

Imagological Topoi in Balkan Literatures

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The purpose of this text is to research dominant/typical images which have been constructed in the process of the perception and representation of the stranger in Balkan literatures, and reciprocally, the images that strangers constructs for the Balkan in the same literary context. Under conditions where Balkan literatures have been treated as an alternative history of the Balkan, the author intends to see the role and power of literary work in creation, in changing or rejecting the image for/of the Other/stranger. The analysis covers several areas: the dominant position of image constructions; acts of invention and in(ter)vention; forming and transforming the images of the stranger; the role of stereotypes and prejudice in constructing images; the role of the discursive communities in creating images; and the role of the projective ideology in creating images.

Keywords: imagological constructions, significant stranger, projective ideology, discursive communities, stereotyped image

Introduction

The metaphorical representations of the Balkans as a bridge, a road, or a crossroads, that is, as a space unfit for a permanent stay, but for by-passing, establish the Balkans as the “ideal” pilgrimage destination. The transience and business of the Balkan region are also corroborated in the imagological representations of the relations between “us” and “the Others”, presented in numerous cultural discourses: mass media, politics, academic research, everyday life, reports and travelogues, popular literature, jokes, or novels. One variety of the literary articulations of the Other is the imagological topos of the foreigner’s image/image of the foreigner. If the foreigner is a concretized representative of a certain collective and a form of presence of otherness or foreignness, then the literary image of the foreigner is a mediated representation of that collective. Hence, this imagological topos in literature includes the relation between Balkanians and non-Balkanians. The elementary definition of foreigners stresses their position of aliens, immigrants, visitors, or conquerors. Ulrich Bielefeld underscores this aspect of foreignness, distance, non-belonging, joining a certain community—family or nation—which they might influence: transform or threaten (Bielefeld, 1998, p. 28). Hence, the concept of the so-called *significant foreigner*, where the attitude towards the foreigner is key; s/he is not a passive observer but an active and influential participant in the environment in which s/he is staying (Bielefeld, 1998, p. 131).

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Several Imagological Patterns in Balkan Prose

The Image of the Foreigner as a Civilized Conqueror

That the old, clichéd images of the foreigner constructed through fascination and rejection have not disappeared (Bilefeld, 1998, p. 109) is evidenced by the 1985 novel *Vježbanje života* (*Exercising Life*) by Croatian author Nedjeljko Fabrio. Among the multitude of images of foreign conquerors—Austrians, Frenchmen, Italians, Hungarians—lies the one of the foreigner as the promoter of civilization values (the revolution) and of progress (building a refinery in Rijeka). This perception is guided by the natives' practical/existential reasoning: the foreigners will leave, but the refinery will stay. In the 1981 novel *Nëpunësi i pallatit të ëndrrave* (*The Palace of Dreams*) (1993)¹ by Albanian author Ismail Kadare, the constructors of this image of the foreigner are the members of the Albanian Quprili family—they see the progress of their own people in their connection with the Ottoman invader: “The Turks (...) gave us Albanians what we lacked: the wide open spaces” (Kadare, 1993, p. 68).

The Image of the Foreigner as an Uncivilized Conqueror

In the 2002 novel *Smrta na dijakot* (*The Death of the Scrivener*) by Macedonian author Dragi Mihajlovski there is the opposite image of the foreigner as the uncivilized conqueror: the Bitola scrivener Ravul and the Turkish commander Timurtaş are the two narrative focal points where the image of the other is projected. In constructing the image of the conquering foreigner, the uncivilizedness is stressed through the absence of basic patriarchal and ethical values—the lack of a sense of family and home, of decency and moderation: “Против кого треба да се бориме? Против орда неверници што не можат да си ги додржат семејствата (...) скитаат по светот, убиваат пристојни луѓе како нас” (Михајловски, 2002, p. 43).² Both these images of the foreigner—as a civilized and an uncivilized conqueror—are varieties of the traditional construct of the foreigner as the outside enemy. This imagological stereotype is based on the dualism between us and the others, the relation to the feelings of fear, hate, disdain or indifference towards outsiders, as well as feeling the safety and the fundamental values of one group threatened by another (as, for instance, in Mihajlovski's novel).

The Foreigner's Image (of the Balkan Native)

The foreigner as an enemy assumes presence on a foreign territory, that is, his/her encounter with the native is an encounter with the unknown, with the alien. In the analyzed texts, there is an identical position from which foreigners perceive the native other: It is the position of the official representative of foreign authority, implying an imposed presence in an official capacity. High-ranking imperial administrators in the state/social hierarchy—consuls, viziers, generals, religious leaders, military commanders—participate in creating an identical, stereotypical image of the Balkanian as a savage and/or barbarian.³ In Kadare's *Gjenerali i ushtrisë së vdekur* (*The General of the Dead Army*) (2008), the Italian general has come to Albania on a state mission in order to exhume and repatriate the remains of Italian soldiers. Burdened by his task, as well as the past, the general views the Albanian people as backward, with innate aggression and belligerence:

¹ First published in 1981 in Albania.

² “Who are we to fight against? Against a horde of infidels who cannot keep their families (...) wandering around the world, killing decent folk like us”. (translator's note)

³ Norris (1999) concludes that ever since the earliest travelogues one has continually documented the two varieties of the image of the Balkanian as a “noble savage” and a “primitive barbarian” (p. 32).

“The Albanians are rough and backward people. Almost as soon as they are born someone puts a gun into their cradle, so that it shall become an integral part of their existence” (Kadare, 2008, p. 27). In *The Death of the Scrivener*, the sullen, exhausted Turkish commander is the perceptive background in relation to which the local population is identified as a “банда словенски тврдоглавци” (“a gang of Slavic mules”) whose fate is to be conquered and subjugated. In the 1945 novel *Travnička hronika (Bosnian Chronicle)*⁴ by Ivo Andrić the various foreigners’ perceptions construct the image of the savage Balkanian. The West-European and Ottoman emissaries in Travnik—the French and the Austrian consul, the Turkish viziers and their administrators—view the Bosnians as uncouth, uneducated, superstitious: “The Vizier tactfully alluded to the backwardness of the land and to the coarse and boorish manners of the people” (Andrić, 1993, p. 28). The French consul’s position is identical: “They are wild ignorant people. They hate everything foreign (...) It’s their barbarian way” (Andrić, 1993, p. 22).

Auto-Image

The imagological projections of the foreigner are reversible—they are founded on the parallel generating of auto-imagological representations. The image of the self is indirectly defined through the image of the other. The image is a translation of the other, as well as a self-translation (Пажо, 2002, p. 111). The self sees the other, and the image of the other transmits a certain image of this self that sees, speaks or writes (Пажо, 2002, p. 105). In the analyzed texts, the Balkan auto-image is founded on stressing several collective qualities, causally connected with foreigners:

(1) Adaptability as an additionally developed survival instinct is in conditions of an alien/invading presence. “Mi Hrvati ionako nećemo nikada nikog pobjediti” (Fabrio, 1986, p. 162).⁵

(2) Wavering between actual subjugation and the desire to rebel: “Pride is their second nature, a living force that stays with them all through life, that animates them and marks them visibly apart from the rest of mankind” (Andrić, 1993, p. 9).

(3) The need for open communication with foreigners—in *The Palace of Dreams*, the prosperity of the Albanian people is conditioned by their political and cultural association with the Ottoman invader: “One day they’ll win their independence, but they’ll lose all those other possibilities” (Kadare, 1998, p. 68).

In all the images of the foreigner, the portrayal of the Balkan barbarian/primitive nature has been realized alongside the auto-imagological representations positioned as counter-images. In Andrić’s novel, the French consul, explaining the vizier’s inclination through the principle of compensation, universally applicable to the other foreigners, creates an auto-image as well:

He thought he understood in a general way how and why foreigners loved France, the French way of life, and French ideas. They were drawn to them by the law of contrasts; they loved France for all those things they were unable to find in their own country. (Andrić, 1993, p. 141)

There is a superior auto-image of the foreigner as the counter-image of a hetero-image in *The General of the Dead Army* as well: “He was the representative of a great and civilized country and his work must be greatly worthy of it” (Kadare, 2008, p. 13).

⁴ First published in 1945.

⁵ “We Croats will never defeat anyone anyhow”. (translator’s note)

Mechanisms of Construction

The bifocal perception through which auto-images and hetero-images are created is founded on a “projective ideology”. It involves a complex transfer of one’s own weaknesses/fears onto the other, resulting in a double effect: creating a distance from the other and, through it, self-identification (Biti, 1994, p. 145). The principle of turning the other into a dangerous enemy and turning oneself into a victim forced to defend her/himself (Biti, 1994, p. 145) is a manner of justifying one’s own position and behavior. That which Ulrich Bielefeld terms mixophobia or fear of mixture, of endangering one’s own purity and sense of domination are the fundamental motives guiding the foreigner when projecting hetero-images, and that phobia in turn generates an auto-image of the projected victim, as evidenced by Fabrio’s and Andrić’s novels. In the eyes of the dominant foreigner, the Balkanian is deliberately distanced to the opposite pole—of the uncivilized, the barbaric—in order to imply one’s own superiority. That is a direct application of the system of differential classification (Пажо, 2002, p. 117). In Fabrio’s novel, the conquering foreigner justifies his presence in Rijeka as part of the enlightenment mission of civilizational influence on the primitive people: “Francuzi (...) običavali ponavljati da su stigli amo zato da bi od domorodaca načinili civilizirane ljude” (Fabrio, 1986, p. 41).⁶ The image of the foreigner as enemy is a projection used to justify one’s own position of a victim: the subjugation under foreign rule for the Balkanians is a justification for their collective state of misery and backwardness. In Andrić’s account, the Turkish rule created some typical qualities, such as pretence, mistrust, laziness of thought and fear of every novelty, or everything and every movement. These qualities, developed through centuries of unequal fight and constant defence, became integral part of the nature of the locals and permanent traits of their character (Andrić, 1993). In *The General of the Dead Army*, the roughness and the belligerence on which foreigners base their image of the Albanian people get a different explanation in an auto-imagological context—as a survival instinct, developed in circumstances of constant subjugation.

One parameter for the imagological constructions is offered by the concept of “discursive community”, which Hutcheon (1994) defines as a “complex configuration of shared knowledge, beliefs, values and communicative strategies” (p. 91). Belonging to different discursive communities not only makes communication difficult but is also a source of the stereotypes and prejudices on which imagological representations are based. In *The General of the Dead Army*, belonging to different discursive communities is the reason of different interpretations of the phenomenon of the vendetta. Whereas foreigners understand the vendetta only from a psychological aspect, the local expert has a different explanation:

I know there are some foreigners who have the idea that our vendetta and various other pernicious customs are to be explained by the so-called Albanian psychology, but the whole notion is too absurd. They are merely customs that were once imposed on us by our former oppressors and religion. (Kadare, 2008, p. 128)

In *The Palace of Dreams* the discursive community facilitates the understanding of Albanian folklore by the Austrian consul. In *Bosnian Chronicle*, however, the unsuccessful reception of Racine’s tragedy *Bajazet* by the vizier is due to his non-belonging to the discursive community of the foreigner (the French consul). From his viewpoint, the theatrical representation of Turkish tradition—the harem—is unacceptable. For the same reason there are different interpretations of the geostrategic importance of roads: For the foreigner, they are the

⁶ “The French (...) used to repeat that they had come here to turn the natives into civilized people”. (translator’s note)

prerequisites of progress, whereas for the Balkanian they are merely a way of easier and quicker access of invading threats and therefore unnecessary.

Imagological Stereotypes

Literary images of the foreigner are imagological constructs projected through prejudice and stereotypes. Discussing the stereotype as a powerful form of the image, Pageaux underscores its partiality and polycontextuality. The stereotype as a short overview, as an abridged expression typical of a culture, transmits the smallest amount of information for greatest communication, with the widest range of possibilities and tends towards generalization (Пажо, 2002, pp. 106-108). In the novels too, the foreigner's images of the Balkan native are always stereotypical.⁷ In the foreigner's imagological representations, the Balkan is reduced to the oriental, as an antipode to the European. In *Bosnian Chronicle* (1993), the French consul perceives the Bosnian people through his literary preconceptions, drawn from the French travelogues on the Balkans. The negative stereotype in the hetero-image results from the stereotypical auto-image where one's own dominance is reinforced—in a political sense, as well as in the sense of a civilizational, cultural and intellectual superiority. The contrast in the foreigner's representations is strategic distancing of the natives through stereotypical stigmatization. This type of prevention is included in the conviction with which the Italian general comes to Albania and the French consul to Travnik. On the other hand, the natives are a priori mistrustful of the foreign, unexcited about novelty and convinced that foreigners always bring misfortune.

However, the texts from our corpus also demonstrate a parallel process of de-stereotyping, provided by double transformation. Firstly, there is a transformation concerning the explicit problematizations of certain kinds of prejudices and stereotypes: in *The Death of the Scrivener*, the foreigner causes the stereotypical opposition between conqueror and defender and the prejudices that identify the unknown and the foreign as unfortunate and evil. Secondly, there is transformation in the instances where inherited or adopted experiences and knowledge will be correctively treated in the act of immediate perception and in one's personal experience with the other. Such a change is experienced by the French consul after meeting the vizier and the local population:

For an Oriental, the Vizier was unusually lively, cordial, and outspoken (...) He had none of that monolithic Ottoman dignity of which Daville had read and heard so much (...) Everything he met with in Bosnia and all that reached him from the embassy in Istanbul, and from the military governor in Dalmatia, was contrary to what he'd been told when he left Paris. (Andrić, 1993, pp. 28-31)

In *The General of the Dead Army* one witnesses the gradual transformation of the convictions with which the foreigner comes to Albania: "I felt I wanted to get to this savage, backward country as soon as I possibly could (...) But when we got there it all turned out differently" (Kadare, 2008, p. 134).

Conclusion

The imagological catalogue in the novels allows for several conclusions:

- (1) The heterogeneity of the foreigners with regard to their ethnicity and their position on the territory in

⁷ This is also stressed by Norris (1999), according to whom the "production of a Balkan semantics is based on a narrow range of persistent images, reinvented as appropriate in each historical moment" (p. 37), as well as by Todorova (2009), who sees the Balkans as "the hostage of a tradition of stereotypes" (p. 187).

which they are staying generates multiplied imagological projections: the foreigners as conquerors, enemies, civilized, and uncivilized strangers; furthermore, the images they create for one another and the various foreigners present in a third, neutral and, for them, foreign (Balkan) territory—the Frenchman's image of the Austrian, of the Turk and vice versa in *Bosnian Chronicle*—and, of course, the foreigner's image of the Balkanians. The multiplication also concerns the heterogeneity of the native—a member of various Balkan nationalities (Macedonian, Albanian, Croatian, Bosnian). Finally, there is a special kind of microlayering in *Bosnian Chronicle*, where the Turk is both the conquering foreigner and a native.

(2) The foreigner's image is identical—negatively stereotypical, xenophobic, ideologically projective. The image of the foreigner, on the other hand, is more richly nuanced. In *The Palace of Dreams* and *Exercising Life*, the foreigner is necessary and undesirable, civilized and uncivilized, good and evil. Is that due to the fact that the authors are Balkan, so they feel the need to stress tolerance as Balkan immanence? But, the problem might also be interpreted differently: The Balkan sense of tolerance is not innate but acquired—the consequence of the permanent presence of foreigners in the Balkan regions and the forcedness of cohabitation. Hence, the credit for the development of Balkan tolerance goes to the foreigners as well.

(3) The images that are (self)referentially marked are multilayered. The novels contain a whole imagological series—image, hetero-image, auto-image and counter-image—in a reciprocal relationship. The dynamic perspective contributing to multilayeredness is also provided through the narrative proceedings in the texts: The foreigner in them is either the bearer of the dominant focalization (*The General of the Dead Army*, *Bosnian Chronicle*) or his viewpoint is equally juxtaposed to the native (*The Death of the Scrivener*). The play with the viewpoints stresses the importance of the position from which one perceives, represents and constructs.

(4) The novelesque images confirm the susceptibility of the Balkans as the subject of imagological research. They show its status as a “contact zone” and its historically confirmed status of a critical region, in terms of armed conflicts. The action in the novels takes place in periods of crises, indicating another stereotypical image of the Balkans as a “powder keg”.

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