

Andrei Makine, *Human Love*, Geoffrey Strachan(trans.), London, Sceptre, 2008; pp. 249; RRP \$39.99 hardback; ISBN 978-0-340-93677-1

Andrei Makine, *L'amour humain*, Paris, Éditions du Seuil, 2006; pp.295; RRP €18.00 paperback; ISBN 2-02-088426-7

In late 2006, award-winning French-Russian author Andreï Makine published his tenth novel, *L'amour humain (Human Love)*. Translated by Geoffrey Strachan in 2008, regular readers of Makine's work will recognise the fluidity of this Russian-raised writer's French prose, the essence of which is well captured in Strachan's translation. Yet it was with some surprise that I opened *Human Love*, for although Makine's partiality for wintry Russian landscapes and fondness for French-themed narratives are traits that often characterise his fiction, I was transported neither to France nor the former USSR, but to South-Western Africa. That being said, Makine maintains his literary ties with the Soviet Union: the narrator is Russian and a considerable slice of the novel's action takes place on Soviet soil. Notwithstanding the Russian interludes, *Human Love* follows the rise and fall of political conflict in South-Western Africa: the final, dying decade of Portuguese colonial rule in 1960s Angola and the twenty-five years of civil war that ensued. Civil warfare, in particular the extension of Soviet power into Angola, is a major aspect of the novel. Yet it becomes a catalyst for the narrative's (and ultimately Makine's) questioning of revolution, war and freedom and, most significantly, of the power and potential for love in the midst of this.

At the centre of *Human Love* is Angolan protagonist Elias Almeida who, fuelled by the memory of his mother's death at the hands of the Portuguese military, is driven by a desire to restore to humanity the love in which he so strongly believes. To this end, he becomes engulfed in life as a 'professional revolutionary', partaking in rebel activities in the East Congo before travelling to both Cuba and Moscow to 'learn the science of Revolution' (p.60). Eventually, he is recruited by the Soviet Union to operate as an intelligence agent in Africa. Despite Elias's active revolutionary role, the struggle between his faith in the ideology of Revolution and its actual implementation will haunt him throughout the novel. A young Elias, disillusioned by the lack of passion he witnesses amidst the reality of revolution, asks: 'What is the point of such liberating turmoil if it does not radically change the way we understand and love our fellow human beings?' (p. 57). Even revolutionary *extraordinaire*, Ernesto 'Che' Guevara – in the Congo to support the African rebels – is unable to dispel Elias's questioning. Indeed 'Che' becomes, in Makine's hands, a much less heroic (and perhaps more human) figure than historical memory would cast him.

Running parallel to the story of war and violence is Elias's relationship with Russian university student Anna. A welcome respite from the often violent passages of *Human Love*, the narrative is peppered with reflections of their relationship, which reaches its peak during a trip to Siberia to visit Anna's family. The journey underscores the importance Elias attaches to his relationship with Anna. The haphazard collection of individuals Elias meets there, for whom life and love flourish in a manner belying the simplicity of their lives, affects him profoundly. Thereafter the memory of Siberia becomes a refuge from the destruction that marks much of the narrative.

Makine adds breadth to Elias's story by framing it within the memory of the novel's nameless narrator – a Russian military-fighter-turned-writer. Harboursing a similar attachment to Siberia, the narrator befriends Elias while the two are held captive in a mud prison on the border between Zaire and Angola. Twenty-five years later, the narrator recalls Elias's story while attending an international conference on 'sustainable development in Africa' (p.14). Although the narrator's perspective initially guides the story, Elias's voice becomes increasingly distinguished, creating alternate streams of the storyline. While the constant ebbing to and fro between time-frames, locations and voices at times disorients the reader, the fragmentary nature of the narrative mirrors that of the story it tells: human life and how it is remembered is not a linear progression but a collage of the scattered people, places and events that have most marked and shaped us.

My main critique of *Human Love*, and one which left me frustrated on many occasions, is Makine's too-obvious attempts to combine both story and theory. *Human Love* is heavily driven by Makine's moral message, to the point of overshadowing the fictional spirit of his writing. Even Elias never truly escapes from Makine's pen, becoming trapped by the words that describe him and his actions, rather than developing as a character with whom the audience can identify and relate. Nevertheless, *Human Love's* reflection on the lives of those caught in the tide of History is mostly

persuasive and, as usual, Makine's writing is infused with exquisite turns of phrase. The Russian interludes contain some of the novel's most deftly rendered passages, so that the reader has the experience of staring into the white oblivion of the Siberian steppe, or losing themselves in the maze of Moscow's streets. *Human Love* is not Makine's best work, but the new direction in subject matter is exciting, if not completely successful. If one can forgive Makine his heavy-handedness and the occasional didactic tone that clouds his story, *Human Love* is a wonderful example of his adeptness at approaching the intersect between cultural and linguistic boundaries and at conveying the complexities of human identity.

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