# Theatre Against Oppression: Anti-Colonial Discourse in Late Soviet Uzbek Comedy

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**Abstract**
This article examines late Soviet Uzbek comedy as a culturally grounded form of indirect critique, focusing on Said Ahmad's "*The Rebellion of the Brides*" (1976) and Sharof Boshbekov's "*The Iron Woman*" (1989). Rather than viewing comedy as merely entertaining, the study considers how satire, farce, and grotesque exaggeration created space for expressing tension within a system shaped by ideological control and censorship. Particular attention is given to how domestic life and gender relations become meaningful sites for reflecting broader structures of authority. In *The Rebellion of the Brides*, the struggle for autonomy within the household points to tensions between centralised control and individual agency. In *The Iron Woman*, the figure of a mechanical wife highlights the pressures placed on women within the Soviet labour system, especially in the context of rural life and cotton production. In the Uzbek context, such themes are rarely articulated directly. Instead, they emerge through familiar situations and everyday interactions. This suggests that comedic theatre functioned not only as entertainment, but also as a subtle and culturally resonant form of expressing social contradictions.

**Keywords**
Late Soviet literature, Uzbek theatre, comedy as cultural resistance, everyday power, gender and labour, indirect critique

## Introduction: Theatre as a space of coded resistance

In political systems marked by strong authoritarian and colonial tendencies, literature and theatre frequently become spaces for indirect political critique. As a result, symbolic expression within artistic works tends to intensify. When censorship restricts freedom of speech, writers and playwrights often rely on

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mediated artistic strategies such as allegory, satire, farce, and symbolic displacement. In this way, dissent is not articulated through explicit political statements, but is embedded in stage action, characterisation, and representations of everyday life.

Soviet Uzbek theatre, particularly its comedic tradition, offers a striking example of such coded resistance. While comedy was often perceived as a "safe" or purely domestic genre, it was precisely within this generic framework that more complex issues could be addressed with relative subtlety. Questions of authority, subordination, labour discipline, and everyday surveillance were thus articulated beneath the surface of seemingly ordinary narratives.

At this stage, a brief methodological clarification is required. In relation to Soviet Uzbekistan, the term "colonial" cannot be applied in the same sense as it is used for classical European empires. Instead, it is more appropriately understood as a form of internal or contiguous domination, expressed through economic centralisation, particularly in the form of cotton monoculture, as well as administrative governance, cultural and linguistic hierarchies, and structured centre-periphery relations. As Adeeb Khalid has argued, the historical experience of Central Asia does not easily conform to analytical models derived from other twentieth-century colonial empires (Khalid 9). Consequently, attempts to interpret this context through direct analogy with maritime colonial systems remain insufficient.

At the same time, analytical categories such as internal colonialism or red colonialism are not entirely foreign to this field and may serve as productive heuristic tools when applied with caution. Within this framework, the present study adopts a comparative approach that places postcolonial theory in dialogue with research on Soviet modernity and the socio-economic organisation of Central Asia. Rather than imposing external paradigms onto Uzbek material, the analysis seeks to explore how structures of authority, economic dependency, patriarchal hierarchy, and the politics of everyday life are articulated through literary forms.

The biographical experience of Said Ahmad is particularly significant for understanding the political logic of his dramaturgy. Having lived through Stalinist repression and the realities of labour camps, he possessed direct knowledge of the mechanisms of violence, surveillance, and discipline within a totalitarian system. Yet instead of expressing this experience through overt political denunciation, he transformed it into a subtle aesthetic language grounded in irony. His play *The Rebellion of the Brides* (1976) gained wide public recognition and was later adapted into a feature film.

As noted by Uzbek literary critic Umarali Normatov, even after official rehabilitation, writers who had experienced repression continued to live under the psychological pressure of fear. Recalling his conversations with Said Ahmad, Normatov emphasises that the writer avoided speaking about his camp experiences for decades, admitting that he was "afraid of reopening his wounds" (Normatov 198-199).

Within this context, the absence of explicit references to repression may seem unexpected at first. This suggests that such silences are not accidental. They are shaped by both psychological and political constraints. Rather, it reflects a strategic displacement of traumatic experience into the sphere of the everyday. The domestic space, structured around authority, surveillance, and control, becomes a symbolic site where broader mechanisms of domination are reproduced and indirectly articulated.

A comparable trajectory can be observed in Sharof Boshbekov's play *The Iron Woman* (1989). Although it initially encountered certain obstacles in publication and staging, the work was eventually performed widely across Uzbekistan and in theatres abroad. It received the Grand Prix award at a national theatre festival and was later recognised at a Central Asian theatre festival. The play was subsequently adapted into both a feature film and an operetta, and in 1989 Boshbekov was awarded the Maksud Shaykhzoda Prize of the Writers' Union of Uzbekistan, further attesting to its cultural and artistic significance.

At first glance, these two comedies appear to centre primarily on domestic and gender-related conflicts. However, when situated within the context of late Soviet Uzbekistan, their meaning may be understood in broader socio-political terms. The domestic sphere is represented as a regulated space in which control over labour, time, and resources is exercised through everyday practices. In this sense, interpersonal relations can be read as reflecting wider structures of power, where the gender hierarchy and the organisation of labour play a significant role in shaping lived experience.

This interpretive shift allows the analysis to move beyond purely thematic readings towards a more systematic understanding of how power is embedded, reproduced, and negotiated within everyday social structures. It also highlights that, in the Uzbek context, such dynamics are rarely articulated directly. Instead, they emerge through familiar situations, interpersonal relationships, and culturally recognisable forms, which enable late Soviet Uzbek comedy to convey complex political meanings without explicit ideological statements.

It should also be noted that earlier interpretations of Uzbek Soviet comedy were shaped by the methodological framework of socialist realism. As demonstrated in the study by Azada Gulyamova, critical attention in the 1960s

and 1970s was largely directed towards the exposure of negative social traits and the moral correction of characters in accordance with ideological expectations (Gulyamova 83). This suggests that literary analysis of the period tended to prioritise alignment with official cultural discourse rather than the exploration of deeper structural tensions. In the Uzbek context, such limitations influenced not only literary production but also its interpretation. As a result, plays like *The Rebellion of the Brides* were often read within the framework of Soviet cultural norms, while their more complex social and political dimensions remained insufficiently examined. This study therefore shifts the focus away from moral correction and towards a critical examination of how comedy reflected and resisted systemic oppression. The following section reinterprets late Soviet Uzbek comedy through the lens of internal colonialism, showing how everyday power relations and economic dependency shaped theatrical expression.

**Late Soviet Uzbek comedy, internal colonialism, and everyday power**

Late Soviet Uzbek comedy emerged within a cultural field shaped simultaneously by ideological regulation and economic dependency on the Soviet centre. Within the official cultural system, Uzbek theatre was expected to promote socialist values, gender equality, and collective harmony. In practice, however, it functioned within a framework where economic extraction, cultural marginalisation, and political subordination were structurally embedded. In particular, cotton monoculture and centralised command policies transformed Uzbekistan into a supplier of raw materials within the Soviet economy (Khalid 9). This system remained closely tied to labour mobilisation, administrative pressure, and the disproportionate burden placed on rural populations, especially women (International Crisis Group).

From this perspective, comedy occupied a relatively "safe" position within the hierarchy of genres. Because it was often perceived by censors as corrective or merely domestic, it provided writers with a space to engage social contradictions without direct confrontation with state authority. In the Uzbek Soviet context, comedy frequently displaces political tension into the sphere of everyday life. State institutions are rarely named explicitly; instead, dramatists turn to familial hierarchies, domestic routines, and gender relations.

Late Soviet Uzbek comedies often feature characters who regulate time, labour, and resources. Although they act in the name of morality, tradition, or collective good, they reproduce at a micro level patterns that resemble the administrative logic of the Soviet state. This form of power does not necessarily rely on open violence. Instead, it is sustained through repetition, routine

practices, and gradually internalised norms that shape how individuals perceive their roles and limitations in everyday life.

This dynamic may be further understood through the concept of "socialist colonialism." In the Uzbek context, however, this relationship is not always straightforward. As Adeeb Khalid has demonstrated, "The new regime made a sustained effort to mobilize the population and to productivize the land from the outset. The political and economic imperatives were completely intertwined" (Khalid 158). This perspective allows us to move beyond rigid distinctions between colonialism and modernisation and to examine how asymmetrical relations were reproduced through economic structures, particularly the centrality of cotton production. This intertwining of political and economic pressures created an environment where open protest was dangerous. It is precisely under such conditions that comedy emerged as an indirect but effective form of critique.

**Comedy under totalitarian conditions**

In totalitarian settings, the space for open critique is extremely limited. Under such conditions, humour and satire often function as what might be described as a "weapon of the weak," offering a relatively safe way to express dissatisfaction and tension in situations where open critique is not possible. As George Orwell suggests, every joke carries within it a small act of rebellion, as laughter disrupts established hierarchies and relativises authority (Orwell 284).

In colonial and semi colonial contexts, this effect becomes even more pronounced. When the dominated laugh, they symbolically undermine the authority of the dominant and assert a form of internal autonomy. Soviet Central Asia provides a revealing case. This relationship was not always immediately visible. Officially, the Soviet state promoted modernisation, yet beneath this public rhetoric, centralised systems of control over economic and cultural life operated beneath the surface.

Postcolonial scholarship further emphasises humour as a strategy of resistance. As Susanne Reichl and Mark Stein argue, laughter occupies a central place in postcolonial cultural practice, functioning as a form of symbolic subversion (Reichl and Stein 158). Similarly, Sukriti Ghosal notes that humour creates a space of inner freedom, even when material conditions remain unchanged (Ghosal 2018). As Fanon suggests, the erosion of colonial authority does not always begin with open resistance. In many cases, it first appears in symbolic forms that gradually weaken fear and challenge imposed narratives (Fanon 311). In this sense, comedy especially when articulated in a national language and rooted in everyday experience may be understood as an indirect yet

significant stage in the broader process of cultural decolonisation. These theoretical insights are particularly relevant to the Uzbek context, where comedy often operated through domestic settings. Said Ahmad's *The Rebellion of the Brides* offers a striking example of how humour, gender relations, and colonial power dynamics intersect on stage.

**Gender, humour, and domestic coloniality in *The Rebellion of the Brides***

Said Ahmad's 1976 play *The Rebellion of the Brides* (*Kelinlar qo'zg'oloni*) stands as one of the most symbolically charged works of late Soviet Uzbek theatre. The comedy continues to resonate with audiences and readers, largely because what appears as a lighthearted domestic narrative conceals a complex set of socio-political tensions. At the centre of the plot lies a conflict within a multigenerational traditional household between the domineering mother-in-law Farmonbibi and her daughters-in-law. Through humour, farce, and everyday situations, the play exposes structural tensions embedded within the Uzbek domestic sphere, particularly the clash between patriarchal authority and the younger generation's aspiration for autonomy. It is also important to note that early critical responses to the play were not uniformly positive. As Ozod Sharafiddinov observes, some critics initially questioned the artistic and social value of the work, arguing that it lacked depth and failed to reflect the essential conflicts of its time (Sharafiddinov 1-2).

However, subsequent reception has clearly challenged such assessments. Over time, *The Rebellion of the Brides* has maintained a strong presence on theatrical stages and continues to resonate with audiences. The play has been translated into numerous languages and staged in different cultural contexts, including a successful production in the United States in 1999 (Sharafiddinov 4). This trajectory suggests that the initial critical framework may have been limited by prevailing aesthetic expectations. It also highlights the importance of considering the play not as a direct reflection of reality, but as an artistic construction in which exaggeration, imagination, and symbolic characterisation play a central role. In this sense, the figure of Farmonbibi emerges as a deliberately intensified and distinctive dramatic character rather than a purely realistic one (Sharafiddinov 5-6).

The play is constructed as a political allegory. In the prologue, the character Usta Boqi informs the audience that beyond the threshold of his workshop begins another country, "xotin poshsho yurti" (the land ruled by a female sovereign) with its own laws and customs (Ahmad 32). While this initially appears humourous, it functions as a key interpretive frame. Farmonbibi emerges as the absolute ruler of a household consisting of seven sons, seven daughters-

in-law, and forty-one grandchildren, a hyperbolic structure that transforms the family into a grotesque social model. Even her name carries symbolic significance, as "farmon" denotes command and authority. Within this framework, the domestic space is effectively colonised. The income of adult family members is centralised, household management is governed through rigid directives, and the lives of the daughters-in-law are regulated in minute detail. The house itself becomes a closed system with borders, internal order, and mechanisms of surveillance. As Farmonbibi declares, "Bu uy ham bir hukumat. Ha, bir mamlakat. O'z poshshosi, o'z qonuni bor" (This house is also a government. Yes, a country. It has its own ruler and its own laws),[2] to which the daughters-in-law immediately respond, "o'z shpioni ham bor" (and it even has its own spy) (Ahmad 6). From this moment, the household ceases to function merely as a family and becomes a miniature political body.

Within this allegorical structure, the daughters-in-law represent a collective subject deprived of voice and autonomy. Although they formally belong to the family, in practice they are excluded from meaningful decision-making and remain structurally dependent. In this sense, they may be interpreted as socially marginalised subjects whose agency is constrained by the internal hierarchy of the household. The power relations depicted in the play thus extend far beyond ordinary domestic conflict and acquire a distinctly political dimension. Farmonbibi governs the household through mechanisms characteristic of an authoritarian system, including strict control over resources, surveillance and punishment, and the suppression of dissent. The introduction of a household "spy" serves as a comic detail, yet at the same time functions as a parody of totalitarian control.

Even the sons, despite occupying respected Soviet professions such as teacher, doctor, or police officer, are deprived of autonomy and reduced to executors of their mother's will. Through this configuration, the play constructs a parallel political model in which Farmonbibi functions as the symbolic centre of authority, the daughters-in-law as subordinated subjects, and the household itself as a micro-colony in which relations of domination are reproduced. This structure can be understood in terms of domestic coloniality, whereby imperial modes of governance are internalised and reenacted within the intimate sphere of family life.

The climax of the play is structured around a moment of collective resistance that can be interpreted as a form of domestic decolonisation.

[2] Unless otherwise stated, translation of Uzbek texts into English throughout this essay is mine.

Supported by their husbands, the daughters-in-law present Farmonbibi with an ultimatum: either their demands are accepted, or they will leave the household. These demands are articulated in a quasi-political language that echoes the rhetoric of rights and reform: "Har bir oila o'ziga o'zi qozon qaynatadi" (Each family should cook for itself), "mehmon chaqirish va mehmonga borish huquqi berilsin" (Each family should have the right to invite guests and visit others), "kinoteatr va madaniyat o'choqlariga borishga ruxsat etilsin" (Permission should be granted to attend cinemas and cultural venues), "har kim o'z maoshini o'z ehtiyojiga sarf qila olsin" (Each person should be free to spend their own salary), and notably, "oilada shpion shtati qisqartirilsin" (The position of the household spy should be abolished) (Ahmad 30-31).

These demands function not merely as domestic requests but as a symbolic dismantling of an authoritarian order. At this point, the household clearly resembles a micro-model of the Soviet system itself, with Farmonbibi occupying the position of the centre and the extended family representing peripheral units.

Ahmad's dramaturgy relies heavily on comedic devices, particularly farce, grotesque exaggeration, and parody, which serve as relatively safe channels for social critique. One of the central techniques is the use of a "performance within the performance," staged by the daughters-in-law and their husbands to expose Farmonbibi's despotism. Through deliberate exaggeration, they mirror her behaviour in a caricatured form. At one point, Farmonbibi exclaims, "Voy, bu meni ko'rsatyapti!" (Oh, they are portraying me!), while the others respond, "Yo'q, oyijon, axir bu spektakl-ku" (No, mother, it is just a performance) (Ahmad 31). The most striking moment occurs when Nigora declares: "Bu uy emas, turma. Ha, turma!" ("This is not a home it is a prison. Yes, a prison") (Ahmad 25). This statement marks a point at which humour and political truth converge. Both plays use comedy to expose hidden structures of power, but Boshbekov's *The Iron Woman* operates on a different scale. Where Ahmad focuses on the household as a microcosm of authoritarian rule, Boshbekov turns his attention to the intersection of gender, labour, and Soviet colonial modernity, themes that become increasingly urgent in the 1980s.

## Grotesque satire, gendered labour, and colonial modernity in *The Iron Woman*

Sharof Boshbekov's play *The Iron Woman* (*Temir xotin*) represents a striking example of late Soviet Uzbek drama that exposes the intersection of authoritarian power, gendered labour, and ideological control. Written in the 1980s, a period marked simultaneously by stagnation and latent dissent, the play employs absurd

humour and exaggerated situations to reveal forms of oppression embedded in everyday life. As the author himself suggests through his dramaturgical method, realism is not abandoned but intensified to the point of grotesque distortion, allowing social contradictions to become more visible.

At the centre of the play stands Alomat, a humanoid female robot created by the young scientist Olimjon. The very name "Alomat" (sign or omen) is symbolically charged, indicating that the character functions not merely as a figure within the plot but as a conceptual marker. Olimjon presents her as a technological solution designed to liberate Uzbek women from exhausting labour. He envisions an idealised future in which mechanisation brings happiness, declaring that he is creating "paxta teradigan mashina emas, paxta teradigan elektron robot" (not a cotton-picking machine, but an electronic cotton-picking robot) (Boshbekov 9).

This utopian vision closely aligns with Soviet narratives of technological progress and women's emancipation. However, Boshbekov immediately destabilises this ideological framework. Rather than liberating women, Alomat becomes a mirror reflecting the unrealistic and oppressive expectations imposed on them. In practice, she performs an inhuman amount of labour: cooking on a traditional stove, cleaning, washing, tending livestock, and participating in collective cotton harvesting. She does so without complaint, initially appearing as an ideal worker. Yet this "ideal" is revealed as a violent norm imposed upon real women.

This contradiction becomes explicit in the dialogue: When the command "Hamma paxta terimiga!" (Everyone to the cotton harvest!) is issued, Alomat instantly abandons all other tasks and goes to the fields, prompting the remark that people behave in exactly the same way—children leave school and women abandon even nursing infants (Boshbekov 10). In this moment, the play exposes a fundamental truth of Soviet rural life: The cotton campaign subordinated everyday existence to centralised economic demands. Historical research confirms that cotton monoculture in Central Asia was deeply intertwined with coercive labour practices and political control (Khalid 160; International Crisis Group). Ultimately, Boshbekov illustrates that Alomat's "iron" nature is not a strength, but a cruel precondition for survival in a fundamentally broken system. Boshbekov highlights this fundamental contradiction by creating a powerful, ironic implication: even Alomat, whose very name means omen and who is constructed from steel, cannot withstand the physical and psychological demands of the cotton harvest. In the play's logic, she is destined to burn out in the fields, a fate that directly comments on the real, unacknowledged heroism of Uzbek women. This darkly comic inference exposes how the Soviet system normalised

an unsustainable workload, a burden so extreme it would destroy even a purpose-built machine. In this sense, Alomat is not a utopian solution but a dystopian mirror held up to the reality of Soviet rural life.

Quchqor, a simple cotton farmer and tractor driver, is a hardworking but disillusioned man in the play. Trapped in poverty and abandoned by his wife, he embodies the exhaustion of the rural labourer in late Soviet Uzbekistan. The most powerful scene in the play occurs when Alomat hypnotises Quchqor, forcing him into an emotional breakdown. On the surface, the situation is absurd: a simple farmer undergoing psychoanalysis by a robot. Yet beneath the humour lies a profound tragedy. Quchqor initially resists, insisting that "erkak uchun yig'lash sharmanda" (It is shameful for a man to cry). Alomat responds with disarming logic: "Men robotman… temirdan yasalganman; odam temirdan uyaladimi?" (I am a robot… made of iron; does a person feel shame before iron?) (Boshbekov 39). Here, the machine becomes a mediator of human suffering. Through a detached and precise voice, Alomat articulates what Quchqor himself cannot express. She recounts his life in terms that resonate far beyond individual experience: "You work constantly, but see no reward…. You bustle like an ant from morning till night, yet nothing changes…. You say 'I am a cotton-grower,' but you cannot even find cotton to stuff your own quilt" (Boshbekov 40). This is not merely a personal complaint; it is a collective portrait of the Soviet rural worker. Alomat continues by exposing Quchqor's lack of dignity: "Hech kim sen bilan hisoblashmaydi… 'yer hayda' desalar darrov kirishasan… to'ylarda chetda o'tirasan… hatto galstukli bir kimsa ham seni haqorat qilishi mumkin" ("No one reckons with you… if they say 'plow the land,' you obey immediately… you sit at the margins at celebrations… even a man with a tie can humiliate you") (Boshbekov 40). In this passage, the official rhetoric of equality collapses, revealing a rigid social hierarchy in which the rural subject remains subordinated.

From a theoretical perspective, this scene can be read through the lens of Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's concept of subaltern speech. Alomat is not literally the subaltern, but she functions as a mechanical voice of the subaltern: She articulates truths that cannot be spoken directly. Quchqor himself is unable to express his suffering openly; the robot becomes a mediator that translates internalised trauma into speech. The culmination of this process occurs in Alomat's striking metaphor: "Yig'lagansiz… faqat ko'zingizning narigi tomoni bilan yig'lagansiz… ko'z yoshlaringiz tashqariga emas, ichingizga oqqan… sizning vujudingiz esa faqat va faqat ko'z yoshidan iborat" ("You have cried… but with the other side of your eyes… your tears did not flow outward, they flowed inward… your whole body consists of nothing but tears") (Boshbekov 42).

This moment can be seen as one of the emotional and conceptual turning points of the play. It may also be read as a point at which suppressed experience briefly comes to the surface. Uzbek literary scholarship has approached *The Iron Woman* within the broader development of comedic poetics in national dramaturgy. As Muradulla Jo'rayev observes, late twentieth century Uzbek comedy increasingly brings together comic and tragic elements within a single narrative, allowing everyday situations to hint at deeper social tensions (Jo'rayev 150). In the Uzbek context, this suggests that the play's humour is not only entertaining, but also reflects a more complex picture of lived reality, where laughter and discomfort often exist side by side. In this sense, Quchqor's body may be understood as a metaphorical container of unspoken suffering. When he finally breaks down and shouts "E, padariga la'nat hammasining!!!" ("To hell with all of it!!!") (Boshbekov 42), the farcical tone collapses into raw human tragedy. This scene has also been read by Uzbek critics as reflecting a broader collective experience, where the suffering of an individual character points to frustrations shared by a wider social group. In the Uzbek context, this blurs the line between the human subject and the mechanical figure, raising a more unsettling question of who, in fact, behaves like a "robot" within such a system. This suggests that the play is not only concerned with labour conditions. It also draws attention to how patterns of constraint may become internalised and begin to shape everyday thinking and behaviour.

The scene concludes with one of the most powerful grotesque images in late Soviet drama. After Quchqor's emotional collapse, Alomat returns to her programmed state and begins to sing a cheerful Soviet song: "Yana o'ynaylik, yana kuylaylik, iqbolimis porloq ekan, davron suraylik" (Let us play again, let us sing again, as long as our future is bright, let us rejoice) (Boshbekov 42). Meanwhile, Quchqor continues to wander and cry, and gradually "his crying merges with the song." This contrast between official optimism and lived suffering captures the political poetics of the play. It illustrates how ideology suppresses reality without eliminating it. This duality recalls Mikhail Bakhtin's notion of the grotesque, in which laughter and pain coexist, revealing truths that cannot be expressed within official discourse (Bakhtin 317). The play demonstrates that ideology not only controls labour but also regulates emotion: Men must not cry, women must work endlessly, and society must conform to the demands of the "plan."

At the same time, the play reflects broader dynamics of colonial modernity. As scholars have noted, the Soviet project in Central Asia combined modernisation with asymmetrical power relations, particularly through the cotton economy and gendered labour exploitation (Khalid 9). In this context, *The Iron*

*Woman* may also be read as a decolonial text in the sense articulated by Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o: It speaks in the local language, about local experience, for a local audience, reclaiming narrative authority from imperial discourse (Ngũgĩ 4). In sum, *The Iron Woman* functions as a powerful example of theatre against oppression. Through grotesque satire, it dismantles the myth of the tireless "iron woman" and exposes the human cost of authoritarian and colonial structures. The play gives voice to experiences that are otherwise suppressed, transforming humour into a form of critique and resistance. In doing so, it demonstrates that even within tightly controlled ideological systems, literature can create spaces in which truth is articulated, power is destabilised, and the possibility of resistance emerges.

**Conclusion: Theatre against oppression**

Late Soviet Uzbek comedy can be understood as a complex cultural form through which questions of power were negotiated under conditions of ideological constraint. In the Uzbek context, this process often takes indirect and culturally embedded forms. Rather than confronting authority directly, these works reveal how control is experienced, reproduced, and at times subtly challenged within everyday life. Within the environment of censorship, satire, farce, and the grotesque were not merely decorative aesthetic devices, but functioned as central mechanisms for articulating anti-authoritarian and anti-colonial meanings. Narratives structured around domestic life and gender relations did not remain socially neutral; rather, they evolved into allegorical forms that both reproduce and expose the logic of totalitarian control at the level of everyday experience.

In *The Rebellion of the Brides*, a large urban household in Tashkent emerges as a symbolic microcosm of colonial and patriarchal power. The domineering mother-in-law represents a localised form of authority that mirrors broader centralised structures, while the daughters-in-law appear as subjects whose voices are constrained and who are compelled to develop indirect strategies of resistance. Their demands for domestic autonomy, control over labour, and access to resources generate a clear metaphor of decolonisation. In this context, humour operates by revealing the arbitrariness and excess of power, thereby destabilising its authority.

A similar, though more intensified strategy is employed in *The Iron Woman*. Here, grotesque satire exposes the systemic violence embedded in Soviet labour ideology. The fragmentation of the "iron woman" figure in the cotton fields demonstrates the unsustainability of a system grounded in silence and enforced endurance. By allowing a robot to articulate suppressed suffering, the play disrupts the enforced muteness traditionally imposed on marginalised

subjects. Humour does not neutralise suffering; rather, it amplifies it, making visible the intersection of gendered exploitation and authoritarian discipline.

Read together, these two comedies reveal that late Soviet Uzbek theatre articulated resistance through the politics of everyday life. Power is not confronted directly; instead, it is displaced into the domestic sphere, where its mechanisms become legible and open to critique. Such dramaturgy demonstrates that colonial and authoritarian domination operates not only through formal institutions, but also through habit, emotional regulation, and gendered expectations reproduced within the family.

At the same time, this analysis underscores the need to adapt postcolonial and feminist frameworks to the specific historical conditions of Soviet Central Asia rather than applying them uncritically. The experience of Soviet Uzbekistan differs from that of classical overseas empires: Domination here operates not through distance, but through proximity, integration, and centralised restructuring. However, this difference does not negate the logic of coloniality; it merely transforms its form.

Late Soviet Uzbek comedy thus occupies a significant place within the broader landscape of cultural critique under authoritarianism. Beneath the surface of humour and entertainment, these works preserve a space for ethical reflection, collective recognition of injustice, and the articulation of latent dissent. Laughter, in this context, is not a sign of compliance but a form of symbolic resistance that erodes the legitimacy of imposed authority. When individual suffering is transformed into collective experience, the stage becomes a site where a subtle yet perceptible community of dissent emerges. In conditions where open opposition is prohibited, farce and satire function as a language of freedom, enabling power to be named, relativised, and, at least imaginatively, overcome.

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