



**Reweaving the Tundra:
Women, Fire, and Fractured Traditions in
Anna Nerkagi's Prose**

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Abstract

Anna Nerkagi (b. 1952), a Nenets writer and cultural activist from the Yamal Peninsula, is one of the few female Indigenous voices in Russophone literature of the North. Beyond her literary work, she has promoted tundra education and the preservation of Nenets culture, exemplifying a form of female creative agency linking literature, education, and cultural stewardship.

This article examines her prose through the lens of the relationship between women and the hearth, understood as a central site of ethical, cosmological, and ecological mediation in Nenets life. Focusing on Aniko, Ilir, and White Moss, it reads these works as a loose trilogy structured around shifting configurations of female subjectivity: women at the fire, women displaced from it, and women beyond it.



Drawing on close textual analysis and ethnographic research, the article argues that the hearth functions as a living relational centre linking humans, animals, and other-than-human beings. At the same time, Nerkagi's narratives register the disruptions brought by Soviet modernity, particularly through boarding schools and the erosion of female genealogies. Rather than opposing tradition and modernity, her works show how Nenets matricultural systems persist through women's labour and ritual authority, allowing the tundra's social and cosmological fabric to be continuously re-woven.

Keywords: Nenets, Anna Nerkagi, matriculture, hearth, Indigenous Russia

Résumé

Anna Nerkagi (née en 1952), écrivaine et militante culturelle nenets originaire de la péninsule de Yamal, est l'une des rares voix féminines autochtones dans la littérature russophone du Nord. Au-delà de son travail littéraire, elle a promu l'éducation sur la toundra et la préservation de la culture nenet, incarnant une forme d'agence créative féminine reliant littérature, éducation et intendance culturelle.

*Cet article examine sa prose à travers le prisme de la relation entre les femmes et le foyer, comprise comme un lieu central de médiation éthique, cosmologique et écologique dans la vie des Nenets. En se concentrant sur *Aniko*, *Iilir* et *White Moss*, il présente ces œuvres comme une trilogie vaguement liée, structurée autour de configurations fluctuantes de subjectivité féminine : des femmes au feu, des femmes déplacées de celui-ci, et des femmes au-delà.*

S'appuyant sur une analyse textuelle approfondie et des recherches ethnographiques, l'article soutient que le foyer fonctionne comme un centre relationnel vivant qui relie humains, animaux et êtres autres que les humains. En même temps, les récits de Nerkagi témoignent des perturbations apportées par la modernité soviétique, notamment par les pensionnats et l'érosion des généalogies féminines. Au lieu de présenter la tradition et la modernité comme des opposés, ses œuvres montrent comment les systèmes matriculturels nenets persistent grâce au travail et à l'autorité rituelle des femmes, ce qui permet de retisser continuellement le tissu social et cosmologique de la toundra.

Mots-clés : Nenets, Anna Nerkagi, matriculture, foyer, Russie autochtone

INTRODUCTION¹

Anna Nerkagi's prose emerges from the tundra and returns to it. Writing in Russian from within the lived experience of Nenets nomadic life, her works articulate the tensions between Indigenous cosmologies and the profound transformations brought about by Soviet modernity. At the centre of this article is the hypothesis that, across her prose, the relationship between women and the hearth functions as a privileged site through which these tensions are narrated and reconfigured.

This article focuses on three of Nerkagi's *povesti*² – *Aniko from the Nogo Clan*, *Iilir*, and *White Moss* – and proposes to read them as a loose trilogy structured around the figure of the hearth and its relation to female subjectivity. Women at the fire, women displaced from it, and women beyond it constitute not fixed categories, but shifting positions through which the stability and fracture of Nenets life are made visible.

Born in 1952³ into a reindeer-herding family in a *chum* in the tundra near the Laborovaia trading post on Yamal, Nerkagi was heir to a clan whose origins were associated, in local belief, with a powerful shaman (Samson Normand 2003: 42)⁴. As a child she was taken from the tundra to attend a boarding school; she later studied at the Geological Faculty of the Tyumen Industrial Institute. In the early 1970s, she met the writer and critic Konstantin Lagunov, who urged her to abandon her early, derivative stories about 'southern seas' and unrequited love and to write instead about the tundra and the Nenets – «what you have lived» (Drozhashchikh 2021: 8). Her first *povest'*, *Aniko iz roda Nogo* [*Aniko from the Nogo Clan*]⁵, appeared in regional and central journals in 1975-76 and was published as a book in 1977; *Iilir* (a proper name derived from the Nenets root *il*, meaning 'life') followed soon after. In 1978, she became the first Nenets woman admitted to the Union of Soviet Writers.

Shortly thereafter, however, Nerkagi left Tyumen and returned to her father's camp near Laborovaia, choosing to live in the tundra. There she combined domestic and herding work with broader social engagement: she worked in an *agitbrigade*, intervened publicly on the

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² *Povest'* is a Russian narrative genre situated between the short story and the novel. The term is retained here to avoid reductive translations that would obscure its specific literary and cultural connotations.

³ According to other sources, she was born in 1951. See V. Rogachev, 'Genii chistoi krasoty. Kritiko-biograficheskii ocherk tvorchestva Anny Nerkagi' [A Genius of Pure Beauty: A Critical and Biographical Essay on the Work of Anna Nerkagi], in A. Nerkagi, *Molchashchii*, SoftDizain, Tyumen, 1996, pp. 405–414, here p. 410; see also the entry 'Nerkagi Anna Pavlovna' in the *Elektronnaia biblioteka tiiumenskogo pisatel'ia*, <https://writer-tyumen.ru/index.php?m=autor&aid=139> (last access 12 December 2025).

⁴ On the nexus between shamanism and Nenets literature, see Zhuleva's comprehensive study (2019).

⁵ *Nogo* is a Russian version of the name; the correct one from Nenets would be *Nokho*.

economic and educational conditions of reindeer-herders, criticised the boarding-school system and, in the mid-1990s, founded the farm *Zemlya Nadezhdi* (Land of Hope), which functioned both as an economic unit and as a familial-educational environment for orphaned children and adolescents (for further details on the project and its profoundly ecological pedagogical framework, see Morgun 2022). Her four *povesti* – *Aniko, Ilir, Beliy yagel'* [*White Moss*, 1995⁶] and *Molchashchii* [*The Silent One*, 1996] – were eventually gathered in the 1996 volume, framed by Lagunov's 'Open Letter' and a critical essay by V. Rogachev (Nerkagi 1996). Biographically and textually, Nerkagi herself embodies the trajectory of a woman taken away from the hearth who, under new historical conditions, returns to the tundra and keeps the fire alive.

In approaching Nerkagi's prose, it is necessary to distinguish between different levels of analysis. The texts construct a literary world that draws on, but does not simply reproduce, Nenets social and cosmological practices, or historical conditions. Ethnographic and historical accounts, in turn, document such practices in ways that are variable, rather than fixed or universally shared. The readings proposed here therefore seek to bring text and ethnography into dialogue without collapsing them into a single explanatory frame.

Ethnographic research has shown that Nenets life is structured not simply through a fixed division of labour between men and women, but through a complex system of embodied practices, spatial regulations, and relational norms that organise everyday life in the tundra (Liarskaya 2005; see also Vallikivi 2024). Gendered roles are inscribed in concrete forms of behaviour and movement: for instance, a range of prohibitions regulate how women may relate to tools, animals, or traces in the landscape, reflecting a broader system of ideas about purity, danger, and the ordering of space (Liarskaya 2005: 317).

Within this system, the *chum* – i.e. the tent (*mya* in Nenets) – is not merely a dwelling but a relational and cosmological space, in which the organisation of the interior reflects and sustains broader social and environmental relations. As has been argued in studies of circumpolar architecture, the hearth, the household, and the wider environment form an inseparable nexus, so that the domestic space cannot be understood independently of the cosmological and ecological relations that sustain it (Wishart 2013: 1-2). At the centre of this space stands the hearth, which among the Nenets is treated as a living and agentive presence. Fire must be carefully tended and 'fed,' and only those who belong to a given household are entitled to maintain it; it protects, warns, and, if disrespected, may also harm (Laptander 2020: 166-167). In this sense, the maintenance of the hearth is not simply a practical task, but a central practice through which relations between humans, animals, and other-than-human beings are continuously negotiated. It is within this

⁶ For the English translation, see *White Moss*, translated by Irina Sadovina and published by Pushkin Press (2026).

relational and cosmological framework that the three *povesti* examined in this article can be situated.

Aniko iz roda Nogo is an autobiographical *povest'* centred on a Nenets girl who is taken away from her family's small tundra camp to attend a boarding school and then an institute in the city. While Aniko is away, her mother and younger sister die in a tragic accident; a letter from her father, Seberuy, calls her back to the tundra. Through a limited cast – the parents, the family friend Passa, and a few human and non-human figures (the reindeer Temuyko, the dog Buro, the wolf Lame Devil) – the *povest'* constructs a dense portrait of life in a Nenets camp, its rituals, and moral codes. The narrative centres on the painful encounter between a father who expects his daughter to come back and take her place in the *chum*, and a young woman whose years away have rendered both the tundra and her father profoundly unfamiliar. The *povest'* ends without Aniko's return: what is staged is not a completed homecoming, but the spiritual and temporal distance that has opened up between the protagonist and her native world.

Set in a tundra camp in the first years after the Revolution, *Ilir* recounts the story of an eight-year-old Nenets orphan who lives in the household of Mayma, the owner of a vast reindeer herd. Determined to hide his animals from the approaching 'Red sled' (i.e. the Soviet power), Mayma drives them deep into the tundra; Ilir, however, eventually reveals their hiding place. To punish this act of 'betrayal' the wealthy master subjects the boy to a series of increasingly cruel trials and ultimately chains him like a dog. Alongside this realistic plot runs a symbolic layer drawn from Nenets folklore: Ilir nourishes his hope for liberation through the legend of the Blue Giants, destined to defeat evil on earth. Around the central conflict between Mayma and Ilir, the *povest'* sketches a small community of damaged or marginal figures – the embittered old woman Varne, the physically disabled Khon, and Ilir's mother, whose death in childbirth leaves him utterly defenceless. These figures are set against the backdrop of a world in which the old order and the emerging Soviet power clash over land, herds, and authority. The *povest'* ultimately stages the struggle between violence and goodness, greed, and compassion, in the most vulnerable space of all: the life of a Nenets child.

Conceived by Nerkagi as a continuation of *Aniko*, *White Moss* is a *povest'* about the impact of modernity on the genealogical and affective continuity of a Nenets community that remains in the tundra. Rather than following those who have left, the narrative explores what happens to the social and cosmological order when departures become irreversible and when the traditional structures of kinship and domestic life begin to erode. At its centre are two pairs from different generations; the old herder Petko and the young man Aleshka; Aleshka's elderly mother and his wife. Petko, recently widowed, can no longer rely on his wife Lamdo to light the fire, mend clothes, and maintain the daily rhythm of the *chum*: when a woman dies she takes 'half of life' with her, and the widower is forced to

move to the other side of a friend's hearth, to live 'across the fire.'⁷ Aleshka, who has spent time away from the tundra, is torn between his love for Ilne – a girl who has left and will not return – and the necessity of marriage as a condition of survival in nomadic life. The *povest'* follows his reluctant marriage to a woman chosen according to traditional norms, and the tensions that arise when the wrong woman takes her place by the hearth.

Against this narrative backdrop, it is worth briefly considering how Nerkagi's work has been read and contextualized. Existing scholarship on Nerkagi has been shaped first and foremost by the rich body of regional criticism that accompanied the publication of her works from the mid 1970s onward. More recent academic work – most notably O.K. Lagunova's monograph (Lagunova 2007) – has sought to systematise this reception by situating Nerkagi's oeuvre within the broader context of the 'young written literatures' of the North, foregrounding their rootedness in oral tradition and regional literary debates of the 1970s-80s. V.A. Rogachev's afterword to *Molchashchii* reads the different novels as steps in an increasingly apocalyptic diagnosis of Soviet and global modernity. More recent approaches – such as Klavdia Smola's argument that Soviet-era Indigenous literatures can be interpreted within the broader analytical frame of postcolonial studies (Smola 2017) – offer important insights into the ways internal colonialism, assimilation policies, and culturally ambivalent forms of modernity have shaped both the production and the reception of Nenets writing.

This article builds on these contributions while shifting the focus to the relationship between women and fire as a central prism through which to read Nerkagi's *povesti*. I argue that across *Aniko*, *Ilir* and *White Moss* female characters can be grouped according to their shifting proximity to – or rupture from – the hearth: women at the fire, women weeping by the fire, and women beyond the fire. Fire becomes the lens that allows us to read the three *povesti* together; women are the vector through which the fire registers the state of health, fracture, or loss of the Nenets world. In this perspective, fragility and resilience appear not as opposites but as intertwined: the fact that Nenets nomadism has not disappeared, and that the tundra lifestyle still attracts younger generations (Liarskaya 2010), is inseparable from the work – material, affective, and cosmological – performed by

⁷ «A year earlier his wife Lamdo, a woman not yet old, had departed into the eternal night. There was no one left to set their small family tea table in the mornings, no one to mend the *kisy*, no one to kindle the fire. When a woman dies, she takes half of life with her; and later one begins to understand that the person with whom one shared one's days also carries away a part of the soul, too [...] Old Petko himself went to live on the other, unoccupied side of the *chum* of his old friend, the Nenets man Vanu. To live 'across the fire' – as the old people would have said – meant not to live in one's own *chum* [Год назад ушла в вечную ночь его жена, не совсем старая женщина Ламдо. Некому стало ставить по утрам их семейный чайный столик, некому починить кисы, разжечь огонь. Когда умирает женщина, она уносит с собой половину жизни, а потом начинаешь понимать, что тот, с кем ты делил дни, уносит еще и часть души [...] Сам старик Пэтко стал жить на другой, свободной половине чума у старого друга, ненца Вану. Жить через огонь – так сказали бы старые люди, значит, не в своем чуме]» (Nerkagi 1996: 12).

women around the hearth. Nerkgi's writing, and her own life choices, can be read as part of a broader effort to 're-weave' the tundra, keeping the fire alight under Soviet and post-Soviet skies.

AT THE FIRE: THE ETERNAL POSTURE OF A NENETS WOMAN

This section examines how Nerkgi translates dynamics of change and the tensions they generate into narrative form through female characters whose proximity to the fire – «in the eternal posture of a Nenets woman, outwardly unmoved by what has occurred» (Nerkgi 1996: 17)⁸ – determines the ethical and cosmological stability of their communities.

In Nenets cosmology, the hearth is not merely a domestic feature but an organising principle of the world, as shown with clarity in the following passage from *White Moss*:

Like every woman of the tundra, Aleshka's mother was convinced that all of human life in its fullness begins precisely with the fact that the women of the world, in every part of the earth, light their fires in the morning – and only after that can men, children, dogs, and reindeer go about their own tasks (Nerkgi 1996: 103)⁹.

Crucially, the hearth belongs to women. Among many Northern peoples, the spirit of the hearth is represented in explicitly feminine form – as the Fire-Mother, Fire-Woman, or Fire-Grandmother¹⁰ – an anthropomorphic being who protects the household, announces danger, and must be respected through food offerings, verbal restraint, and the careful maintenance of the fire itself. In Nenets system, women alone are authorised to kindle the fire, feed it, and interpret its signs; even the master of the household may refrain from touching the hearth, according to some ethnographic accounts (see Khristoforova 2023: 176-178; Zhuleva 2019: 103).

This gendered structure has deep cosmological roots. As Zhuleva observes, in Nenets myth the progenitor of the world is a woman, a figure whose creative force is reflected in the very constitution of space. Her association with the tundra and with the ancestral mother suggests that the environment itself is conceptualised through feminine generativity

⁸ «в извечной позе ненецкой женщины, безучастной к случившемуся».

⁹ «Как всякая женщина тундры, мать Алёшки была убеждена, что вся большая человеческая жизнь начинается именно с того, что женщины мира во всех частях земли разжигают по утрам огни, и только после этого мужчины, дети, собаки, олени смогут делать свои дела».

¹⁰ See for detailed analysis on these figures in folklore/mythology: Pushkareva 2007 (English version 2019).

(Zhuleva 2019: 73).¹¹ Within this cosmological framework the hearth becomes the material site where the feminine principle articulates its relational power: it links the living with their ancestors, stabilises the boundaries of the *chum*, and establishes the ethical order of the community.

Few scenes in Nerlagi's oeuvre render this cosmological dimension of the hearth as powerfully as the long passage in *White Moss* in which the mother of Aleshka – aware that her life is ending – approaches the fire to deliver her final *slovo* [word]. The scene is not a form of decorative ethnography, but a dramatic condensation of the three functions of fire: as a symbol of protection, as a unifying agent, and as a means of purification and an amuletic force (Laptander 2020). In this sense, the fire emerges both as the guardian of the household and as the witness of genealogical continuity. Only through a woman's hands, voice, and ritual posture can this connection be enacted.

Nerlagi stresses the gravity of the moment from the outset: «The word to the fire is the word of the soul. It is the first and the last, granted only once in a lifetime, as birth and as death» (Nerlagi 1996: 32)¹². It is an event of ontological exposure. The old woman is afraid – of inadequacy, of approaching the Great Fire (*Velikii Ogon'*) with an unprepared soul. Ritual authority is shown to be neither automatic nor guaranteed by age; it must be earned through embodied knowledge and moral maturity.

The choreography is meticulous. She searches the ashes for a living ember – «like a living, burning heart» (Nerlagi 1996: 33)¹³ – and places two coals beside it so that they ignite together. The gesture is maternal and cosmological at once: to ignite the fire properly is to awaken the heart of the household. When the three coals catch fire – «the three of them... were instantly taken up by the pale blue flame» (Nerlagi 1996: 33)¹⁴ – the woman smiles with relief: the flame itself has given a sign of acceptance.

«I have come with a word», she said quietly. But she spoke firmly, for she knew that there could no longer be any doubt, neither in her soul nor in her voice. «For the last time I have kindled you. For the last time my hands have touched your body, and my eyes have sought your gaze». Watching the flame intently, the woman restrained the trembling in her hands, knowing that she must no longer add any logs. The fire knows by itself. What follows is its own affair. It may go out while there is still wood, or it may burn even when not a single ember remains. Such is its will.

¹¹ In *White Moss*, throughout the narrative, the tundra itself is figured as a maternal presence: in a key scene, on his wedding night, Aleshka flees the *chum* and lies down in a hollow in the moss, as if the land were providing a second nuptial bed.

¹² «Слово к огню – слово души. Первое и последнее, и оно даётся лишь раз в жизни, как рождение и как смерть».

¹³ «словно живое горящее сердце».

¹⁴ «все трое... мгновенно занялись голубеньким пламенем»

Without lifting her head, feeling only the warmth and the light upon her face, the woman continued, her soul now strengthened:

«I will not let tears fall upon your face. I will not complain, nor will I curse. Another woman's hands will tend you. That is why I am here... but not only for that», she added hastily, changing her posture. She knelt, bowing her head even lower. The fire was not her equal.

«I bow before you».

«I hear you», the Fire replied. But this was not the fire that was lit each morning by the will of the old woman's hands. It was the great root of life. The proudest, the most ardent heads had bowed before it in all ages, imploring not only warmth and well-being for themselves. Incomprehensibly vast is the power of Fire over humankind, and the woman's quiet, sorrowful voice came to sound not as a demand, nor as a whim, nor as a threat, but as a timid plea, fearful of slipping into despair and pain (Nerkagi 1996: 33).¹⁵

Her plea centres on one demand: the fire must protect her son, but if he ever violates its order – «If my son should wish death upon you... burn him!» (Nerkagi 1996: 34).¹⁶ Here the hearth emerges as the highest arbiter of moral life: a force to which even maternal love must defer. The «rare golden flame»¹⁷ marks the ritual as complete: the lineage is secured, and the woman's custodianship fulfilled.

While the scene discussed above foregrounds one dimension of female transmission – women speaking to the fire on behalf of future generations and thereby sustaining the ethical and cosmological fabric of the community – Nenets women also play a crucial role in maintaining relations across different domains of existence, especially when the

¹⁵ «– Со словом пришла, – негромко сказала. Но твёрдо сказала, ибо знала, что сомневаться ни в душе, ни в голосе уже нельзя.

– Последний раз я разожгла тебя. Последний раз мои руки коснулись твоего тела, а глаза искали взгляда.

Зорко следя за пламенем, женщина, сдерживая дрожь в руках, зная, что нельзя уже подложить поленьев. Огонь сам знает. Дальше его дело. Он может потухнуть, когда есть ещё дрова, а может и гореть, если даже не останется ни одного уголька. Его воля.

Не поднимая головы, лишь чувствуя на лице своём тепло и свет, женщина продолжила, окрепнув душой:

– Я не уроню слёзы на лицо твоё. Не пожалуюсь, и не прокляну. Руки другой женщины будут беречь тебя. Вот почему я тут... но не только поэтому, – торопливо поправила она и сменила позу. Она стала на колени, ещё ниже склонив голову. Огонь ей не чета.

– Я преклоняюсь перед тобой.

– Слышу! – ответил Огонь. Но это был не тот огонь, который загорался по утрам по воле рук старой женщины. Великий корень жизни. Ему поклонялись самые гордые, горячие головы, во все века вымаливая для себя не только тепло и благополучие. Непостижимо велика власть Огня над человеком, и робкой просьбой, не капризом и не угрозой стал звучать тихий печальный голос женщины, боясь перейти на отчаяние и боль».

¹⁶ «Если сын мой пожелает смерти тебе.....сожжи его!»

¹⁷ «огонь золотой, редкостный по цвету».

boundaries between them grow porous. Ethnographic accounts show that Nenets cosmology does not distinguish sharply between the human world and its surroundings. Alongside the *nentsy* (real people), the tundra is inhabited by a wide range of other agents: spirits of place, beings created before humans who dwell at the margins of the *oikoumene*, and the dead, as well as animals, birds, and plants. These beings are not conceived as inert nature nor as radically other, but as *other persons*: they possess their own modes of life and traditions, can understand human speech, and require forms of reciprocal attention and care (see Khristoforova 2023: 185 ff. and 203 ff).

In such a relational system, order does not rest on rigid separation but on the careful management of coexistence. Moments of transition are therefore moments of heightened risk, when the balance between domains may be disturbed. It is primarily in these liminal situations that women exercise their authority as mediators, regulating passage, speech, and proximity between different layers of the cosmos (Liarskaya 2005). In Nenets cosmology, the land of the dead is imagined as a negative counterpart of the world of the living – identical yet inverted.¹⁸ Ethnographic accounts describe Nenets funerary practices as a set of actions that regulate the transition of the dead, ensuring that objects, bodies, and relations assume their proper form beyond the world of the living (see Khristoforova 2023: 229–233). Within this framework, death emerges as a paradigmatic moment of passage, requiring careful ritual mediation. In Nerkagi's narrative, these practices are consistently entrusted to the female community, which prepares the body, organises the farewell, and sustains communication with the dead.

In *Aniko*, the funeral of Nekochi – Aniko's mother – and her small daughter is entrusted to the female community. It is they who prepare the bodies for the journey and make sure that everything that once belonged to the deceased is broken or torn before being placed in the grave, so that it may assume its proper form in the other world. Women also manage the dialogue with the dead, who, according to belief, come to meet the newly deceased and to receive news from the world of the living. The ritual thus becomes an act of controlled communication across ontological boundaries. In Nerkagi's scene, it is the oldest woman – Passa's mother – who directs this fragile liturgy:

People do not offend Nekochi.

While the meat is cooking, they generously pour tobacco into the corners of the coffin, into the fire, and simply onto the ground.

Silently, with lowered heads, they sit around the fire. Everyone wishes to do something kind for Seberuy's wife, and at the same time to give her a charge: so that there, in the camp of those who have departed, she may put in a word for those who have remained and tell in detail how each one lives.

¹⁸ See Laptander and Vitebsky 2021: «The model of domestic fire encompasses all humans. The dead also sit in groups around a fire, though this is an anti-fire, with small, blue flames that burn with icy cold. But even here, it keeps its function as the focal point of a group» (p. 17).

This is not so much a funeral as a farewell to a person who has decided to go to another world.

Passa's mother was older than all the others. She knew the customs better, and therefore she spoke:

– Do not be silent. One must say something. So many have come to her now.

And all of them are listening to her story. They must also hear our voices.

– Yes, Passa adds. They must know that we have come to see her off, that on the earth she lived well.

The old Nenets woman continues:

– Do not take offence, Aniko's mother. – Women rarely call one another by name; more often they call one another by the name of a living child. – We dressed the little girl well. She will not be cold. And for you – you can see it yourself – here is your new *yagushka* (Nerkagi 1996: 319).¹⁹

Such scenes reflect a broader cosmological structure. In Nenets cosmogony, as in other Northern cultures, the divinity of the Middle World – the realm of the living – is feminine and articulated through two complementary names: *Ya-Nebya*, the mother of all living beings, and *Ya-Myunya*, the womb of the earth that receives the dead (Khristoforova 2023: 146; Pushkareva 2007).

Just as the dead belong to the category of 'other persons' with whom relations must be carefully maintained, so too do animals form part of this wider community of beings. In the tundra, they are not external resources but co-dwellers, bound to humans through shared work, dependency, and exposure to vulnerability. The woman's domain – centred on the *chum* and the hearth – thus becomes the space where relations with animals are negotiated not through domination, but through gestures of nurture, proximity, and care. It is in this context that Nerkagi places one of the most striking scenes of *Aniko*: Nekochi breastfeeding the orphaned reindeer calf Temuyko.

¹⁹ «Люди не обижают Некочи. Пока варится мясо, они щедро насыпают табак в уголки саркофага, в костёр и просто на землю.

Молча, склонив головы, сидят вокруг костра. Всем хочется сделать приятное жене Себеруя и вместе с тем дать наказ, чтобы она там, в стойбище ушедших, замолвила слово за тех, кто остался, да' подробно рассказала, кто как живёт. Это скорее не похороны, а проводы человека, решившего уйти в другой мир.

Мать Пассы старше всех. Она лучше знает обычаи и поэтому говорит:

– Не молчите. Надо говорить о чём-нибудь. Сейчас ведь их очень много к ней пришло. И все слушают её рассказ. Они должны слышать и наши голоса.

– Да, – добавляет Пасса. – Они должны знать, что мы пришли провожать её, что на земле она жила хорошо.

Старая ненка продолжает:

– Не обижайся, мать Анико. – Женщины редко когда называют друг друга по имени, чаще – матерью живого ребёнка. – Девочку мы хорошо одели. Ей не будет холодно. А на тебе, ты сама видишь, твоя новая ягушка».

When the camp grew quiet, she set about feeding the stubborn little one again, and again without success. Then the woman knelt down beside him, slipped off her *yagushka*, unbuttoned the collar of her dress. She covered the reindeer calf's eyes with her palm. He did not even stir. When Nekochi brought her breast to him, he flinched, then, wetting the nipple with his saliva, drew the milk into himself.

– Seberuy!

He lifted his head and was struck dumb: Temuyko, the unacknowledged son of the herd, was sucking at her breast, his little legs braced against the floor.

They fell asleep only at dawn. Temuyko, covered with the *yagushka* and caressed by his new mother, only now and then raised his head; he no longer cried, but seemed to peer at something in the faint twilight of the chum.

Nekochi fed him for a week; then she accustomed him to fish soup, to bread, and even to sugar (Nerkagi 1996: 325-26)²⁰.

In this way, Nekochi extends the maternal gesture to another species. Through this act, Nerkagi situates her within the broader logic of women at the fire: the scene places human and animal life within the same moral space and shows how continuity in the tundra is maintained through caring, embodied practices. Women, positioned at the hearth, emerge here not as symbolic figures but as practical mediators of this interdependence, holding together humans, animals, and a world shaped by relationships rather than possession.

WEEPING BY THE FIRE: WOMEN IN A FRACTURED ORDER

If the women at the fire discussed in the previous chapter embody the possibility of continuity and balance within the Nenets world, Nerkagi's prose also registers the moments in which this order fractures. When the ethical equilibrium of the *chum* is disturbed – whether through abuse of authority, fear of dispossession, or the collapse of relational roles – the hearth ceases to function as a space of protection. This chapter focuses on such moments of internal collapse, examining how *Ilir* and, in a different

²⁰ «Когда в стойбище стало тихо, она снова принялась кормить маленького упряма, и опять напрасно. Тогда женщина опустилась рядом с ним, сбросила ягушку, расстегнула ворот платья. Закрывает ладонью глаза оленёнку. Тот даже не пошевелился. Когда Некочи поднесла ему грудь, он вздрогнул, затем, помочив слюной сосок, втянул в себя молоко.

– Себеруй!

Тот поднял голову и обомлел: Тэмуйко, непризнанный сын стада, сосал грудь, упёршись ножками в пол.

Уснули только на рассвете. Тэмуйко, укрытый ягушкой и обласканный своей новой матерью, лишь изредка поднимал голову, но уже не плакал, а что-то высматривал в негустых сумерках чума.

Некочи кормила его неделю, потом приучила к ухе, хлебу и даже сахару».

register, *White Moss* portray the suffering produced when male authority becomes violent or misaligned, and when the fire turns from a centre of care into a space of exposure. Through these narratives, Nerkagi shows how the consequences of historical change are first inscribed not in ideology or institutions, but in women's bodies, roles, and silenced endurance.

Set in the first years of Soviet power in the tundra – a temporal shift that was probably adopted on the advice of Nerkagi's mentor to soften the text's social accusatory force (a conjecture formulated by Rogachev, in Nerkagi 1996: 411) – *Ilir* is one of her most severe narratives. Rogachev interprets the *povest'* as a double indictment: of conservative, oppressive relations within Nenets society on the one hand, and of the false promise of the new Soviet authority on the other, which, despite its rhetoric of liberation, proves incapable of protecting the most vulnerable.²¹ What gives *Ilir* its critical force, though, is not ideological accusation as such, but the way historical pressure and internal disalignment converge within the intimate space of the *chum*.

The figure of Mayma – a wealthy owner of reindeer – embodies this collision. He appears simultaneously as the product of a genealogy of accumulation and as a man acting under the pressure of an approaching power that threatens his dominance. His violence represents a distorted response to vulnerability and perceived impotence, a transformation of authority into coercion. One of the deeper sources of his frustration is his son Khon, a central and highly compelling figure of the *povest'*, whom it is not possible to discuss here in detail. The child is crippled, a condition that causes Mayma profound suffering by depriving him of a 'worthy' heir, while also insinuating a deep sense of guilt: Mayma's wife maintains that Khon's disability is a punishment inflicted by *Ya-Myunya* for the beatings he administered to her while she was pregnant (Nerkagi 1996: 127). In *Ilir*, the distortion of the value system of male authority – one that comes to regard reindeer as more precious than human beings – has immediate consequences for the ethical function of the hearth. Before *Ilir* himself is chained, humiliated, and reduced to a condition likened to that of a dog, the disintegration of order has already been inscribed in the fate of women – those who depend most directly on the fire as a guarantee of safety and continuity.

²¹ Nerkagi herself later stressed, however, that ideological confrontation was never the primary motor of the text: «I literally wrote the *povest'* *Ilir* in a single breath, about a deformed boy who proved through his fate that land and human beings are one. But I had already become such a Soviet person that I could not write 'just like that'. I needed a background. So I overlaid my hero's destiny onto the events of the Civil War. Even so... at the time I was least of all interested in the problems of class struggle in the tundra [Я буквально на одном дыхании сочинила повесть "Илир" про мальчика-уродца, который своей судьбой доказал, что земля и человек – едины. Но я была уже настолько советским человеком, что писать просто так не могла. Мне потребовался фон. Поэтому судьбу своего героя я наложила на события гражданской войны. Хотя... меня тогда менее всего интересовали проблемы классовой борьбы в тундре]» (quoted in Drozhashchikh 2021: 15-16).

While the figure of Khon's mother undergoes a relatively positive development, marked by the emergence of maternal feeling and growing compassion toward her son and toward Ilir (see Nerkagi 1996: 213-215 and Koneva 2016), the story of Ilir's own mother is entirely tragic. Widowed as a result of Mayma's exploitation of her husband, she is left to rely solely on her young son for survival. Although Mayma already has two wives – a practice still attested in the 1930s, as scholarship on Nenets polygamy has shown, with clear social and economic rationales (Glavatskaya 2016) – he becomes irresistibly drawn to her, begins to visit her *chum*, and impregnates her. Nerkagi makes clear that this relationship is not grounded in fascination or compassion, but in fear: faced with violence and dependence, the woman submits.

When the time comes to give birth, she follows the rules of ritual purity and constructs a small *chum* outside the main dwelling in order not to contaminate it. As scholars have shown, this practice reflects a belief – widespread among many Northern peoples – that childbirth is a liminal moment, a passage between worlds akin to death, and therefore potentially disruptive of cosmic order (Zhuleva 2019: 69; Golovnev and Osherenko 2018: 37-38).²² When she dies from the cold shortly after childbirth, her death appears not as a random tragedy, but as the logical outcome of a world in which the fire no longer protects those who depend on it.

At this point, another female figure assumes the role of caregiver: Varne, the old woman considered mad by the camp. She instructs Ilir about the hardships that await him now that he will be alone and advises him to preserve a live ember from the fire of his *chum* when it is dismantled, as a means of protection and support. The scene unfolds around the fire, which stands as both witness and participant in the dialogue:

– Tomorrow morning they will take down your *chum*. Take a warm ember from the fire and hide it, so that no one notices. The fire is the third presence in our conversation now: you will forget my words, but the son of the fire will remember them – Varne bent over the nearly dying hearth, took a smouldering ember in both hands, brought it to her lips, and began to whisper something.

The ember hissed; the skin on her fingers darkened visibly, while Ilir, transfixed by the expression on the woman's face, did not dare to move.

At last the old woman threw the ember back into the fire and, brushing a lock of hair away from her ear, bent even lower, as though eavesdropping on the faint tongues of flame.

She listened for a long time. A grey strand of her hair flared up, releasing an acrid smell. Extinguishing it, the old woman gave a satisfied grunt.

²² On the interpretation of the laws of purity as techniques for preserving cosmic order, see Mary Douglas's seminal study *Purity and Danger* (Douglas, Mary. *Purity and Danger: An Analysis of Concepts of Pollution and Taboo*. London: Routledge, 1966).

– Now I will leave, and I probably won't live much longer. But tomorrow, don't forget to take the ember. And know this: the path ahead of you will be hard. But you will walk it. For now, sleep, and do not go again to the dead—do not disturb them. Try not to cry, or your mother's head will ache –
Varne stood up, bowed to the fire in thanks for its warmth, and quietly went out (Nerkagi 1996: 137).²³

Varne's story itself constitutes a profoundly tragic narrative insertion. The only child of an extremely poor pair of nomadic fishermen, she receives a marriage proposal shortly after coming of age. Her father leaves the *chum* to procure meat for the celebrations and never returns; he is later found murdered in the tundra. Mother and daughter are taken in by Mayma's camp, where the mother soon dies, while the daughter is condemned to perform the most menial labour for others, without a *chum* of her own, nor hope for future happiness. This situation – a narrative anticipation of what will soon happen to Ilir – is so unbearable that the young woman invokes the spirit Kharbtso, hoping to be driven mad and thus relieved of the weight of consciousness. When this finally happens, however, the spirit does not grant her this gift, and she is forced to feign a madness she cannot truly inhabit. It is she who is the first to oppose Mayma, cursing his sledges (including the sacred one bearing the idols) and his *khorey*, the pole used to direct the reindeer (see the scene in Nerkagi 1996: 143): when women transgress the prescriptions intended to keep male and female domains separate, misfortune falls upon men (Liarskaya 2005: 324; Golovnev and Osherenko 2018: 33).

While in the case of the women in *Ilir* the source of their tragic trajectories appears to lie in Mayma's violence, which shatters the harmony among the camp's inhabitants – human and non-human alike – the imbalance at the centre of *White Moss* is of a different nature. As anticipated, the plot revolves around an absence: Ilne, who left years earlier for the boarding school, has never returned. At the camp she left behind her father – widowed at the time of the narrative and forced to settle in his friend Petko's *chum*, thereby triggering marital tensions – and young Aleshka, who has always been in love with her. The latter's

²³ «– Завтра утром будут снимать твой чум. Возьми тёплый уголёк из костра и спрячь его, чтобы никто не заметил. Огонь сейчас в нашем разговоре третий, ты забудешь мои слова – сын костра будет помнить, – Варнэ наклонилась над почти умершим костром, взяла обеими руками тлеющий уголёк, поднесла его к губам и что-то зашептала.

Уголёк шипел, кожа на пальцах заметно чернела, а Илир, замороженный выражением лица женщины, не смел даже пошевелиться.

Наконец старуха бросила уголёк в костёр и, убрав с уха прядь волос, наклонилась ещё ниже, словно подслушивая разговор слабых язычков пламени.

Она слушала долго. Седая прядь её вспыхнула, издав неприятный запах. Потушив её, старуха довольно хмыкнула:

– Теперь я уйду и жить, наверно, буду недолго. А ты не забудь взять завтра уголёк. И знай: путь у тебя впереди трудный. Но ты пройдёшь его. А сейчас спи и не ходи больше к умершим, не мешай им. Старайся не плакать, а то у мамы твоей будет болеть голова.

Варнэ встала, поклонилась костру, благодаря его за тепло, и тихо вышла».

drama, compelled to marry another woman, constitutes one of the novel's central narrative lines, counterbalanced by his mother's tribulations in safeguarding the lineage of the *chum* (as discussed above). Ilne's figure functions as a variation on the character of Aniko, to whom we will return shortly. What calls for attention here, however, is the distortion produced by the arrival of an unwanted woman at the hearth. Aleshka resists the marriage – which has effectively been imposed on him by the elders in the name of Nenets tradition – and refuses to consummate it. The young wife, whose figure emerges only through the gaze of others, suffers this rejection in silence until one morning she can no longer hold back her tears. «Don't cry. Your tears will fall onto the face of the Fire. He must not know of ... our misfortune» her mother-in-law tells her. And Nerkagi adds: «That their misfortune was shared, the woman did not doubt» (Nerkagi 1996: 104)²⁴.

This collective drama, generated by Ilne's absence, unfolds largely – characteristically of Nenets culture (Khristorova 2008; Vallikivi 2024) – in silence. This emerges clearly in the following scene, in which the father and the young man are unable to articulate what they carry in their hearts:

«...It is not my daughter who lights the fire in his *chum*. It is not she who warms his blood and will bear him a son. It was not she who saw the sled off in the morning, and it will not be she who weeps over him one last time. And that means he has no reason to pity me. And I have no right to ask for pity» – the old man thought, staring into the flickering embers of the small fire, watching with sorrow as one glowing eye after another went out. The fire that had only just warmed him was dying. In the same way human feelings fade, turning to dust – even the best of them, the most sincere and pure. No one can be judged or reproached for this. Autumn comes, leaves turn yellow, flowers and grasses wither, and people do not reproach nature for it. «...Will I be able to explain that I have never stopped waiting for his daughter, even though there is a girl living in my *chum* – a girl who has not become a woman? I did not take her, and I will not take her. Will he believe me? Will he not laugh if I say this?» – Aleshka thought, also staring ahead of him. The words burned inside him. [...] Time passed. There is a silence that is especially heavy (Nerkagi 1996: 93).²⁵

²⁴ «“Не плачь. Слёзы уронишь на лицо Огня. Он не должен знать о... нашей беде”. Что беда их общая, женщина не сомневалась».

²⁵ «...Не моя дочь разжигает огонь в его чуме. Не она веселит ему кровь и принесёт сына. Не она провожала утром упряжку, и не ей плакать над ним в последний раз. А значит, и не ему жалеть меня. А мне не просить жалости», – думал старик, глядя в мерцающие уголья костерка, с тоской наблюдая, как гаснет глазок за глазком. Умирает огонь, который только что грел его. Так же меркнут людские чувства, становясь пылью, даже самые лучшие, искренние и чистые. Никого не осудишь и не попрекнёшь за это. Приходит осень, желтеют листья, сохнут цветы и травы, и люди не ропщут за это на природу.

The novel, however, concludes with a form of reconciliation of the two men. Both appear to relinquish their pain to the camp community and to find, within its social and relational logic, a space in which to go on living.

In *White Moss*, the fracture does not take the form of open violence, but of absence. Ilne's departure – shared, silently, by the men who remain – leaves the hearth without the woman who once anchored it, revealing how profoundly the Nenets order depends not only on fire itself, but on the female presence that keeps it alive. It is from this absence, from women who are no longer by the fire, that Nerkagi's third configuration emerges: women who have left.

BEYOND THE FIRE: WOMEN WHO HAVE LEFT

The protagonist of Nerkagi's debut novel, *Aniko*, embodies a third type of female figure in her work: women who have left the tundra. Aniko is unmistakably a largely autobiographical character, a narrative projection of the inner fracture that Nerkagi herself experienced. This fracture emerges from being torn between the tundra and what she refers to as the 'big world' – not yet a clearly defined space, but rather an impulse of attraction toward an elsewhere perceived as lying beyond the limits of her native environment:

From childhood I was drawn toward the big world; I longed to go beyond the limits within which my fellow countrymen most often remain. Like Aniko, the heroine of my first *povest'*, after finishing my studies at the boarding school in the settlement of Beloyarsk, I left for the big city and enrolled at the Tyumen Industrial Institute.

It took years to come to a rather simple realisation: that there is nothing greater, more spacious, or dearer than one's native land, my beloved (Baydaratskaya) tundra.

If Aniko, the heroine of the *povest'*, wavered between the city and the tundra, then I made my choice.

On the peaks of the Polar Urals grows ancient white lichen. No one touches it except the wind and the sun. For me, this beautiful moss is a fusion of freedom, pride, unattainable beauty, and independence.²⁶

«...Смогу ли объяснить, что не перестал ждать его дочери, хотя в моём чуме живёт девушка, не ставшая женщиной. Я не взял её и не возьму. Поверит ли? Не засмеётся ли он, если скажу об этом?» – размышлял Алёшка, тоже глядя перед собой. Слова жгли его. [...] Прошло время. Есть особо тяжёлое молчание».

²⁶ Quote in Rogachev, *op. cit.*, Nerkagi 1996: 410: «С детства меня тянул большой мир, я стремилась за пределы того, чем чаще всего обходятся мои земляки. Как и Анико из моей первой повести, закончив учебу в школе-интернате в поселке Белоярск, я уехала в большой город, стала учиться в Тюменском индустриальном институте. Потребовались годы, чтобы осознать довольно простую мысль, что нет

Nerkagi belongs to the generation that grew up during the most intensive phase of Soviet educational policy in the North. As documented by Liarskaya, this period – to which she refers as that of the ‘classical boarding schools’ (from the late 1950s to the mid-1980s), and especially its early stage up to the mid-1970s – was marked by a particularly aggressive drive toward Russification (Liarskaya 2013). Indigenous children were sent to boarding schools as part of a centralized state policy, often against the will of their parents; the use of native languages was strictly prohibited not only in the classroom but also in everyday interactions among the children themselves. While this system contributed to the emergence of an *intelligentsiya* among the northern minorities – who would later play a crucial role in national revival and cultural and political activism from the 1980s onward, and to which Nerkagi herself belongs – it was also a profoundly traumatic experience. The violence of this educational regime did not simply produce mobility or social advancement; it generated a deep internal fracture, marked by the suppression of memory, language, and embodied forms of knowledge.

This fracture lies at the core of *Aniko*, which can be read as its narrative chronicle. The novel follows the young woman’s return to her native camp after years of absence and stages the cognitive dissonance that defines her condition. *Aniko* has almost entirely repressed her childhood, along with her native language, and her arrival at her father’s camp does not take the form of a homecoming. Rather, it unfolds as a journey into a painful and repressed past – one that resists reconciliation and exposes the lasting effects of displacement produced by colonial education.

Aniko represents the modern, educated, and successful young woman, the quintessence of the cultural revolution that Soviet education was meant to bring about. Her return ‘home’, however, fractures this monolithic self-image and, by confronting her with her father’s pain as well as with her own, compels her to question the priorities she had hitherto taken for granted. During her visit to her mother’s grave – one of the most dramatic moments in the novel – *Aniko* is seized by a profound sense of guilt and says: «Forgive me. I was to blame for our separation – I left you in order to study, to become better. But did I truly become better?» (Nerkagi 1996: 355).²⁷

The encounter with Aleshka, a childhood peer who, like *Aniko*, had attended the boarding school but was later forced to return to the tundra after his father’s sudden death, further intensifies her doubts. It is through him that the novel most explicitly articulates the hybrid condition to which the younger generations of Nenets are relegated. Reflecting on the

ничего больше, просторнее и милее, чем родная земля, дорогая моя (Байдарацкая) тундра... Если *Анико*, героиня повести, металась между городом и тундрой, то я выбор сделала... На вершинах Полярного Урала растет вековой белый ягель. Кроме ветра и солнца, никто не трогает его. Для меня этот красивый мох – сплав свободы, гордости, недоступной красоты и независимости».

²⁷«– Прости меня. Я была виновата в нашей разлуке, ушла от тебя, чтобы учиться и быть лучше. Только лучше ли я стала?».

experience of the *internat*, Aleshka observes: «The boarding school is a good thing. But think about it – how many young people actually returned to the tundra after boarding school? And those who did return, what did they bring back with them? They never properly learned to read and write, and they forgot the crafts of their fathers. So, we end up as neither people of the tundra nor people of the city – some kind of mixture...» (Nerkagi 1996: 361).²⁸ Education, he concedes, may in principle be valuable; yet in practice it produces subjects who belong fully to neither world – neither to the tundra nor to the city – while simultaneously eroding traditional forms of knowledge and labour. Aleshka goes on to demand recognition, on the part of the authorities, of the value of Nenets professions and ways of life, which the school system persistently marginalizes.

Aniko is left deeply unsettled. Speaking with her old friend, she gradually realizes that she cannot bring her father to the city, as she had naively imagined at the beginning of the novel; at the same time, she is unable to imagine herself returning to the tundra. In a moment of emotional outburst, she exclaims: «So, for his sake [father's], must I repeat my mother's fate?». Aleshka's response is sharp and deliberately provocative: «So you want to live in a comfortable apartment, while other Nenets women are supposed to sit by the hearth? You're educated – then go and make their lives better. [...] When you have felt the full weight of a woman's life on your own skin, then you will know what needs to be done» [Nerkagi 1996: 362].²⁹

The scene closes not with resolution, but with Aniko's inner turmoil. Somewhere deep within herself, she begins to sense that Aleshka may be right, yet the implications of this recognition are overwhelming:

Somewhere deep down, Aniko began to realise that the young man was right. But how... how could she give everything up: the institute, the theatre, the cinema, dancing, debates with friends about art, about an interesting and vibrant future? How could she forget the noisy, feverish streets of the city, the beloved places where she had so often thought and dreamed so well, and voluntarily surrender herself to the frozen silence, lose herself in the white expanse of snow, put on a *yagushka*, live by the light of a kerosene lamp and... grow old?! (Nerkagi 1996: 362).³⁰

²⁸ «Интернат – это хорошо. Но вспомни, много ли молодых вернулось после интерната в тундру. А те, кто вернулся, что они принесли? И грамоте толком не научились, и ремесло своих отцов позабыли. Вот и получаются из нас не тундровые жители, не городские, смесь какая-то...».

²⁹ «Что же, ради него [отца] я должна повторить судьбу матери?»; «Значит, ты хочешь жить в благоустроенной квартире, а другие ненецкие женщины пусть сидят у очага? Ты же грамотная, вот и сделай их жизнь лучше. [...] Вот когда ты на собственной шкуре почувствуешь всю тяжесть жизни женщины, тогда будешь знать, что делать».

³⁰ «Где-то в глубине души Анико начала сознавать, что парень прав, но как... как бросить всё: институт, театр, кино, танцы, споры с товарищами об искусстве, об интересном и ярком будущем? Как забыть шумные, горячие улицы города, любимые места, где не раз так хорошо думалось и

In fact, the novel gestures toward the possibility of a third path, situated between the abandonment of one's land and a full return to traditional life. This alternative is embodied by Ira Laptander, Aniko's former schoolmate – far from a particularly brilliant student, unlike the protagonist – whom Aniko encounters shortly before leaving once again for the 'mainland'. After completing her medical studies in the city, Ira declines the position she has been assigned in a large urban center and instead asks to be sent to the tundra, where she works as a veterinary assistant, caring for the herds. As the novel repeatedly suggests, the younger generations are called upon to use the education they have received to improve the lives of their people.

Ira, who had never been the chair of the youth council and, after joining the Komsomol, had not sat – like Aniko – at the desk of the Komsomol secretary, had suddenly become a support for her people? Had begun to heal them and care for them?

And she? What had *she* done – she, Aniko Nogo, once respected and admired by everyone? Built some rotten shed called *personal well-being*? As if Aniko wanted to live only for herself. Could that really be true? Very well, she would return here – but there was not even a proper place to wash. And the institute? Three years of study were no joke. No. Something was wrong. She had stirred up this turmoil in her soul for nothing. One must live, and that is all – and how, let each person decide for themselves.

It sounded firm and reassuring – and yet a residue remained in her soul. (Nerkagi 1996: 375-76).³¹

Ira's figure therefore interrupts the apparent binary between leaving and returning: she embodies a form of 'return' that does not undo education but redirects it toward the tundra and toward collective care. For Aniko, however, this possibility does not translate into a solution; it remains an unsettling mirror that exposes the gap between individual success and responsibility toward one's community. As the autobiographical passage cited at the opening of this chapter makes clear, it is precisely this third path that Nerkagi herself would ultimately choose – reorienting education not away from the tundra, but back toward it.

мечталось, и добровольно отдать себя мёрзлой тишине, затеряться в белом просторе снегов, надеть ягушку, жить при керосиновой лампе и... состариться?!»

³¹ «Ира, которая никогда не была председателем совета дружины, а став комсомолкой, не села, как Анико, за стол секретаря комсомольской организации, вдруг стала опорой своему народу? Стала лечить его и заботиться о нём?

А она? Чем занялась она, всеми тогда уважаемая и почитаемая Анико Ного? Построением какого-то гнилого сарая, имя которому – личное благополучие? Можно подумать, что Анико хотела жить только для себя. Неужели это правда?.. Ну хорошо, вернётся она сюда, но тут даже толком помыться негде. А институт? Три года учёбы не шутка. Нет. Что-то не так. Зря переполох подняла в душе. Надо жить, и всё, а уж как, это пусть решает каждый.

Крепко и утешительно сказано, и всё-таки в душе остался осадок».

CONCLUSIONS

Taken together, the narratives discussed in this article suggest that Anna Nerkagi's prose does not simply mourn the potential disintegration of Nenets cultural order, nor does it idealize a return to an untouched past. Rather, it articulates a space of negotiation in which continuity is made possible through adaptation. Central to this process are women, insofar as they most consistently sustain the ethical, affective, and ecological order of the *chum* when that order comes under pressure.

This literary vision finds a striking parallel in ethnographic research on Yamal. As Liarskaya has shown, the region has demonstrated a remarkable capacity to adapt to modern pressures without collapsing its nomadic foundations (Liarskaya 2010). Crucially, this resilience is linked to a gender shift that did not replace women's roles in the *chum* but rather reconfigured them within the existing nomadic order. Where Soviet policies introduced the figure of the *chumrabortnitsa* – a salaried female worker detached from the internal economy and symbolic order of the camp – effectively removing women from their relational role at the hearth, the camp itself frequently ceased to function as a coherent unit. By contrast, the third way evoked in Nerkagi's prose – exemplified both by fictional figures such as Ira Laptander and by Nerkagi's own life choices – points toward a different outcome: one in which women remain embedded in the domestic and affective core of nomadic life, while also gaining new forms of education and agency. Only in this way does the tundra continue to function as a lived environment, rather than being reduced either to a relic of the past or to a purely productive space.

In this light, Nerkagi's writing can be read as a sustained reflection on cultural resilience. Her prose does not deny loss, fracture, or pain; instead, it shows how Nenets matricultural systems, though destabilised, continue to function through women's labour and ethical commitment. Her prose suggests that survival in the circumpolar North depends less on resisting change than on carefully mediating it, preserving the relational structures – above all those maintained by women – that allow Nenets society to endure. The hearth, kept alive by women who neither fully abandon the tundra nor remain untouched by modernity, becomes the site where cultural webs are not merely preserved, but actively re-woven.

About the Author

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