of his poems becomes loaded with historical allusions and mythological references, which stretch the thread of time from past to present and future of the Buryats, and thus strengthen the ethnic consciousness of his contemporaries. The chapter is structured around most essential poems, each of which represents the major aspects of the image of the nomad, his temporal route from ancient times to modernity. I start with the analysis of his most prominent poem, *The Nomad’s Star*, which became the guiding light for post-Soviet Buryatia. The poem concisely displays the most general nomadic images of a horse, fire, yurt, etc., as well as defines such traditional principles as ancestors’ cult, lineage continuation and balance in the universe. The motif of nostalgia and even sorrow of the “forgotten” past of the Buryats becomes inseparable from the image of the nomad. The high value of the foretime, the nomadic past of his ancestors become praised by means of mythological images and plots borrowed from traditional folk culture of the Buryats.

Further on, I pay attention to the issues of the language choice. The majority of poems by Dugarov are written in Russian. This linguistic duality causes the feeling of guilt. Search for his own identity reconciles when the poet defines himself as a Eurasian poet. The Eurasian characteristics of his poetry go further than the simple opposition of Buryat content and Russian form. The poems of Dugarov evidence the presence of not only Buryat cultural symbols, but also Western / Russian ones. And vice versa, the form of the poems cannot be called Russian only: the poet implements the principles of traditional Buryat anaphoric versification to his poems in Russian.
Finally, tracing the route of the nomad through time, it is important to speak about modernity. While looking back to his past, the nomad of Dugarov turns modern. This idea is most vividly expressed in the poem *Cumulus clouds float*. I argue that despite the “sorrow for saddle”, the poet manages to reconcile the duality of past and present, nature and culture in the soul of his lyrical hero, as well as his own soul. They both stay Buryat by origin, but can no longer deny globalization processes in the world. The Middle way for the poet and his lyrical hero lies in recognition of his mixed Eurasian identity. The modern nomad keeps up with modernity, he transcends the boundaries of the steppe and yurt to the open world, but at the same time continues to remember his traditional culture, the language.

Chapter IV is dedicated to the spacial route of his nomad. Applying the idea of Franco Moretti about literary maps, I analyze the place names in order to reveal the hidden patterns of Dugarov’s poetry. Nomadic worldview and geographic mobility is inherent to the lyrical hero and the poet himself, that is why it is no surprise a lot of place names appear in the poems of Dugarov. Though many critics emphasize nomadism as his central topic of his poetry, no one has ever tried to identify where exactly his lyrical hero nomadizes, and what such mapping can uncover. Tracing the route of his nomad through space made it vividly clear that the mental map of Dugarov’s homeland does not coincide with the geographical map of Buryatia. It goes wider and includes Mongolia as an ancestral home, neighboring areas of Irkutsk oblast, Altai, and even mythological places, such as *Bargudzhin Tukum*.

Another important finding discovered during the place names analysis and which, I argue, shows the worldview of the Buryats in general, is the fact that the map outlined by Dugarov in his poems is not flat: along with places on the Earth it includes places in the Sky. Such toponyms as names of stars, constellations, etc., are used by Dugarov in his poems together with more common names of rivers and mountains, cities and countries. Thus, the map of the world is not represented as a surface, but is perceived as a vertical space.

The creative activity of the poet spans over several decades and witnesses major social and political shifts of the turn of the 21st century, which is why I focused mainly on two collections: *Concave* (1986) and *Asian Allure* (2013). The changes on geographical and political maps became reflected in the poetic world of Dugarov, the diachronic analysis
revealed that the route of his lyrical hero-nomad was transforming and became broader and more global in the course of time. In such a way, Moscow, its streets and sights are mentioned 11 times in the collection of 1986, however, the situation changes sharply in the *Asian Allure*, where there is no a single mention of this place name. The access to other places and centers becomes possible without any mediator, and Moscow disappears from the map of Dugarov’s poetry. What is more, apart from the map of USSR, the poet tries to shape in his poems an alternative map – map of Eurasian steppe from the Balkans to Inner Asia, which was not imposed from above, but historically justified. Trans-border mobility after the collapse of the Soviet Union became reflected in Dugarov’s poetry too: the map of poems evolved into more globalized one; the modern nomad is not limited to the steppe spaces only, but can nomadize throughout the whole planet: “мой конь заповедный – планета./ А песни – мои стремена” [“My precious horse is the planet, / And chants are becoming my stirrups”]. (Dugarov 2007, 53)

The presented analysis shows, to a certain extent, the postcolonial character of Dugarov’s poetry. However, in my research I tried to go beyond the post-colonial or indigenous studies discourses. As many scholars already noticed, such terms as “indigenous”, “minority”, or “Siberia” determined the way the Buryat culture was perceived by the outsiders, not the way they viewed themselves (see Bernstein 2013; Zhanaev 2017). Focusing neither on the traumatic discourse of Soviet experience in the contemporary Buryat literature, nor on the discussions of minorities and social exclusion, but on the unique worldview and beliefs of the Buryats reflected in the poetry of Bair Dugarov, I did not want my research to be locked within the postcolonial framework alone. Instead, I view it as a contribution to world literature studies. I wanted to show that Buryat traditional culture should be limited neither to the borders of a specific geographical area, nor one language, and, in a certain way, from this perspective the poetry of Bair Dugarov can be considered transcultural. Following the route of the nomad from ancient times to modernity, from Inner Asia steppe to the global world, Dugarov transcends the boundaries and reconciles the duality of nomadic past and globalized present. Nostalgia expressed as a contradictory “settled sorrow of saddle” becomes at the same time the expression of a mixed Eurasian identity where shaman mythology, Buddhist philosophy and European culture in its Russian edition coexist.