

2012 Russian Booker Award finalist
NOS Literary Award nominee (2011, Russia)

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Marina Akhmedova's *Khadijah* is a novel of absorbing interest, and one that will have an immense impact; due to its brilliant first-person narrative style the reader identifies himself with the girl, sinks deep into her inner world full of archaic taboos, tribal prejudices, or medieval Islamic traditions that survived until today, and of which the civilized world knows little, and prefers not to think about. Author's descriptions of life in distant Muslim region are amazingly vivid and full of detail. Along with *Khadijah*, the reader feels that traditional patterns of life and thought are doomed to disappear under the pressure of global civilization, and realizes that their collapse will bring along a lot of violence and anger. Looking at all this through the eyes of a teenage girl, the reader just can't decide who is to blame for the tragedy; he can only feel sorry for anybody involved, and turn page after page, hoping for a happy ending which – just as in real life – will never happen.

Khadijah's diary begins when she'd only 12 years old. The girl describes her family, her village, and what is going on in her soul. The story is not a happy one. After Khadijah's father died, her mother returned with a baby girl to her native village in a remote North Caucasian region of Dagestan, to the family of her parents, and also died a few years later. Khadijah was brought up by her grandparents.

Country lifestyle in Dagestan is archaic. Tribal and family traditions, rituals, and customs yet

remain little affected by modern world; patterns of life and thought are so subject to an ancient customs and traditions as if social upheavals and progress have never arrived to these hilly lands. Little Khadijah foreknows everything that expects her in life. She knows just how and where she will be betrothed - young men choose a bride near the only spring well in village. She knows that she won't be allowed exchange a word with her future husband until the very day of their wedding. And that after the marriage she will walk every morning to bring fresh water from the well and bake bread for her family, raise her children, and never say a word in defiance to her husband.

But, in contrary to the fantasies of her infancy, one day Khadijah's life has changes drastically: when she turns 17, her middle-class relatives take her to the capital city of Makhachkala, and enroll her to the University (with the only purpose to find her a better match, since a wife with university degree is worth her weight in gold). A sudden dive from a secluded village life into a whirlwind of a big city affects Khadijah strongly. The girl passes through strong emotional transformation, and soon falls in love with her classmate. Young love inspires Khadijah to a crazy move: in contradiction to tradition, she elopes from home, and marries without being betrothed, without permission of her older relatives, in naïve hope that their families will accept them.

But their happiness didn't last long. Khadijah's young husband, a member of the anti-government Islamist guerrilla group, is killed by Russians during a 'cleansing raid'. While mourning over his death, pregnant Khadijah falls under the influence of her late husband's associates, adepts of Sharia, the religious law of Islam. She's told that the only way she could overcome her tragedy is to strictly follow the Islamic code of conduct, cover the head with burka, and pray to Allah... But she's given no time even for prayers: there's a war on their land, young men go to fight against Russians, while women are used as a live bombs... The Mullah offers her a faster way to reconcile with her beloved in heaven: she should oppose to the evil that destroyed her happiness by committing a suicide attack. Khadijah agrees to be brought to Moscow. Last time we see her when during a rush hour she enters into the metro, wearing an explosive belt under her clothes.

Khadijah's tragedy is not entirely social. Things are moving so fast at the end of Khadijah's story that the reader does not have time to understand against what type of social evil she fights. Girl's so short life was absolutely intuitive, guided only by ancient beliefs and traditions of her tribe; her psychological identity and social behavior were defined by a traditional reality she lived in, and thus were predestined to self-destruction after a clash with 'modern' society.