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# Why Women Sing: Female Performers in Traditional Societies

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## Özet

Female performance in traditional societies has always been a phenomenon that presented a real challenge for women-singers. It is common for famous female performers to have had a difficult but remarkable destiny. In Central Asia, the female role in society is mostly associated with the fulfillment of family duties and child-bearing commitments. However, we can find a number of cases of famous women-singers, who on their path to success, recognition and fame, each had to overcome the limitations imposed by traditional societies in profound ways. Four prominent Central Asian female singers of the 20th and 21st century form the focus of my presentation: Berta Davydova (1922-2007, Uzbekistan), Munojan Yulchieva (b.1960 in Uzbekistan), Jamala (b. 1983 in Kyrgyzstan) and Manizha (b.1991 in Tajikistan). Bringing attention to performers of both classical and popular genres of music, I am going to demonstrate that any genre featuring female performances has its particular challenges and demands and that in order to achieve a successful career, women-singers have always needed to take a risk. All four women had entered the hall of fame in the

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history of music with their outstanding destinies as celebrated musical performers. Their background - always controversial - was the reason for developing their singing career. All four have achieved fame thanks to their determination and dedication to singing and hard work, but they have had to overcome many difficulties arising from their national conservative surroundings. Therefore, their popularity and victories are to be recognised as heavily contextual. Whether by their own will or by force, those women had entered music history as heralds of changing societies, entering the strictly gender-biased area of performance, that had previously belonged to male singers. The 21st century has proven that Central Asian women-performers can go even further, shedding light upon and exposing current social conflicts and prejudices through their musical performance, as is seen in this day and age, in the Eurovision song contest, which as a globalised product of modern media, has become an arena for Central Asian young female pop singers Jamala and Manizha. These women form their authentic image by contributing to the broader social and political history of their nations.

What are the features of traditional societies in the past and present? Why is being a female performer is very difficult in those societies? Why do women-performers become the centre of social key problems? In this presentation, I will exemplify those questions and their effect on world cultures.

**Keywords:** Female performers, traditional societies, Central Asia, music, social problems

### **Introduction**

Female performance in traditional societies has always been a phenomenon that presented a real challenge for women singers. It is common for famous female performers to have had a difficult but remarkable destiny. In Central Asia, the female role in society is mostly associated with fulfillment of family duties and childbearing commitments. However, we can find a number of cases of famous women singers, who on their path to success, recognition and fame, had to overcome the limitations imposed by traditional societies in profound ways.

Four prominent Central Asian female singers of the 20th and 21st centuries form the focus of my presentation: Berta Davydova (1922-2007, Uzbekistan), Munojat Yulchieva (b.1960 in Uzbekistan), Jamala (b. 1983 in Kyrgyzstan) and Manizha (b.1991 in Tajikistan). Bringing attention to performers of both classical and popular genres of music, I am going to demonstrate that any genre featuring female performances has its particular challenges and demands and that in order to achieve a successful career, women singers have always needed to take a risk. All four women had entered an unofficial hall of fame in the history of music with their outstanding destinies as celebrated musical performers. Their background - each controversial - was the reason for developing their singing career. All four have achieved fame thanks to their determination and dedication to singing and hard work, while they have had to overcome many difficulties arising from their national conservative surroundings. Therefore, their popularity and victories are to be recognized as heavily contextual. Whether by their own will or by force, these women have entered Central Asian music history as heralds of changing societies, and a strictly gender-biased area of performance that had previously belonged to male singers.

The 21st century has proven that Central Asian women performers can go even further, shedding light upon and exposing current social conflicts and prejudices through their music performance, as is seen presently in the Eurovision song contest. This event has become an arena for Central Asian young female pop singers Jamala and Manizha. These women form their authentic image by contributing to the broader social and political history of their nations, and we are going to talk about it later in this article. What are the historical and present-day features of Central Asian traditional societies? Why is being a female performer difficult in this region? Why do women performers become the Centre of social key problems?

This is based on my ethnographic experience of women struggling to succeed as performers in Soviet and post-Soviet Central Asian societies due to societal adversities. The examples provided are a mixture of primary and secondary interviews proposing a common thread or trend with Central Asian female performers. Further analysis will inform a broader theory, specifying the particular political, traditional and ideological forces which create a common obstacle to these women in performance.

Again, my article will introduce the four different singers from Central Asia – Berta Davydova, Munojat Yulchieva, Jamala and Manizha— and touch upon the issues of traditional societies and nationalism in the former USSR and contemporary Russia.

### Traditional Societies

In sociology, traditional society refers to a society characterised by an orientation to the past, not the future, with a predominant role for custom and habit.<sup>1</sup> Traditional societies have been seen as characterised by powerful collective memories sanctioned by ritual and with social guardians ensuring continuity of communal practices. In regard to women, Kitty Warnock argues that there is a certain biased opinion about female roles in the Middle East, as “Northern Europeans tended, for reasons of historical rivalry, to think of Middle Eastern (RS: and Central Asia including) , as polarities, essentially different... European Travellers may have been most struck by those elements in Middle Eastern society that confirmed their image of ‘the exotic orient’. The subordinate position of women, which Europeans have sometimes thought of as particularly Islamic, is in fact imposed by the institution of the patriarchal family and is equally characteristic of many other cultures, including that of Europe... as “the life of those women who are growing up within a framework of ideals and restrictions which, although relaxed since their mothers’ and grandmothers’ days, has not fundamentally changed, has not conceptualized ... primarily as individuals but as parts of a family group. Those women collectively had lower status than men, and it is women’s particular relationship of dependence within the group that concerns us here.”<sup>2</sup>

Of the four Central Asian women I will focus on, some of the singers are living currently in Russia or Ukraine, where they still face criticism on social media or social networking services for numerous reasons that I will cover later.

### Berta Davydova (1922- 2007)

Millennia-old Bukhara, found at the very heart of the Great Silk Road, has long been a center of trade, scholarship and Islamic culture. Bukhara is also a city famous for its Bukharan Jews, who live there continuing the practice of Sephardic Judaism. It was Bukharan Jewish musicians who have historically contributed to the performance of Uzbek-Tajik classical music Shashmaqam. Their presence has played a crucial role in the preservation of the musical heritage of Shashmaqam, since female performance, officially prohibited in Muslim Central Asian palace culture and in aristocratic circles, had instead found its home in the repertoire of female Bukharan Jewish musicians. As one of the outstanding Bukharan Jewish female singers, Berta Davydova (1922-2008) confessed in several interviews I had with her in Tashkent: ”I

1 Langlois, S. 2001. “Traditions: Social”. *International Encyclopaedia of the Social & Behavioral Sciences. International Encyclopaedia of the Social*. pp. 15829–15833. doi:10.1016/B0-08-043076-7/02028-3. ISBN 9780080430768)

2 Kitty Warnock, 1990, p 20. *Women’s positions in traditional society*”, [https://link.springer.com/chapter/10.1007/978-1-349-20817-3\\_2](https://link.springer.com/chapter/10.1007/978-1-349-20817-3_2)

was the first woman who sang Shashmaqam”, defying that ban by dedicating her singing career, alongside many like her, to help preserve this unique music phenomenon. The musical genre of Shashmaqam (six Maqams, stemming from Arabic ‘Maqam’ which means a station, place, or location) was established in Bukhara several centuries ago. Its exclusive beauty, length of melody and rhythm, along with complicated structure, have resulted with numerous schools of performance. Therefore, thanks to female Maqam singers, Shashmaqam has escaped extinction by crossing religious, ethnic and gender boundaries. Female Maqam performers became more common during Soviet times. Berta (Balur) Davydova (b. 1922 in Margelan, Ferghana Valley, d. 2007 in Tashkent), was one of the leading performers of Shashmaqam. She was born to a rich Bukharan Jewish family and loved to sing from her early childhood. In 1938 her family moved to Tashkent. After finishing school she graduated from medical college and worked as a nurse in a local health centre. Berta liked to sing, and sometimes performed at evening concerts for the local hospital crowded with wounded soldiers from the WW2 front. Once, on a big occasion, local Uzbek musicians came to perform for all the wounded soldiers, and one of the young soldiers on crutches suddenly shouted in the middle of the concert, “We also have a singer here!” People called for Berta Davydova, who feeling embarrassed as she was in her nurse’s white medical gown, went on stage where she sang a few songs.

Berta recounts, “After the concert the Uzbek People’s artist Imamjon Ikramov came to the hospital’s director and said that I had a special voice and he would like to invite me to work for the radio. The head of the health centre said that very soon, on reaching eighteen years of age, I would have to go to the front line to fight the Germans in World War 2. To avoid that, it would be better if they took me to sing.”

Berta continues, “My mother didn’t want me to become a singer. So, I asked my colleagues to help me and the Uzbek People’s artist Imamjon Ikramov went to talk to my mother to explain to her that it was the only way to avoid me being sent to war. After that my mother didn’t mind me singing for live broadcasts. I remember I sang at that time ‘Munajat,’ which was the first classical song I learned with Imamjon Ikramov. With this song I became Berta Davydova”.<sup>3</sup>

Describing her singing style features, as Berta states: “If you sing Maqam in the right way you never get tired! In the 1960s, I often went on holiday to Andijon, I was sometimes singing samples of all six Maqams at once during the same public concert. On one occasion I was taken by helicopter to Jalalabad (a city 100 km away in Tajikistan) where an instant public concert

<sup>3</sup> Sultanova, Razia. 2011. *From Shamanism to Sufism: Women, Islam and Culture in Central Asia*, IB Tauris, London -New York, pp: 79

was arranged for me to perform. After the concert, returning to Andijan, I was told that again another concert was to follow on that very evening as the kolhozchilar (farmers) had asked for another performance. And I was the only singer in those long non-stop concerts! I have had many students who I taught Shashmaqam performance: Nasiba Sattarova (People's artist of Uzbekistan), Maryam Sattarova (People's artist of Uzbekistan) are the most famous among them, then Mahbuaba Sarymsakova, and many others.<sup>4</sup>



*Photo 1: Berta Davydova*

### **Munajat Yulchieva - a mega-star performer of Shashmaqam**

Munajat Yulchieva (born in 1960) is indeed the brightest star among performers of the classical Uzbek music in recent decades. Even her name, “Munajat”, means “ascent to God”, which represents the true meaning of Sufism. One of the common traditions of Sufism is the continuity of a spiritual chain or silsilah.<sup>5</sup> In those terms, Munajat has inherited her musical knowledge from her spiritual and musical Pir or, in Sufi terms, murshid (teacher, master) Professor Shavkat Mirzaev (1942-2021). Professor Mirzaev in his turn inherited this knowledge from his father-musician Muhammajan Mirzaev, to whom the knowledge was passed by the famous Ferghana Valley Sufi musicians Fahriddin Sadykov and Djurahan Sultanov. So the beginning of this chain melts away in the mists of past centuries. Despite the Soviet politi-

<sup>4</sup> From my personal interviews with Berta Davydova in 1997, 1999, 2007 in Tashkent; From *Shamanism to Sufism*, IBtauris, 2011, p 176

<sup>5</sup> Sultanova.R. *From Shamanism to Sufism: Women, Islam and Culture in Central Asia*, IB Tauris,, 2014, p 83

cal and cultural pressure on the content of the Central Asian classical music performance, when most of the poems have been transformed into the lyrics praising Communist leaders, the classical Maqam music in Central Asia continues in the same traditional way thanks to the Uzbek great musicians Shavkat Mirzaev and Munojat Yulchieva.<sup>6</sup>

The focus on Sufi music on Munojat's repertoire was crucially important for the Uzbek audience in the 1970-1980s as an attempt to reconstruct the image of elite court culture within the Uzbek -soviet country. This was the brave new step taken by her Ustad Professor Shavkat Mirzaev. Unfortunately there are no scholarly works dedicated to this area of research, though such an approach would reveal many interesting facts about this cultural phenomenon. In general, Sufi music was and is a little known subject area in the heritage of Asian classical music. As Regula Qureshi observed about a neighbouring region, "Unlike Sufi poetry, Sufi music has not been recorded in writing... from the point of the body of traditional knowledge".<sup>7</sup>

The most remarkable fact is that during her singing Munojat Yulchieva has received the same kind of Ustad-Shogird training from her teacher Professor Shavkat Mirzaev as any of the pre-Soviet times Sufi singers would have had. Despite the Soviet's cultural policy neglect of classical Uzbek heritage, Munojat was taught in the traditional way when the oral traditional method of learning singing was built on long hours of individual sessions. Shavkat Mirzayev's new "restorative" method was based on the exclusive choice of Sufi poetry, which replaced the popular modern Uzbek poetry flattering the Soviet ideology.

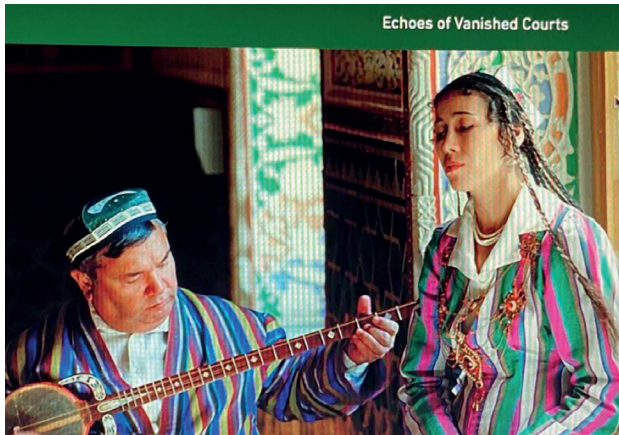
Born in 1960, in the village of Sherman Bulak (in the Ferghana Valley), Munojat studied music at Tashkent State Conservatoire from 1978 to 1985 under the guidance of Professor Shavkat Mirzaev. She studied and was well trained by her famous teacher, concentrating on the proper repertoire of Uzbek classical music. After one of her performances was shown on TV, a concert in 1978 when she was 18th years old, she became an overnight success. Since that time, Munojat has won first prizes in many regional and international festivals and competitions (including in 1997 the "Golden Nightingale" at the Samarkand International Festival Sharq Taronalari). Since 1989, she has toured many countries, including the USA, and European, Asian, and Latin American countries. She received the awards "Honoured Artist of Uzbekistan" (1991) and "People's Artist of Uzbekistan" (1994) as well as being decorated with the order "Respect and Order of the People" (1998).

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid*, p:83

<sup>7</sup> Qureshi Regula Bukhardt. *Sufi music and the historicity of Oral Tradition*. in :*Ethnomusicology and Modern Music History: Festschrift for Bruno Nettl*, ed. S Blum and P Bohlman, Urbana, III 1990, p. 106

I have known Munojat since she was a student, as we both studied at the Tashkent State Conservatory. The most remarkable fact is that Munojat Yulchieva received the same Usto-Shogrid Sufi training from her teacher, Professor Shavkat Mirzaev, as other Sufi singers in pre-Soviet times. In spite of the Soviet cultural policy to sideline classical heritage, she was brought up in the Uzbek traditional way of the old singing school.

Professor Mirzaev took a certain risk in training Munojat during her long association (nearly thirty years) with her Ustad. Building such master-apprentice relations during the Soviet times, when conservatory classes were full of students practising in groups to sing opera repertoire on a five-years course, was both a challenge and an outstanding achievement. As a result of his devotion, Munojat Yulchieva and Shavkat Mirzayeva have become famous all over the world. In Munojat's repertoire today there are songs of Sufi poetry and maqam pieces. In fact, Munojat has become a symbol of yesterday's authentic Sufi culture, singing classical poetry, using classical idioms and performing the classical music of local places that vanished under Soviet rule.



*Photo 2: Munojat Yulchieva/ CD Cover photo, "Uzbekistan: Echo of Vanished Courts. 2014. UNESCO-Smithsonian, Folkways, Washington DC. Recordings and Liner notes by Razia Sultanova*

In order that Munojat's voice could be trained in the solo Sufi singing style, Professor Mirzaev invented new techniques, which included both the famous Uzbek voice techniques called guligi (throat singing) and binigi (nose singing); he added to these the famous technique of the Italian belcanto singing style based on deep chest breathing. His training was, therefore, based on the symbiosis of the old Uzbek local styles of solo singing through the throat and nose, and the best of the European opera singing style. As a result,



Professor Mirzaev has established a completely new technique of Sufi singing that is rooted on the use of the head, nose and throat but with the additional deep chest sound.<sup>8</sup> That Sufi singing technique helped Munojat to conquer the world.

Today, Munojat's repertoire consists of the best examples of Uzbek Sufi and Maqam music together with Bastakor-composers' songs created in a classical style. Thanks to her unique voice (mezzo-soprano, extending to 2.5 octaves) and owing to Professor Shavkat Mirzaev's training, Munojat not only revived female songs well-known from the history of Uzbek music, but performed for the first time many male songs with both difficult composition and dynamic development. Her repertoire includes Uzbek Sufi music and the poetry of Alisher Navoiy (15th century), Fisuli (16th century), Mashrab (died 1711) and Huvaido (18th century) among others. Finally, all famous Sufi songs were included in her collection! Munojat's dream of becoming a star came true, thanks to her extreme good fortune in meeting Professor Shavkat Mirzaev, who in a way was her own "Professor Higgins" transforming a village girl into the world famous lady Munajat, like in Bernard Shaw's show "Pygmalion".<sup>9</sup>

### **Jamala- The Crimean Tatar Singer**

Crimeans (Crimean Tatars) are an Eastern European Turkic ethnic group and nation, who are an indigenous people of the Crimean Peninsula. Crimean Tatars constituted the majority of Crimea's population from the time of its beginning until the mid-19th century, and they were the largest ethnic population group until the end of the 19th century. Almost immediately after the retaking of Crimea from Axis forces in May 1944, the USSR State Defense Committee ordered the deportation of all of the Crimean Tatars from Crimea, including the families of Crimean Tatars serving in the Soviet Army. The deportees were transported in trains and boxcars to Central Asia, primarily to Uzbekistan. The Crimean Tatars, according to various estimates, lost up to 46 percent of their population as a result of the deportation to Central Asia. Starting in 1967, a few were allowed to return and in 1989 the Supreme Court of the Soviet Union condemned the removal of Crimean Tatars from their motherland as inhuman and lawless, but only a tiny percentage had been able to return before the full right of return established in 1989.

Jamala -Susana Alimovna Dzhamaladinova (born in 1983), better known by her stage name Jamala - is a Ukrainian singer, actress and songwriter. She

<sup>8</sup> Sultanova, Razia. (2009). *Sacred Knowledge: Schools or revelation? Master-Apprentice System of Oral Transmission in the music of the Turkic Speaking world*. Germany: LAP Lambert Academic Publishing, p: 47.

<sup>9</sup> Sultanova, Razia. (2014). *From Shamanism to Sufism: Women, Islam and Culture in Central Asia*, IB:Tauris, p .87

represented Ukraine in the Eurovision Song Contest 2016 in Stockholm, Sweden, and won the first prize with her song “1944”. Today Jamala is a UNICEF Goodwill Ambassador. Jamal was born in Osh, Kyrgyz Republic, to a Crimean Tatar father and an Armenian mother. Her Crimean Tatar ancestors were forcibly resettled from Crimea to Central Asian republics under Joseph Stalin’s rule during WW2, although her relatives had fought on the Soviet side. Jamala speaks Russian as her mother tongue, though she had written some songs in Crimean Tatar language. She is also fluent in Ukrainian and English, which she learned as an adolescent. Jamala has been fond of music since early childhood. She made her first professional recording at the age of nine, singing twelve Crimean Tatar songs. She entered the Simferopol Music College and later graduated from the Tchaikovsky National Music Academy of Ukraine as an opera singer, but chose to pursue a career in pop music.

The lyrics for “1944” relate to the deportation of the Crimean Tatars in 1944 because of their alleged collaboration with the Nazis. Jamala was particularly inspired by the story of her great-grandmother Nazykhan, who was in her mid-20s when she, along with her five children, was deported to Central Asia. The song was released amid renewed repression of Crimean Tatars following the relatively recent Russian annexation of Crimea, since most Crimean Tatars refuse to accept the annexation. The English lyrics were written by the poet Art Antonyan. The song’s chorus, in the Crimean language, is made up of words from a Crimean Tatar folk song called “Ey Guzel Qirim” that Jamala had heard from her great-grandmother. The song laments the loss of her youth, which could no longer be spent in her homeland. The song features the Duduk (the traditional double reed woodwind instrument made of apricot wood) and the use of the Mugham vocal style. As the Eurovision rules prohibit songs with lyrics that could be interpreted as having “political content”, with the 2014 Russian annexation of Crimea Jamala could not claim that “the Crimean Tatars are on occupied territory” in the song lyrics, and did not address this annexation in the song as she would go on to do later in her interview with *The Guardian*.<sup>10</sup>

Jamala’s “1944” song lyrics are describing the cultural genocide drama which moved the Crimean nation from the Black Sea shore to several thousand miles away in Central Asia:

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<sup>10</sup> Veselova, Viktoria; Melnykova, Oleksandra, “Crimean singer in line to represent Ukraine at Eurovision”, *theguardian.com. The Guardian*. 11. 02. 2016

Yaşlığımaya toyalmadım,  
Men bu yerde yaşalmadım,  
Yaşlığımaya toyalmadım,  
Men bu yerde yasalmadı

*When strangers are coming,  
They come to your house.  
They kill all of you and say:  
We're not guilty not guilty!  
Where is your mind?  
Humanity cries...*



*Photo 3: JAMALA, the Crimean Tatar singer*

So, Jamala's "1944" song is a striking example of the female performance on the "silenced" in the USSR subject of Crimean Tatar deportation. Having grown up in Andijan, in the midst of Ferghana Valle in Uzbekistan, I had witnessed in my childhood their decades long struggle, protests and insurrections. Every year in May, the Crimean human rights fighters would attempt to start an uprising, and as a result every street corner in our city Andijan was marked by the presence of a soldier with his Kalashnikov rifle on standby. We had witnessed this as children, although we failed to understand the meaning of those "silent" political issues at the time. So, the emotionally charged, angry song by young Jamala has opened up the otherwise silenced subject to the global community, announcing the tragedy of a small, long-suffering Crimean Tatar nation.

### **Manizha- "the Russian" singer of Tajik origin**

Manizha Dalerovna Sangin (born in 1991, in Dushanbe, Tajikistan), known professionally as simply Manizha, is a Russian-Tajik singer and son-

gwriter. Beginning her career in 2003 as a child singer, Manizha went on to perform with the music groups Ru.Kola, Assai, and Krip De Shin, before later pursuing a solo career. Manizha's parents were divorced: her father did not want Manizha to begin a singing career due to believing it was not a suitable career choice for a Muslim woman. In 1994, when Manizha was 3 years old, her family fled Tajikistan due to the Tajikistani Civil War, subsequently settling in Moscow. Manizha began studying piano at a Moscow music school, and later singing with private vocal coaches, although she studied psychology at Russian State University for the Humanities. Today, Manizha is a DIY artist and Instagram star, music writer and performer of songs. Over the past few years, Manizha has been collaborating with the best musicians and producers in Moscow, St. Petersburg, and London and has recorded more than 100 compositions in Russian and English.

Recently in March 2021 Manizha, after winning the Russian competition to sing at the Eurovision 2021 song contest representing Russia, became an instant sensation: she faced a storm of chauvinism and xenophobia from Russian audiences. Humiliating criticism and abusing comments on Twitter and Instagram were about her non-Russian Tajik-ethnic origin, or "insufficient" for her song called "Russian Woman", saying that since she was ethnically non-Russian she should not touch upon such a "sacred image".

What is specific about her song?

In "Russian Woman" Manizha is playing on the Russian woman famous expression by Nikolay Nekrasov (1821-1878) from the poem "Jack Frost" (1864), where the Russian woman was described as being able "to stop a horse in full stride and walk into a burning house".

Few lines from the song are:

"Fields, fields, fields, I'm so small,  
How do you cross a field through the fire?  
How do you cross the field when you're alone?  
.....  
*Every Russian woman needs to know  
You strong enough to break the wall!  
Don't be afraid! Don't be afraid!*  
.....

In the song, Manizha seems to be mocking herself about her age, her body weight, her search for a prince-style boyfriend, etc. Her Eurovision stage performance was visually stunning with her matryoshka style costume, and a powerful chorus performance alternating with her solo singing. Musically and theatrically, "Russian Woman" is a very dynamic and impressive show

song. Manisha's dancing at the end of the song becomes similar to the Shamanic healing rituals body movements spread all over Siberia. Another excellent artistic trick is certainly at the culmination of the song, when Manizha turns round to the screen with the computer graphically designed images of nearly hundred women (including famous Russian actresses and celebrities), chorally together with Manizha singing the concluding lines: "Struggling, struggling, but not praying!". The panorama of that multiple Russian women images on the screen behind Manizha's back shows and proves how many ethnically different looking women claim to be Russian citizens. It was a very good way using the high technology design to manifest the diversity of Russian race- ethnicity.

Her background stage decorations showed images of instant fire splashes, which made Manizha look like an army leader who won a battle. Indeed, Russians are famous for their long history of wars and victories. According to some French writers, "Russians are the nations of warriors".<sup>11</sup> Also, the history of Russia shows many women ruling the country ( i.e. Catherine the 1st, Elizabeth- Empress of Russia, Catherine the Great) and obviously Manizha reconstructs those pages through her style of performance and choice of the song. As Alla Pugacheva - the iconic Russian pop singer, the people artist of the USSR, - said about Manizha's choice of the song to perform at the Eurovision-2021 contest, "just for Eurovision!"<sup>12</sup>

So, why did the singer face hostile and threatening comments on Instagram in Russia after being chosen for representing Russia at the Eurovision Song Contest? The singer's fight against social unfairness /injustice has led to a torrent of abuse – some from very powerful people.<sup>13</sup> Although many foreign listeners called Manizha's song legendary and millions of Youtube users supported this opinion, in Russia feelings of hatred and humiliation described the main sentiment of the audience. The publicist Yegor Kholmogorov, evaluating Manizha's performance at the Eurovision-2021 song contest, said that he could not have deliberately come up with a better metaphor for de-Russification: "If she had deliberately invented a metaphor for de-Russification, a way out of Russianness, and disintegration," then she "could not have done better".<sup>14</sup> However some famous Russian media figures have fully supported Manizha's career and her choice of the song.

A famous Georgian born Russian media manager, TV presenter and producer Tina Kandelaki said, "11 millions views of the view for the song "Rus-

11 *Anne-Louise Germaine de Staël-Holstein, Dix Années d'Exil, Paris, 1818, p 210*

12 [https://yandex.kz/news/instory/Pugacheva\\_ocenila\\_pesnyu\\_Manizhi\\_dlyaEurovideniya--c34bd-192256d37f67dd3d26e769ea8ec](https://yandex.kz/news/instory/Pugacheva_ocenila_pesnyu_Manizhi_dlyaEurovideniya--c34bd-192256d37f67dd3d26e769ea8ec)

13 <https://www.theguardian.com/tv-and-radio/2021/apr/09/russia-eurovision-candidate-manizha-takes-on-the-baters>

14 <https://vz.ru/news/2021/5/19/1099930.html>

sian Woman” in the Eurovision Songs Contest account in two months, FIVE Million views of the semi-final performance... I can confidently say now, the RUSSIAN -the singer Manizha obviously breaks a standing ovation in the European arena”.<sup>15</sup>

Why did this happen, you might ask. With Manizha living in Moscow, why is she being questioned as a Russian or a non-Russian woman? Why has such a heated discussion taken place? Despite her Tajik origin, Manizha spent her childhood in Moscow, completing her school studies and getting her University degree. Therefore, she should be recognized as a “Russian” by her nationality! Why is she not being accepted as a Russian woman by the Russian critical audience? Although the subject of Russian nationality is beyond the scope of this paper, let’s try to see the few reasons for Manizha to feel the Russian woman in her attempt to perform the song as a manifest of RUSSIANNES.



*Photo 4: Manizha, the Russian singer*

### **Nationalism and Ethnicity in the former USSR and contemporary Russia**

It is well known that the Soviet Union (1917-1991) was one of the world’s most ethnically diverse countries, with hundreds of distinct national ethnicities living within. Today’s Russia is still a multinational state with over 190 ethnic groups designated as nationalities within its borders. However, there are Russian social and cultural images/reasons dominating the common understanding of what Russianness is.

One can ask are Russians a biological unity? However, “Russians” cannot really be described in a physical anthropological sense. There is no such thing as “the Russian race” (“russkaia rasa”). The Russian historian Pavel Miliukov

<sup>15</sup> <https://russian.rt.com/opinion/863769-kandelaki-manizha-rossiya-evrovidenie>

(1859-1943) argued that: “to speak about the ‘racial’ differences of nationalities in our time would be an impermissible anachronism revealing inadequate knowledge of current scientific knowledge.”<sup>16</sup> As the proverb runs: “Scratch a Russian and you’ll find a Tatar” - “and the reverse,” as Lev Gumilev (1912-1992) sensibly adds. Indeed, “The Russians” simply do not exist as a coherent biological or genetic entity as there is no blood test or genetic diagnostic for “Russianness.”<sup>17</sup>

Another view on the importance of being a Russian in Russia is related to the “Russian nationalism” which is famous for its ultra-national movement and developments. For example, a famous slogan “Russia for Russians” is a xenophobic political slogan and nationalist doctrine, encapsulating the range of ideas from bestowing the ethnic Russians with exclusive rights in the Russian state to expelling all ethnically non-Russians from the country. Originated in the Russian Empire in the 19th century, the slogan has become increasingly popular in modern Russia, challenging the dominant discourse of multiculturalism within the country. Russian President Vladimir Putin was also involved in the discussion of the subject saying: “Russia for Russians!”, - so say stupid or provocateurs! Russia is a multinational country”.<sup>18</sup> Nationality, then, shows a person’s relationship with the state. As the Eurovision 2021 song contest results were announced on May the 23d, Manizha was on the 9th place entering the top ten, proving to her Russian critical compatriots that she is a real RUSSIAN woman-singer!

### Conclusion

Therefore, today, in the 21st century these women-singers - Manizha and Jamala - are commanding a worldwide arena of the Eurovision song contest, breaking the limits of traditional societies and offering new images of history related to their countries.

Throughout the 20th century, Uzbek-women-singers were able to overcome the gender, religious and ethnic issues, just like Berta Davydova, or the challenges of the Soviet ideological cultural restrictions, as Munajat Yulchieva. Now in the 21st century, female pop singers Jamala and Manizha have become world-known by their brave undertaking to share from the stage of the Eurovision song contest their stories: the Crimean ethnic cleansing in Jamala’s case, or testing the image of the “Russianness”, and the nationalism in the modern Russian society in Manizha’s case. Therefore, the song’s performance made these four outstanding women the heralds of the new culture and music art rewriting their countries’ history.

<sup>16</sup> Miliukov P N. 1905. “Russia and its crisis”. Chicago: University of Chicago Press

<sup>17</sup> <http://www.panorama.ru/works/patr/ir/13.html>

<sup>18</sup> President Vladimir Putin, 18.12. 2003. <https://www.kommersant.ru/doc/4693917>

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