

Title: Laughter and the Anxiety of Ethnicity: The New Caucasian Woman in *Kavkazkaya Plennitsya* and *Qaynana*

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The comic films *Kavkazkaya plennitsya* (“Girl Prisoner of the Caucasus,” dir. Leonid Gaidai, Mosfilm, 1967) and *Qaynana* (“Mother-in-law,” dir. Huseyin Seyidzade, Azerbaycanfilm, 1978) resonated strongly with their contemporary audiences and remain as beloved classics to this day. Both films center on the clash of “ethnic/traditional” with “Soviet/progressive” values as they relate to the New Caucasian woman. In the first, a young Caucasian woman is kidnapped in order to be forced into marriage with a local functionary. In the second, a tyrannical Azerbaijani mother-in-law is tricked into treating her modern daughter-in-law with the respect. Both films end with the victory of the progressive and the triumph of the New Caucasian Woman, supported by the laws and values of the Soviet State, and – apparently – the disruptive power of ethnicity, particularly as it relates to gender relations, is overcome.

Both films disempower ethnic traditions by the power of ridicule, with humor arising from the absurdity of the existence of outmoded behaviors in the Soviet world. When examined closely, however, the films betray very different anxieties and suggest very different conclusions. *Kavkazkaya Plennitsya* looks from the center toward the periphery, seen through the eyes of a Russian who goes looking for folklore but instead finds the remains of culturally inscribed misogyny and violence that has not yet been stamped out by Soviet modernity. *Qaynana* looks from the periphery toward the center, searching for ways to resolve traditional respect for elders and expectations of women with the demands of the Soviet world. This presentation will compare these two films in order to explore the role of comedy in both relieving and revealing the anxieties of non-Russian ethnicity in the former Soviet Union.