

# Fears of Touch, Taboo Zones

By Gulnoz Nabieva

Translated from the German by Jonathan Becker

Uzbekistan is a predominantly Muslim country in which topics such as homosexuality, female sexuality, and feminism are met with disdain and repudiation. There are many taboo zones. A translator who dares to go near them can expect trouble. When I translated Ilja Trojanow's *The Collector of Worlds* into Uzbek, descriptions of female nudity and allusions to physical intimacy were censored.

These dominant societal norms reduce women to the role of mother and wife, in conjunction with rigorous expectations of chastity. Emancipation is equated with chaos, the oppression of women seen as service to society. Where governmental control ends, the family takes on the role of the state. The (very limited) literature market is dominated by didactical religious works; contemporary Western literature is viewed as decadent and morally reprehensible. When I was a teenager, I got my hands on a copy of an uncensored Uzbek translation of Boccaccio's *Decameron* — this would be hard to imagine today.



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We live in a post-Soviet country. As a result of several targeted writing system reforms and Soviet language policies, we lost access to our literary heritage, which was historically more open and tolerant than Soviet literature. Under a special commission instituted by Stalin, the writings of Uzbek authors were altered to conform to Soviet ideology; the brightest minds fell victim to the repression of the 1930s. The Russian-language literary canon of the Soviet era is not suitable for the international stage. Even after independence was gained in 1991, the country was dominated by a politics of repression and surveillance for another thirty years. When people are made to live in fear, they turn to religion, and that is exactly what happened. Only a few years ago, it was impossible to find a single decent bookstore in the capital Tashkent, only religious literature was sold at bazaars. The works of the most prominent Uzbek authors of this time are also dominated by religious themes.



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It has only been since the death of the first president and the transition of power in 2016 that changes can be felt. Bookstores and book cafés have cropped up where Uzbek and Russian translations of literature from around the world are sold. A young generation of authors and translators is seeking to abandon the well-trodden paths, hoping for an exchange with the world, also via translation. Let's overcome our *Berührungssängste*, our fears of touch!



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**Gulnoz Nabieva**, born June 4, 1981 in Samarkand, studied German literature and language and English at the Samarkand Institute of Foreign Languages and at the Mirzo Ulugbek National University of Uzbekistan. To date she has translated into Uzbek a series of short stories by Rafik Shami, Matthias Nawrat, Saša Stanišić, Shida Bazayr, Jo Lendle, Iliya Troyanov's novel *The Collector of Worlds*, as well as the novel *Hier ist noch alles möglich* by Gianna Molinari. She has also translated poetry by Paul Celan and Jan Wagner. She currently lives in Tashkent where she works at the Goethe Institute.

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