

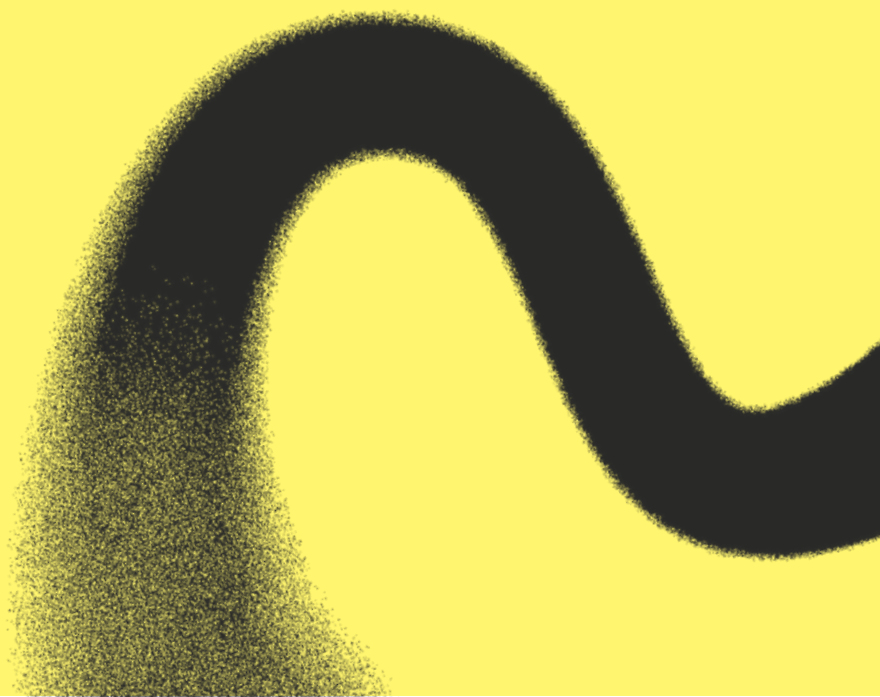
FROM KIRGHIZ TO KYRGYZ

ETHNIC IDENTITY DISCOURSES OF KYRGYZ FEMALE MIGRANTS IN RUSSIA

Thesis booklet

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SECTION I. BACKGROUND & RATIONALE

Migration, Identity, and Belonging

- Migration is one of the most significant social processes in the contemporary world, reshaping demographic structures, labour markets, and cultural landscapes.
- Beyond economic and demographic effects, migration raises questions of belonging and identity. Identity is not fixed or stable, but a dynamic, socially constructed process (Brubaker and Cooper, 2000).
- Migration intensifies these processes by placing individuals across multiple social, cultural, and institutional contexts simultaneously.

The Post-Soviet Context

- Contemporary migration in the post-Soviet space is shaped by the legacies of the Russian Empire and the Soviet Union.
- Russia remains among the world's top three largest migrant-receiving countries. During the Soviet period, Russian became the dominant language of administration, education, and interethnic communication, with effects that continue to shape migration today (Pavlenko, 2008; Kosmarskaya, 2015).
- Migrants from Central Asia frequently encounter discrimination, racialisation, and xenophobic attitudes in Russian society (Bessudnov, 2016).
- Kyrgyzstan is a particularly important case due to the official status of the Russian language and its close economic ties with Russia.
- Although extensive literature examines labour migration from Central Asia, less attention is paid to migrants' lived experiences and identity formation. Migrants are often reduced to a homogenised category of "Central Asian" migrants.

SECTION I. BACKGROUND & RATIONALE

Feminization of Migration and the Gap Addressed

- Women now constitute around 40% of Kyrgyz migrants in Russia, reflecting the growing feminization of migration.
- This transformation is linked to economic restructuring, limited employment opportunities, and rising poverty at home.
- Migration can provide women with economic independence and social mobility, but female migrants also face specific vulnerabilities, including precarious employment and gender-based violence (Abdukadyrova and Studenko, 2023).
- Even as primary breadwinners, women remain expected to maintain caregiving and family obligations and may face social control and public shaming within their own community.
- Understanding these experiences requires an intersectional lens, as gender, ethnicity, and class interact to produce complex forms of social positioning (Crenshaw, 1989; Yuval-Davis, 2006).

Language and Belonging

- Language is a central dimension of belonging. Due to Russification and the Soviet education system, many Kyrgyz citizens are bilingual, while knowledge of Russian remains a major driver of migration to Russia.
- Russian provides economic and social advantages, while Kyrgyz remains associated with ethnic belonging and cultural heritage.
- Migrants may therefore experience tension between linguistic practices connected to mobility and those connected to authenticity.

SECTION I. BACKGROUND & RATIONALE

Originality of the research

- Focuses specifically on *Kyrgyz female migrants*, a group that has received limited attention in existing migration research;
- Examines identity construction through migrants' own narratives and linguistic practices rather than solely through quantitative indicators;
- Integrates *ethnographic and sociolinguistic analysis with migration research* by examining how code-switching and interdiscursivity reflect negotiations of ethnic identity;
- Situates these processes within a *postcolonial framework* attentive to the historical relationship between Russia and Central Asia (Bhabha, 1994).
- The empirical material consists of 101 pages of interview transcripts collected through semi-structured interviews with highly skilled, bilingual Kyrgyz female migrants living in Russia.

Research questions

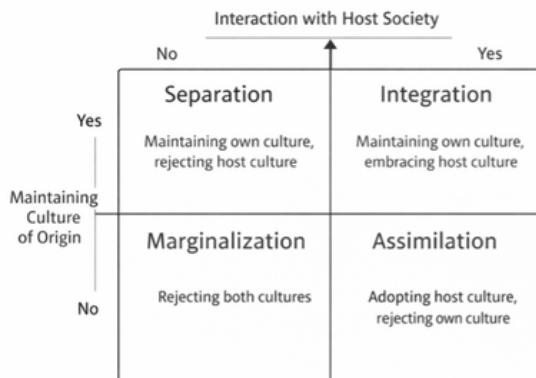
- **RQ1 (Identity).** How do Kyrgyz female migrants in Russia construct and interpret their ethnic identities?
- **RQ2 (Belonging).** How do Kyrgyz female migrants' experiences and acculturation strategies shape their sense of belonging?
- **RQ3 (Discourse).** How do Kyrgyz female migrants' language practices and discourses reflect their ethnic identities?

SECTION II. METHODOLOGY

Two levels of analysis, combined: an ethnographic level built on semi-structured interviews, and a discourse level built on Critical Discourse Analysis of the same transcripts.

Ethnographic level

- **Pilot research (2021–22)**: hashtag observation on Instagram (#kyrgyzinmoscow, 90.3k posts) + a tested ethnic-identity scale, later replaced with open-ended questions.
- **Final guide based on Berry (2007)**: migration story → feeling (ethnic relations) → doing (acculturation) → being (identity) → closure (future). 15 main + 23 follow-up questions.
- Semi-structured interviews conducted in June–Oct. 2023, online, 1–1.5h, mainly in Russian (L1) with Kyrgyz (L2) available throughout.



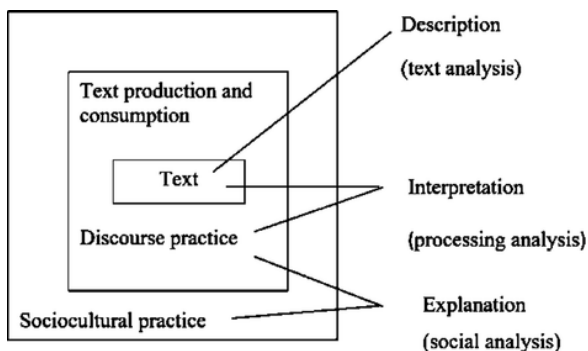
Berry's Acculturation Model (1997).
(Source: own creation)

Berry's model is a conceptual framework for the extraction and interpretation of qualitative narratives on identity and belonging.

SECTION II. METHODOLOGY

Discourse level

The discourse level applies Critical Discourse Analysis, based on Fairclough's (1992; 2001) three-dimensional model, which treats discourse as text, discursive practice, and social practice.



- **Text (micro-level):** linguistic features of the interview transcripts — vocabulary, evaluative descriptors, metaphors, grammatical structures and modality, and code-switching/ code-mixing between Russian (L1) and Kyrgyz (L2).
- **Discourse practice (meso-level):** interdiscursivity and intertextuality — how discourses of migration, nationalism, professional identity, and gender interact within a single narrative, and how narratives reference media, literature, and shared cultural knowledge.
- **Sociocultural practice (macro-level):** participants' narratives situated within institutional frameworks, the historical legacy of Russification, migration systems, and power relations, including the geopolitical shift caused by the war in Ukraine.

The coding process followed three steps: identifying themes, grouping themes, and analysing instances across the ten transcripts and their English translations.

SECTION III. SCIENTIFIC RESULTS

Ethnographic level

Ethnic identity and belonging: scalar and situational

- Ethnic identity among Kyrgyz female migrants was neither fixed nor stable, although it was frequently described in essentialist terms — references to “blood,” origin, or “roots.”
- Belonging is situational: participants felt more Kyrgyz while in Russia, where ethnic difference is externally imposed, but felt “less Kyrgyz” in Kyrgyzstan, where language use and adherence to tradition become more salient.
- Rather than holding separate, parallel Kyrgyz and Russian identities, migrants placed themselves on a metaphorical scale of being “more” or “less” Kyrgyz.
- A dichotomy emerged between “authentic” Kyrgyz (кыргыз) and “Russified” Kirghiz (киргиз), performed through language, food, hospitality, and expressed attachment to the country.
- Despite high education, professional employment, and fluency in Russian, participants remained positioned as “non-Slavic” in Russian society, marked by everyday microaggressions, racialised assumptions, and structural barriers, particularly in housing and bureaucratic procedures.
- Participants did not adhere to a single acculturation strategy (separation, assimilation, integration, or marginalisation) but combined strategies depending on context.

SECTION III. SCIENTIFIC RESULTS

Ethnographic level

Alternative ethnic identity and gender identity

- Gender is central to identity construction: female migrants experience a “double pressure” from both the society of origin and the host society.
- Migration functions as a pathway to empowerment and financial independence, though pressure to maintain family roles and honour persists across borders.
- Relations with the Kyrgyz diaspora were ambivalent: co-ethnic networks offered familiarity but were also associated with social control, moral judgement, and, for some participants, experiences or fear of harassment and gender-based violence from Kyrgyz male migrants.
- In situations perceived as unsafe, some participants reported strategically adopting alternative ethnic identities (e.g., Tatar, Korean, Buryat) to avoid unwanted interactions — identity reshaped situationally as a form of protection.

Discourse level

Language as a marker of belonging

- Russian functions as a necessary resource for education, employment, and everyday communication, while Kyrgyz operates as a marker of authenticity, emotional attachment, and cultural continuity.
- The distinction between “authentic” Kyrgyz and “Russified” Kirghiz was articulated largely through language proficiency and adherence to cultural practices.
- Code-switching and code-mixing between Russian and Kyrgyz function as a mechanism of identity negotiation, occurring most often around culturally specific concepts and emotionally charged moments; participants shifted into Kyrgyz more when reflecting on their ethnic identity.

SECTION III. SCIENTIFIC RESULTS

Discourse level

Discourse as social hierarchy

- Participants' narratives show interdiscursivity: neoliberal individualism, patriotism, feminism, and discourses of global mobility intersect, with migration framed simultaneously as a strategic project, a personal transformation, and a search for belonging.
- A discourse of “privilege” is prominent: participants distinguished themselves from labour migrants through education, language proficiency, and white-collar employment — at times reproducing the dominant “civilising” narrative that links worth to education and language.
- Borrowed categories such as “Slavic,” “non-Slavic,” “white,” and “Asian” structured experiences of inclusion and exclusion more strongly than formal citizenship, reinforced through racial profiling, discriminatory housing, and bureaucratic practice.
- Participants' own word choices (e.g., “third-world citizen”) reveal internalised colonial legacies in which Russianness is associated with privilege and cultural dominance while Kyrgyzstan is constructed as marginal.
- The war in Ukraine (2022) acted as a macro-structural turning point, shifting migration narratives from the “Moscow Dream” toward considerations of safety and a “second migration” to Europe.

Across all three analytical levels, ethnic identity is neither purely fixed nor fully fluid: it is discursively stabilised through references to origin and ancestry, yet constantly reinterpreted through everyday interactions, power relations, and shifting political realities. Migrants' discourses reveal a sustained condition of in-betweenness, positioned “everywhere and nowhere” at once — a perspective that moves beyond transnationalism toward a more global condition of belonging.

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