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## Image of Migrants and Refugees in Contemporary Russian Children's Literature: A Case Study of Alexey Oleynikov's Works

**Abstract:** The war in Eastern Ukraine, which began in 2014 and accelerated after Russia's February 2022 full-scale invasion of Ukraine, has resulted in the displacement of millions of people, including children, with over 1.2 million Ukrainian refugees recorded in Russia as of the end of 2023. In light of the increasing number of refugee narratives in children's literature across the world, and in the wake of anti-immigrant policies and xenophobic attitudes towards migrants and refugees in Russia, this article analyses the representation of migrants and refugees in contemporary Russian children's literature with special attention to the works of Alexey Oleynikov – *Skazhi mne «Zdravstvuy!»* [2015] and *Bezhat' Nel'zya Ostat'sya* [2021]. Focusing on both text and image, I inquire into discourses on authenticity and “otherness,” as well as agency and voice of migrants and refugees.

**Keywords:** Russia, Ukraine, war, migration, refugees, children's literature

Russia has long been both a destination and a source country for migrants. According to the latest statistics compiled by the International Organization for Migration (IOM), as of 2024 there were around 12 million international migrants in Russia, making it the fourth-largest migrant population in the world (IOM, 2024: 124). The main flow of migrants to Russia comes from post-Soviet states, particularly from the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS), due to a visa-free regime, some knowledge of the Russian language and cultural affinity. Performing (often illegally) low-paid and physically demanding jobs that are unattractive to the local population, these labour migrants have become an indispensable part of the tapestry of Russia's daily life. The backside of this tapestry is an upsurge in racism and xenophobic attitudes towards migrants enabled by the support of the state and fueled by mass media (Kuznetsova, 2017; Hoang, 2020; Avrutin, 2022). Depictions of migrants in the Russian media and government reports are associated with “mounting organized crime,

the expanding shadow economy, social disruptions, cramped and often dangerous housing conditions, and increasing stress on social infrastructure” (Hoang, 2020: 64), as well as with spreading “dangerous diseases” (Kuznetsova, 2017: 151). The recent wave of migration to and from Russia was triggered by the armed conflict in Eastern Ukraine, which began in 2014 and in February 2022 escalated into the devastating war in Ukraine. This unprecedented influx of migrants and refugees has intensified the already existing hostility towards migrants and ethnic minorities (regardless of their migrant status). At the same time, the war has caused a historic emigration wave of an estimated one million Russian citizens.<sup>1</sup> Despite being one of the leading countries of both origin and destination for migrants, Russia has surprisingly few contemporary children’s books presenting migration experiences as “a living reality for present day children” rather than “something belonging to the past” (Hope, 2008: 297). This article will shed light on some of the few attempts to break with this underrepresentation of migrant experiences in Russian children’s literature, focusing on the issue of authenticity and other/self-representation.

Defining authenticity in children’s literature is a contentious issue, and many scholars have developed various definitions and criteria. Since contemporary Russian children’s literature has not yet fully developed a new language for depicting ethnic diaspora, as well as a theoretical apparatus for its analysis, I will resort to Western models. Fox and Short, in *Stories Matter: The Complexity of Cultural Authenticity in Children’s Literature* (2003), explore various definitions of authenticity, noting that it cannot be confined to a single meaning. They discuss the perspectives of scholars like Bishop, who focuses on accurately reflecting cultural perspectives (20), and Howard, who emphasizes the reader’s sense of truth (25). Contributors to their collection agree that the key issue is not whether cultural authenticity should be a criterion but how to establish appropriate standards, especially when texts are written by outsiders. Hope highlights that autobiographical stories about migrants carry particular authenticity (2017), while Park Dahlen raises concerns about the subjectivity of perceived authenticity (2021). Scholars like Yokota argue that insider perspectives are more likely to present culturally authentic views, although this can sometimes clash with personal authenticity or risk essentializing identities (1993). Moreover, outsiders may still provide valuable perspectives, helping to make unfamiliar cultures more relatable, as noted by Gamble and Yates (2008). While Bishop contends there is no set formula for authentic literature (2003), Yokota offers ‘practical’ criteria, such as cultural detail richness, authentic dialogue and relationships, in-depth treatment of cultural issues, and the inclusion of members of “minority” groups for a purpose (1999: 159–160). The *CLPE Degrees of Erasure* 2018 framework similarly identifies superficial portrayals in

<sup>1</sup> There is no precise data, as many Russian citizens have since either returned to the country or relocated from their initial refuge.

literature. Gopalakrishnan suggests that authentic books should be culturally and historically relevant (2011), well-researched, and thought-provoking. Similarly, Short presents a comprehensive set of criteria, emphasizing authors' cultural connections and research depth (2011). Despite these guidelines, Smolkin and Suina remind us that no culture is uniform, making authenticity inherently nuanced (quoted in Fox & Short 2003). Following this very brief inquiry into the authenticity concept, I will look at the strategies employed to depict migration and migrants in two contemporary Russian texts for children. Who is telling migration stories, and what kind of stories do they tell? Can they be considered authentic, and if yes, to what degree?

### “MOM NEVER SPEAKS TO STRANGERS”

One of the first contemporary Russian books to touch on the theme of migration was a 2015 *Skazhi mne «Zdravstvuy!»* [Say “Hello!” to Me]<sup>2</sup> written by a popular Russian journalist, educator, children's author, and poet, Alexey Oleynikov, and illustrated by Natalia Yaskina. Reminiscent of Peter Sis' *Madlenka* (2000), it tells the story of an eight-year-old Moscow boy, Vasya, who meets representatives of different countries (including ex-Soviet states) living and working in the Russian capital. Each of the 12 encounters is accompanied by an illustrated spread containing information on the geography, history, and culture of the country in question, as well as the reasons for migration to Moscow. The choice of Moscow for the story setting is justified by the author by the simple fact that it is “the biggest city in the country, where most people relocate to” (Oleynikov, 2016), which also happens to be his hometown that he knows best. According to Oleynikov, the idea of creating this book belonged to the founder and editor-in-chief of Samokat publishing house, Irina Balakhonova, who wanted to follow the “Western trend of diversity and multiculturalism in children's books and adapt it to the Russian reality since the issue of intolerance towards migrants in Russian society is just as serious (if not more acute) as in the other countries.”<sup>3</sup> The book was planned to be aimed at children aged five to ten, which predetermined the choice of the format – an engaging picture-book with elements of nonfiction. The book opens with quite a straightforward publisher's preface explaining their intent:

We thought if we explained who migrants really were, why they were forced to leave their home, if we told children their stories and open the door to their culture, if we honestly admitted that our ancestors (with few exceptions) were once migrants too, there would be less fear and more warmth around.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Unless otherwise indicated, all translation from Russian are mine.

<sup>3</sup> By “Western” Oleynikov means British, European, and American (Oleynikov, 2019).

<sup>4</sup> The book is unpaginated.

Despite the publisher's good intentions, this introductory note clearly indicates the juxtaposition of "them" and "us," implying that the book's targeted audience is non-migrant readers. This is also emphasized by the decision to make a non-migrant Moscow-born character the protagonist. Following the literary tradition of the children's texts where "exciting" things start happening when parents are not around, the story begins to unfold with the boy's parents leaving for vacation in Greece. His Auntie Gelya, who has fled Ukraine's Donetsk region, is here to look after Vasya and introduce him to the concept of migration as they are running daily errands in the neighborhood. Due to her work in the past (as a construction company accountant), Auntie Gelya has traveled all over the USSR and can find a common language with everyone. Unlike Vasya, who, being raised in a typical Moscow way (cautious and distant)<sup>5</sup> is not used to welcoming strangers:

At the entrance, the street cleaner is shaking off his broom and looking at me with his black eyes. His smile is suspicious. I hid behind Auntie Gelya just in case. Mum never speaks to strangers, let alone street cleaners. And she forbids me to do so. (8)

This is not just a warning of a concerned parent about stranger danger; this kind of danger is directly related to the common belittling and even racist perception of a migrant as a potentially harmful person. From "his black eyes" to a "suspicious smile," Vasya is reproducing in his thoughts the typical "othering" tropes. But as Vasya observes Auntie Gelya interacting with Alisher (the cleaner) and using some words in his native Tajiki language, he sees how Alisher lights up. After that, Vasya asks her to teach him her ways with people, particularly how to say "Hello" in their native languages. This interaction is then followed by an illustrated spread containing information on geography (including distance from Moscow), history, and cultural traditions of Alisher's country, as well as the reasons for his migration to Moscow. The informative aspect of the book is reinforced by the use of maps. Uncomplicated in nature, they provide visual support to verbal descriptions, contextualizing the narrative and confirming to the readers the accuracy of information presented in the book – a common strategy used in nonfiction picturebooks (see Goga & Kümmerling-Meibauer, 2017).

Meticulously drawn by award-winning Natalia Yaskina, visual elements of all informative spreads include the depiction of the country's map, its flag, and representatives of the nation wearing colorful traditional clothes and being engaged in a celebration of their country's main national holiday which involves a food feast (with the names of some dishes spelled out) which helps to acquaint children with new cultures. According to the author, it was of crucial

<sup>5</sup> Of course, it does not mean that all families in Moscow raise their children this way, but, according to the author, this was a deliberate exaggeration to prove a point.

importance to include a textual description of each country's national holiday, as well as its visual representation, following the common trend of Western children's books celebrating diversity and multiculturalism. The endpapers provide a brief vocabulary of basic words from each of the countries (e.g., *me, you, hello, home, friend, thank you, mom, and please*) and their Russian transcription. Each language is also accompanied by the image of a country's national dressed in traditional attire. However, some readers found such representations a bit "archaic" and even "stereotypical" (Oleynikov, 2019), stating that it reminded them of the numerous Soviet encyclopedias for children about different cultures and nations of both the Soviet Union and the world. To them, *Skazhi mne «Zdravstvuy!»* projects the negative feeling of a restorative nostalgia for the Soviet past with its seeming praise of multiculturalism and solidarity.

Throughout the book, Vasya meets migrant characters from the following countries and regions: Tajikistan, Moldova, Tatarstan, Belarus, Kazakhstan, Azerbaijan, China, Chechnya, Georgia, Yakutia, Armenia, and Ukraine. The book creators provide two reasons for the countries' selection. First, despite claiming to have conducted proper research, they were relying on the principle of "whom you would most likely come across on the streets" (Oleynikov, 2016), which, again, might be read as "stereotypical" – something that Russian children are expected to see both outside, on the streets of Moscow, and in the media. The second reason was purely rooted in the book's design. The publisher wanted to feature "visually diverse landscapes" to keep the child reader interested and focused. For this reason, it was decided to include a migrant character from Yakutia – to break down landscapes more familiar to a child's eye with a cool-toned image of Yakutian snow.

If we look at the gender composition and migration reasons, out of twelve, only three characters are females, while migration is caused by both push factors (war, political persecution) and pull factors (higher quality of life, employment, study, marriage, reuniting with family). Despite the author's aim to introduce children to as many types of migration as possible, the dominant reason for migration is seeking a higher quality of life and getting a better-paying job to provide for their families back home. The occupations vary from quite common, migrant-associated ones (street cleaner, plumber, house painter, taxi driver) to more: "ordinary," not typically associated with migrants (dentist, jeweler). The characters themselves are not based on real people and instead represent rather "collective" images,<sup>6</sup> which, in a way, continue certain existing stereotypes, both in terms of visual representation (e.g., their looks) and in the choice of their new occupations (e.g., Armenian migrant as a music teacher, Yakutian migrant working with rare gems), which however unintentionally, still has a negative impact on how children perceive migrants.

<sup>6</sup> According to the illustrator, the images were created before Oleynikov's text (from personal correspondence, 2025).

However, due to the book's quite formulaic and repetitive structure and its focus on an informative component, there are no judgment-based evaluations or any other thoughts related to the construction of us/them divides voiced either by migrants themselves or by the protagonist, apart from the ones mentioned in the very beginning. The author partially acknowledges the issue of stereotypes; however, he admits that for the purpose of the book (introducing migration to non-migrant children), this was a necessary and unavoidable decision to show migrants as typical "others," which, according to García-González, "give[s] a sense of cohesiveness to the in-group" (2017: 66).

The last country that Vasya gets to know is Ukraine. As his auntie starts speaking Ukrainian on the phone, Vasya suddenly realizes she is using a different language: "all of a sudden, she started babbling in some mysterious language! It sounded almost Russian, but I couldn't understand a word" (52). As Vasya explains further, all this time, he thought his auntie was making up her own words to sound funny. This perception of the Ukrainian language as something funny and inferior to Russian is acceptable from a child's perspective. However, it is also quite common for the whole Russian society in general.

As for the reasons for Auntie Gelya's migration, the reader learns the following: "The worst cause of migration is war. It is not only soldiers who die but also civilians who are killed by hunger, disease, and shells. Now that there is a war in Ukraine, Auntie Gelya is living with us. She is a displaced person. But we believe that the war will end soon, and then we'll be able to just go and visit each other!" (55). Written in 2015, these words did not age well. Moreover, due to Russia's recently introduced war censorship laws<sup>7</sup>, it is simply no longer possible to even mention "war in Ukraine" in children's texts published in Russia. As it is the case with all other migrants' backgrounds in this book, such migration "explanation" provides quite a limited perspective: the readers are only told that there is a war, however, this section avoids a more in-depth discussion of the root reasons turning it into what Vassiloudi refers to as "a self-created condition" (2019: 38). Acknowledging the unstable political situation in the country, the publisher admits that they have spent three and a half years working on the book and constantly rewriting it "to keep it up to date as the authorities built either ghettos or registration centres for migrants" but also "not to speak vaguely about complex issues" (Balakhonova, 2015).

The book has two endings. It is Vasya's eighth birthday, but his parents were delayed at the airport and could not make it in time. Instead, in the best traditions of multiculturalism, all his new migrant friends are showing up unexpectedly, bringing presents and their traditional food to the festive table. All

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<sup>7</sup> Introduced in 2022, these laws criminalise spreading of "fakes" and "discreditation" of the Russian armed forces (Articles 207.3 and 280.3 of the Criminal Code), carrying a maximum sentence of 15 years. In 2022, both publisher and author signed an open anti-war letter.

the dishes are numbered and have brief descriptions. And then Vasya wakes up and realizes it was all but a dream, and his parents are already home. Such a dream can be considered symbolic and nostalgic as it clearly demonstrates both the boy's and authors' desire to live in one friendly world or at least to long for the world that once used to be peaceful.

The book was very well received (after all, it is one of the first books on the Russian market on this topic), with some readers calling it "a fiction story, a map, and an atlas of intercultural communication."<sup>8</sup> However, there was a fair share of criticism, too. Some critics suggested that ideally, such a book should have been accompanied by several regional editions as migration flows and diasporic compositions differ from region to region. Oleynikov recalls the books being accused of showing the signs of "Chauvinism, Moscow snobbery and even fascism" (Oleynikov, 2016). Apart from the selection of countries, readers were puzzled by the decision to make the child protagonist interact with adult migrants and not child migrants. It reminded them of post-imperialism legacies – a white boy is being served by migrants. As Vassiloudi writes, "an outsider to the community, a foreigner, is accepted and integrated only after he proves he has something to offer in return – in other words, when he is deemed useful to them" (2019: 44). Even if this "acceptance" is just taking part in a boy's birthday from a dream. One might think of the old-fashioned children's books where a traveler exploring foreign lands would be showered with presents. Oleynikov himself partially agrees with this "ethnographic nostalgia," as he calls it, but emphasizes that there was no other way around it (Oleynikov, 2019).

Although written by an internal second-generation "migrant" who has conducted diligent research, *Skazhi mne «Zdravstvuy!»* can be considered authentic only nominally. It is one of those books that "are often recommended because of how they seemingly give us access to immigration [...] [and] enrich the worldview of the local child with new perspectives" (García-González, 2017: 66). In reality, it only scratches the surface around the concept of migration, offering somewhat limited exploration of migrant feelings on the matter, as well as reader's engagement in deeper discussions about why these people became migrants in the first place. Nevertheless, it is still one of the first attempts to break the underrepresentation of migrant experiences in Russian children's literature, and such innovation must be applauded.

### "EVERYTHING IS DIFFERENT HERE"

Having taken into account some of the criticism voiced towards his first book on the topic and switching the focus from migrant adults to migrant children,

<sup>8</sup> From *Labirint.ru* book reviews, one of Russia's most popular online bookstores: Alena. (2019, March 21). [Online review of the book *Skazhi mne «Zdravstvuy!»*, by A. Oleynikov]. *Labirint.ru*. <https://www.labirint.ru/reviews/goods/509396/>.

Oleynikov went on to create another book – *Bezhat' Nel'zya Ostat'tsya* [Run Can't Stay, 2021]. This comic was also a commissioned work, created in partnership with UNHCR Russia, and features seven stories about 'ordinary' school students in Russia who are refugees and migrants from Afghanistan, CAR, DRC, Palestine, South Sudan, Syria, and Yemen. Unlike his previous book, it is based on real-life events and reveals the difficulties that refugee children and their families have to overcome. Illustrations are provided by the students of the Comics Studies program at the Moscow Higher School of Economics, with each story illustrated by a different artist in order to get "different voices and different images" (Oleynikov, 2021).

*Bezhat' Nel'zya Ostat'tsya* falls under the broad category of ever-growing "refugee narratives" or "refugee stories," which, according to Vassiloudi includes "narratives in picturebook, graphic novel, comic, or animation format produced independently by authors, based on fictionalized versions of lived experience" (2019: 35). Such narratives share some common elements (not necessarily presented within one text), such as "home-away-(new)home" structure, "happy closure," the accompanying explanatory paratext, and an endorsement by international or local refugee relief organizations, while their functions include raising the awareness of non-refugee child readers, developing empathy towards less fortunate/privileged, and inspiring to make a change (Hwang & Coneway, 2017; Hope, 2018). Sub-genre of migration literature, refugee stories "reflect *forced* migration, which, while sharing many aspects of migration literature, have other agendas" (Hope, 2017, 17). So, what is the "agenda" of Oleynikov's book?

The book starts with an introductory note, which is devoted to the description of the UNHCR work and defines the aim of the project as follows: "We really wanted to show the life experiences of *your* peers, who had to seek refuge in Russia. Although sometimes they might face challenging times, they still dream, think, ask questions, and hope for the best. *They* are just the same as the rest of *us*" (7, italics mine). This juxtaposition of "they" and "us" clearly indicates that the book's targeted audience is non-refugee readers, which is also emphasized by the section "How You Can Help"<sup>9</sup> on the last spread, which puts the reader in the position of a benefactor – a common criticism voiced about some of the Western refugee books for children (García-González, 2017; Vassiloudi, 2019).

According to the contact person at UNHCR, a total of seven stories from numerous interviews with refugee children were offered to Oleynikov, and he picked all of them and then "played with the narrative." Apart from that, the

<sup>9</sup> This includes the following: "Spread information about refugee relief organisations; Be kinder to people regardless of their nationality; Donate money to UNHCR or other partner organisations; Become a volunteer in one of the partner organisations; Donate products and clothes to partner organisations" (137).

names of the heroes and their countries of origin were changed in 95 percent of cases.<sup>10</sup> The name change is expected, but the country change seems a bit unnecessary and jeopardizes the whole concept of authenticity, as if it is not important to respect the origin of refugee people and their lived experience. It makes one wonder how the original interviews for this project were conducted, whether children's parents/relatives participated, and to what extent other aspects of the stories were fictionalized for the dramatic effect.

As I was curious whether the children participating in this project were presented with the final product and what their opinion about this "playing" with such a highly sensitive narrative was, I reached out to UNHCR. However, they did not provide answers to these questions. Regardless of that, it would have been pertinent to provide this information either in the preface or afterword to the book to make the process more transparent. Scholars have long noted that while there are many refugee children's books (especially picturebooks), very few are written by refugees themselves. As a result, refugee children, who often find themselves in the position of mere "observers of the disruptions to their own lives," are once again deprived of autonomy and control over their lives, albeit on paper (Oranç & Veryeri Alaca, 2017: 165). Oranç & Veryeri Alaca point out the therapeutic benefits of collaborative creating narratives, which, apart from reducing post-traumatic stress, "contribute to meaning-making and identity development among refugees [...] by enabling the reconstruction of memories, the reinterpretation of the present and the imagining of new possibilities" (2017: 156). By taking control over the original refugee narratives, Oleynikov and other creators of the book not only risk limiting the value of narrative therapy but also may unintentionally constrain opportunities for refugee children's personal development.

When discussing refugee narratives, it is important to differentiate between diasporic and non-diasporic texts as it affects the functions of such texts. According to Martin & McDaniel, who take an authorship rather than an audience approach, "only authors who originate from the countries they write about or who are descendants of those who do can write diasporic literature" (2021: 55). According to these authors, rather than simply raising the awareness, diasporic texts "affirm the experiences of children in those communities, letting them know that they are not alone" (2021: 55). Diasporic texts thus tend to be more focused on sharing experiences and emotions caused by the same or similar trauma, while non-diasporic texts lean towards the enlightenment of a reader. Although it might not be the case with all such texts, *Bezhat' Nel'z'ya Ostat'sya*, despite being based on interviews and engagement with real child refugees, cannot be considered a diasporic text in Martin & McDaniel's understanding. This is also emphasized in the introductory note with its us-them

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<sup>10</sup> From personal correspondence, 2022.

divide and focus on non-refugee readers. However, it still can be considered authentic as it is written by an “outsider to the culture who collaborate[s] with an insider to strengthen authenticity” (Short, 2011).

Each of Oleynikov’s stories is introduced by an informational double spread that provides a reader with the historical context, while the story itself occupies from seven to ten double spreads with a top-to-bottom, left-to-right reading order, which is guided by the arrangement of panels. The first page is devoted to a short introduction of the character, including their age, interests and hobbies, the reasons for immigration to Russia, and the difficulties associated with the refugee condition: separation from family and friends, loss of homeland and identity, displacement, rejection, lack of safety, bullying, unemployment, paperwork bureaucracy, etc. Such structure allows both the author and the illustrator to focus on capturing and transmitting emotions rather than setting the scene.

At the end of each refugee story’s introduction, the reader is presented with a set of open rhetorical questions. For instance, the story about George, who had migrated from CAR, asks the reader: “Will he stay in Russia? Will he reunite with his father? Will he ever walk the streets of Moscow without feeling unsafe?” (70). What differentiates this book from similar Western ones is the lack of a “happy closure,” or any closure for that matter. Each of the seven stories ends quite abruptly without giving any answers. Such an open ending can be again treated as a deliberate lack of agency on the refugee part as if readers, after familiarizing themselves with this book and taking action to become agents of social change, might have an impact on their destinies. However, the author provides a different explanation:

Their stories are not finished. They are still going on. No one knows what will happen next. Many have been living in this uncertainty for years. [...] And I thought it wouldn’t be right for me to provide a happy ending. The aim was not to write a glamorous story, but to evoke a strong emotional response from teenagers to the difficult reality of life, to share these problems. (Oleynikov, 2021)

Using an unaccounted-for war as a reason for displacement and skipping the emblematic journey part, Oleynikov’s text is focused on a ‘new home’ part and integration process told from the first-person perspective. However, some stories do delve into the traumatic memories of the characters. According to some critics (Moran, 2007; Salzman & Rosenberg, 2006), the impossibility of representing trauma by means of a traditional language makes a comic or a graphic novel the most appropriate medium for such narratives as Cathy Caruth states, “to be traumatized is precisely to be possessed by an *image* or event” (1995: 4–5, italics mine). Due to the unique character of the time-space relationship in comics, which, according to McCloud, “are one and the same” (1993: 100), the comics medium allows for the visual simultaneously of the past and the future, which is achieved through back-and-forth reading of panels.

This sense of timelessness can also be reflected through the use of bleeds and images that “fill an entire page to the edge” (Earle, 2017: 49).

The author has placed all characters within the space of one school, although due to their age and Russian language skills, they all study in different classes. In the text, they do not interconnect with each other directly; however, such strategy attempts to show that they are more connected than one might think, although this slightly undermines the extent of the “based on a true story” claim.

The first story is about Marva, whose family moved to Russia from Afghanistan when she was three years old, and now she is in the eighth grade, plays in a school basketball team, works in a café, and dreams of applying to the university. Unfortunately, her family, especially her father, thinks that she should quit school and help her mother at home, as this is where a woman belongs. Apart from the introduction, the verbal text is limited to the internal thoughts of the character, speech balloons, and several instances of onomatopoeia, which is typical for comics. Since the text is rather sparse, the tension is achieved through visual elements, the use of evocative black-and-white illustrations, high contrasts, shadows, lines, and color blocks.

The story starts with Marva sitting in a history class and being triggered by the teacher's mention of Afghanistan. Her memories are presented with very dark panels, which are dominated by black color, contributing to its prominence and attention-grabbing. The panel is not limited to one page but invades the gutter and the space between the panels, and continues over to the next page, which reminds of a picturebook technique. As panels shape the sense of passing time, we might say that Marva's traumatic memories are still not entirely in the past.

Unlike another girl character from the next story, Marva is allowed to play sports at school, but she is also forced to wear a headscarf once outside, and she can no longer walk alone, so either her brother or father meets her after school. Her reaction to this is shown through facial expressions: cheerful with bright, wide-open eyes at school and suppressed, with eyes looking down once she is around her male relatives. She is not arguing with her brother but obediently follows him like a shadow, which is depicted in the middle right panel.

After that, we learn that her father is planning to make Marva marry her uncle because he is “a good person and has a good job” (26), and that is exactly how he married Marva's mother. In the final spread, we see Marva in bed, lying under a black duvet covered with white stars, with one of the stars depicting her thoughts on wanting to do something more interesting with her life than marriage, which can serve as a little glimpse of hope since this is the end of the story. A similar experience is presented in Jasmine's story, whose father is not allowing her to participate in gym classes together with the boys as her family needs to “protect her honor.” The final spread depicts the shadow of her father

shaped almost like a monster, while the falling snow covering muddy roads, a herald of the coming change of the seasons, can also be interpreted as a symbol of hope and a fresh start.

Despite commonly faced refugee problems (language barriers and cultural differences, lack of legal status and state support, poverty, social exclusion), the book seems to make a clear gender-based distinction: female characters are more troubled by internal, family-related issues (e.g., overprotecting relatives who insist on wearing a headscarf and doubt the value of education), while male characters are more subject to external issues such as racism, society, and school bullying, etc.), like, for example, Abdul who is being attacked by an old woman on a bus: “Don’t we have enough of you?! Go home to collect bananas. Shame on you!” (35) or George who is being provoked on the street because of his skin color. Even one of the female characters admits in her story that she would have been stopped for checks on the streets more often if she was male, and especially “if they knew that I speak Arabic” (128). However, such gender division is not necessarily present in real life, as female immigrants face just as much bullying at school/on the streets. In the book, it is both local children/teenagers and adults who demonstrate hostile attitudes towards foreigners. Second-generation migrant characters, who were born in Russia and who are more confident in their language skills and cultural awareness, are not having an easy time either, like, for instance, Pierre: “I’m local. I was born here. But no one believes me. In every new school they ask me the same question. As if they’ve never seen a person with a dark skin” (90).

Despite all the difficulties faced by the characters (“Everything is different here. Different clothes. Different people. Different weather” 59), almost none of them feel nostalgic for the lost homeland. Most of their recollections are associated with war and destruction, fear and loss. The only exception is 16-year-old Ibrahim. His mother was born in Azerbaijan. During her studies in the Soviet Union, she got married and moved to Yemen, which they had to leave due to the war conflict. Although Ibrahim understands a little bit of Russian, it is not enough for him to study with children of his age; that is why he is still in the sixth grade. Working part-time as a loader to help his mother and sister, he is escaping from reality by dreaming about “pre-war Yemen, a golden time of peace and quiet.” “I once used to have the sea. We had a garden. Not a big one, but we loved it. Our house was by the sea. You just need to walk down the street and here it was. The port, the ships. I never wanted to become a sailor. I just liked to look at the sea. That’s what I miss the most” (104–105). To strengthen his fascination with the sea, his story opens with the line “Call me Ibrahim” (103), an allusion to Herman Melville’s *Moby-Dick*. The lack of nostalgic feelings expressed by other characters can be explained by their age difference: those who have left their home country too young mostly remember their home through the tragic memories of their families.

Just like in *Skazhi mne «Zdravstvuy!»*, the representation of migrant characters, both female and male, in this book is slightly leaning towards the stereotypical one. This is especially evident with the depiction of Muslim girls who are forced to wear headscarves and marry older relatives. Jasmine, who is very dependent on her environment, is trying to fit into the new world: making friends at school and playing with other girls during PE classes, which is forbidden by her father. Here, we have the conflict between the traditional Islamic culture of the parents and the culture of the outside, accepting world, not to mention that in some schools, headscarves are strictly forbidden by the administration. According to the author, the black headscarf was used to mark her as “different” and separate her from the Russian girls, and in this way, to show the child’s inner conflict. There are some problematic male representations in the book, too. For instance, Pierre from the Congo is extremely good at football, which taps into the stereotypical (not necessarily a negative one) image of “poor African village boys” playing football for days on end in hopes of getting noticed by talent scouts while the story of George, who has arrived from the Central African Republic, is written in rhyming verse imitating rap which – as creative as it might be – can also be considered as a reductive stance. Oleynikov, who in 2019 wrote a whole different comic in rap verse about school bullying, believes that the rap format makes the texts more accessible to modern Russian teenagers, evoking in them more resonance and empathy.

According to the project spokesperson, no real photos were used in the process of creating illustrations: students relied purely on their imagination and text descriptions. Nevertheless, all migrant children are illustrated as culturally diverse. Characterized by quick, simple lines, their images depict different skin tones, body types, hairstyles, facial expressions, and clothing. The style of illustrations, in general, is dominated by dark and grey tones and shades, which might come across as frightening, especially against a stark white background. However, such a restricted palette of colors can also be symbolic, reflecting the narrow-mindedness of the locals towards refugees.

In 2021, the book was adapted for theatre as part of the World Refugee Day art festival taking place in Moscow. Called “documentary performances,” these were a series of headphone-verbatim performances where actors listen to the characters’ direct speech in real-time and broadcast it to the audience. This was followed by more stage adaptations in 2022–2023 across Russia, including amateur adaptations produced by various summer art camps. In 2022, the UN Refugee Agency and Ethnosphera Centre for the Promotion of Interethnic Education also produced a methodological handbook for the comics containing practical tools for conducting interactive sessions with students in schools. Theatrical adaptations, as well as an inclusion into the school curriculum, can be seen as *Bezhat’ Nel’zya Ostat’tsya* exhibiting the early signs of a canonization process.

## CONCLUSION

As windows and mirrors, migration and refugee narratives can be powerful vehicles in shaping children's self-images and images of others, as well as their attitudes toward other nationalities. This is especially relevant in turbulent environments like today's Russia, where creative freedoms are increasingly stifled, and the very act of producing works that address such sensitive and complex topics is an achievement in itself. Echoing Ludmila Ulitskaya's book series for teenagers titled *The Other, Others, About Others*<sup>11</sup>, which began back in 2006 and ceased to exist for political reasons, Oleynikov's texts represent one of the rare attempts to raise awareness of migration problems and create a much-needed contemporary image of refugees and migrants in Russian children's literature.

However, the inherent outsider's position often present in children's literature, combined with the lack of a new, nuanced language for depicting ethnic diasporas and a theoretical framework for analyzing such representations, slightly undermines the authenticity of both texts under analysis. Due to the clear juxtaposition of "they" and "us" in the paratexts, both *Skazhi mne «Zdravstvuy!»* and *Bezhat' Nel'zya Ostat'tsya* are targeted at non-migrant readers, who are put in the position of benefactors – a common flaw that these two texts share with some of the Western refugee/migrant books for children. Drawing from personal teaching experience with migrant children and an understanding of the psychological challenges they face in a foreign cultural environment, the author brings valuable insights to the texts. Despite this background, both books occasionally slip into problematic representations, binarism, and a certain "Sovietness." The visual and verbal depiction of characters, the representation of their qualities and emotions through actions and choices, as well as their relationships with peers and adults at times taps into stereotypical tropes, perhaps in hope to encourage empathy in the reader, who is forced to look at the characters represented as the poor unfortunate "others."

Nevertheless, despite these "shortcomings," Oleynikov's texts remain an important and simply necessary predecessor, serving as a call to action for future authors to explore these narratives with greater nuance and depth. Their existence is a testament to the resilience of literature in challenging times.

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<sup>11</sup> Dedicated to various topics in cultural anthropology and ethnography, this series was aimed at sharing information about representatives of other cultures and their traditions and fostering mutual understanding and respect. I want to thank the reviewers for bringing my attention to this series.

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