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EMPATHY, SYMPATHY AND DEMONIZATION OF THE OTHER IN THE BALKAN LITERATURES

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Abstract: *The profile of the other in the Balkans literatures is as special and complex as its projection onto real life has been through the region's history. Since the Balkans itself has been a bridge between East and West, being 'the other' in relation to Europe and part of it simultaneously, the concepts of self and the other reveal as specific in the Balkans literatures.In these literatures, the other has been the alien, the invader, who came either from a powerful empire or from 'beyond the fence'—the neighbour, the similar but also the different one all at once. In most cases, this 'other' exerted all its influence to spread their culture and, either when being part of an empire or merely a neighbour, cohabited with them for such long periods as to strive to undo the features of their identity. The present paper aims to highlight some features of 'the other' in the Balkans literature that make it essentially unique and (considering the work of albanian and serbian prose writers) which, in relation to self, appears in diverse and often opposite positions: it has been demonized at times, but empathised or even sympathised at pthers, and, as everything else of the Balkans, is depicted in strong colours and contrasts, yet essentially similar.*

Keywords*: Balkan; the other; self; narrative; demonization*

1. INTRODUCTION

Literature is that space of imagination which is interested in and allows space for the issue of 'the other' more than any other art form. *The other* has at all times been destined to be changed into speech, although this has happened especially in the literature written for and of postcolonial countries, where the confrontation between self and *the other* appeared in clear-cut contrasts. That is why the first studies on this issue are to be met in the 1950s, when the term postcolonial theory[1] is to be traced too.

In most of its part, the postcolonial theory pivots around the concept of *the other*, looking at the world as split into adversary forces: *the self* is ordered, rational, masculine – thus, good, whereas the other is chaotic, irrational, feminine – thus, evil. In the works of that literature (postcolonial), the unequal power relations appear in the form of binary opposites: we – they, white – black, colonizer – colonized, self – other, powerful – powerless, Master – slave, superior – inferior. (Al-Saidi, 2014:95-105)

Of course, when we talk of *the other* in the Balkans Peninsula, in the Balkanian culture and literature, an identikit of this *other* cannot be that simple or easily identified. This is due to many reasons, which relate to the history, culture and the geopolitics of the region through the ages, considering them in both contexts, the Balkanian internal relations and the juxtaposition between the Balkans and Europe, particularly, in the way this relationship has been seen through the last century to the present.

A few things are to be resolved before laying out the specific issue of *the other* in the Balkans literatures. First and foremost, are we considering the Balkans as an entity, or rather each of its constituent patches? Is *the other* as different from *the self* as it appears in the European view of the Easterner, or as it reveals in the perception that the colonized peoples have of the European in the literatures of the postcolonial countries? Is this *other* Balkanian, or is it one coming from Europe, from the east, or from a neighbouring land in the Balkans? Does this *other* bear obvious, clear-cut distinctions from the *self* or just minor differences, yet essential in the different cultures of the Balkans? What are its relations it with itself?

[1] The term gained importance in 1970, when Edward Said wrote his book "Orientalism". It was initially used to refer to cultural interactions in colonial societies. The postcolonial theory was created to deal with the literature written in the countries that used to be or that are still colonial.

In Maria Todorova's view, the Balkans issue should be seen as parallel to other similar experiences, such as the relations between Europe and postcolonial countries. *"The Balkans is also a bridge across the stages of growth, which is why it should be classified as half-developed, half-colonial, and half-oriental."* (Todorova, 2009: 16) Certain scholars in the West are too quick to use the oriental notion—used by some Balkanian researchers too—as a model to incorporate the whole of the Balkans. That is why she also uses the term *Balkanianism* when she refers to the European's discourse of the Balkans and the Balkanians.[2]

For Todorova, the methodologies used in post-colonial studies cannot be applied in the Balkanian ones. The issue that Todorova treats in *Imagining Balkans* relates to the way the Balkans has been seen—as an *other*, different from Europe, a part of which it actually is. Our interest lies in only one approach of this view and not in it as a whole, as the matter in our discussion, while we are arguing on the basis of the Balkans literature, is seen from a different perspective. Todorova's viewpoint is of an interest to us because it helps us position our discussion in a broader context that will lead to certain conclusions.

While discussing *the other* in the perception of the Balkans peoples, we should bear in mind that the very roots of these peoples relate to Europe, a part of which (though in the periphery) the Balkans is. On the other hand, since it used to be part of the Ottoman Empire for hundreds of years, the two cultures were mixed and cohabited side by side, so that this climate of controversy about identity prevails the discussions about it today, both inside the Balkans countries and outside them.

The discourse on *the other* in the Balkanian culture is highly affected by the history of the region and the age-long clashes for expansion, the developments brought about by the cohabitation under the Ottoman rule, as well as the traces it left on the religion and culture. Consequently, *the other* of these peoples has not only been the one coming from far away, imposing their own language and culture, but also their adjacent neighbor, from whom they differ in certain characteristics as nation, religion and language. Following this line of reasoning, the identity of the other in the Balkanian history, literature and culture is special, quite different from the one held by the post-colonial countries about Europeans, as different as the one held by the Europeans about the peoples of the east. Since the Balkans has been a bridge between east and west, being the other to Europe though part of it, the concept of the other reveals as specific in the Balkanian literatures.

As the peoples of the region have been marked by both a common fate and conflictual relationships lasting for centuries—bound by a neighbourhood they could not escape—it is not easy to define the image of the other as depicted in the Balkans culture and literature. Thus, in Albanian literature, from the folk Epics of the valient warriers to the later cultivated literature, it is hard to find such pairs of binary opposites as the ones in the literatures of the post-colonial countries that we have mentioned above.

A view of the Balkans as something in-between can be noticed in depictions of it. East and west are usually depicted as incompatible entities, as opposing worlds, and the image developed of the Balkans is either of an intersection or of a bridge linking these two opposites.

The bridge is a structure that not only complements the very meaning, the geographic, historical and cultural position of the peninsula, but it has also become a part of its identity, of the way the Balkanian knows himself. Turned to a metaphor, the construction of a bridge, as a thing of vital importance to the community, is a narrative to be found in all of the Balkans languages.

This concept of a bridge or a crossroads is also related to the concept of the Balkanian for *the self* and *the other*. In the Balkans literatures, as in the perception of its peoples, *the other* has been the foreigner or the invador coming from a powerful empire, or from "beyond the fence," or the nieghbour—similar but different all at once. This

[2] "The way to understand this *Balkanianism,*" holds Todorova "is by placing it within the theoretical debates being held—above all, in juxtaposition to *orientalism* and *post-colonialism*." In her understanding, the evolution of a general Balkanic discourse is much less than a variant of *orientalism*, since it is a development with quite distinctive features within the 'western' intellectual and academic perception. The Orient of their imagination hardly had any concrete location or boundaries; it used to be considered as 'non-European', closely associated with a colonial and by-gone image, dressed with racial connotations ('non-whites'), and closely associated with Islam, as the religion of 'the rest of the Orientals.' Todorova emphasizes that most of these aspects are not to be found in the Balkanian discourse. The Balkans was precisely located in the geographical context, it was 'European,' it had no real 'colonial' past experience, its population was 'white,' and (around 1900) most of its population were Christian. By early twentieth century, though, a portrait of the Balkans as a cultural '*other*' had become dominant.

other has, in most of the cases, exerted all their influence to extend their culture and, either when they were part of an empire or a mere neighbour, cohabited with them for a long time striving to undo parts of their identity.

Owing to specific circumstances of an age-long cohabitation of a common history, and, irrespective of the long-lasting differences and the keen old clashes, the profile of *the other* pictured in the Balkans literatures shares as many features as the respective cultures and identities do.

The aim of this paper is to draw a portrait of this Balkanic *other* (starting from the work of Albanian and Serbian authors), who is, in relation to self, in different and often conflicting positions: it has both been demonized and empathised or even sympathised and, as everything else connected with the Balakns, comes through powerful colours and contrasts, yet essentially similar.

2. DEMONIZING THE 'OTHER'

As far as Albanian literature is concerned, it has generally been accepted to have a rather isolationist inclination, particularly after World War 2. Due to numerous historic determinant circumstances, isolation from the world, from the different one—from the *other*—has either been a fatal condition at times or, at other times, a prerequisite to survive in aspects of culture and identity. Nevertheless, even though created in the time-space of communist Albania, the prose of such writers as P. Marko, I. Kadare, D. Agolli and a lot more contains various scales of imaging this *other* in the Albanian letters. That is not a linear image, either within the boundaries of the literature as a whole, or within the work of the same author.

In Ismail Kadare's work, for example, we can find various types of relationships with *the other*, which, no matter how they differ, they all tend to demonize it. *The other* in his novel *The General of the Dead Army* is represented by the general of an enemy country and the priest, who are central figures in the novel. The author considers *the other* from his own perspective. The way this *other self* views Albanians enables us to know *the other* himself, in this case, the General. Picturing him as the general of the dead army, the army that charged in order to invade that land, immediately merges the figure of the general with that of the enemy, who now comes in a more sophisticated form to extract the remains of the once glorious army and "fight", this time without weapons, only to be defeated once again. In his novel *The Wedding Procession Turned to Ice*, Kadare follows another path in his imagination of *the other*. Here he starts from the self, a Pristina hospital doctor and her husband. She has to go through a process of rendering account for the assistance the doctors of her ward have offered to the Kosovo students wounded in a demonstration. The other in the novel comes as a senior officer of the UDB, Dobrila Guberovic , and two of his ex-colleagues, Vladan and Yovitsa. The letter are painted in dark colours. Feeling excluded because of the new politicies, they think that now that the UDB needs them again, the big day has arrived for things to be put to their normal order.

> Yovitsa couldn't help sobbing. 'Poor lonely one,' he repeated a few times, while Vladan said, 'Hush, brother; everything will be restored, just need be patient.' But Yovitsa could hardly get hold of himself. 'They've set fire to the Patriarchate of Peya. They are rendering our Serbian girls barren. How could I be patient?' 'What about us?' responded Vladan 'Haven't we done enough to them? On April 1 our tanks rode right upon people's bodies. The blood traces can still be noticed in Germiya. Is that not enough to you?' 'Not enough!' responded Yovitsa. 'It is very little to me. Would they but leave us free as in Karageorgevitch's time. To uproot them, stamp 'em out, with their language and all, with their cursed alphabet, which they claim to be more ancient. (Kadare 2000:158)

In the writer's imagination of *the other*, a demonizing inclination is noticeable in treating him as a fanatic and a criminal. There are other Serbian characters in the novel, though, having other features than these, such as another hospital doctor (it is related that the Serbian doctors too have equally assisted the young wounded in the demonstration), or a client in the bar *Old Serbia* who mocks the ex-UDB people.

The very title of the novel, *The Wedding Procession Turned to Ice*, foreshadows such an atmosphere. Unlike in the legend, where the frozen procession participants return to normal again and the marriage between *the self* and *the other* may be accomplished, this is impossible in the novel and the real life.

A demonization of the other, although rather disguised through parody, is also to be found in Ivo Andric's *The Journey of Đerzelez Alija*. While the Albanian hero Gergj Elez Alia of the epic *Songs of the Frontier Warriors*, who has been in bed for nine years, rises to defend his sister's honour and life, Andric's character has different features. In the novel, he is not *the other*, but rather *the other*'s hero (as the epic depicts Gergj Elez Alia).

However, in Andric's discourse, the relations between the hero and the crowd beholding him are inversed: the crowd knows *Đerzelez* from his deeds; it shrinks from him initially, but then, gradually comes to see how ridiculous he is and makes fun of him.

> Now that he had dismounted his steed, as if descending from a pedestal, the awe and esteem started to abate, and he kind of equaled with the rest … In a matter of days the magic circle around Đerzelez had totally dissolved (Andric, 1976:52).

Feeble in the face of feminine beauty, he becomes ridiculous, especially in their presence. Course and ignorant as he is, he allows the others to ridicule him, lets himself get drunk, crawl in front of the crowd, and not get what he wants.

In addition to being individual, the features he dresses *the other* in are also related with the community he comes from and he represents. That is noticeable in his attitude towards females:

> As always when he beheld feminine beauty, he immediately lost all sense of time and real relationships, along with all understanding of reality, which separates people from one another (Andric, 1976:69)
> He smoked with hatred. That he cannot reach that Vlach woman; that he never can! A new wave of blood wrapped him … (Andric, 1976:52)

or his attitude towards the others that are not like him, as in the case of those who do not fast like as he does:

> On an afternoon, because of boredom and weariness, they beat a somunji, a Christian, for he had been smoking while passing by (Andric, 1976, 52)

Andric chooses not to talk of *the other* by juxtaposing it with his *self*. He chooses to parody it, by transforming the heroic into ridiculous, bravery into unmanliness, and virtue into vice. He does not call *the other* names but rather builds the scene and the figures so that the reader can gather the meaning themselves. He envisages the hero and *the other* as demoniac and silly all at once, through parodying him. Consequently, if he does that to the hero, it is easy to see what he suggests about *the others*.

Both in the cases of Kadare and Andric, *the other* is seen in a relationship already established. For Kadare, he is the foe coming from a powerful empire or from an age-long conflicting neighbourhood. He is, a priori, the "enemy" that has charged, imposed his values and culture, and dispised the values, the culture, and the right of people to live in freedom. For Andric, *the other* is the one coming from afar, with norms, canons and features different from those of *the self*. He is of an inferior culture and is despised for the fact that he strives to impose that culture upon the others. In both cases the conception of *the other* derives from conflict, from the clashes that their people have had, now with the invador who tried to be imposed upon them, now with the neighbour they have always lived in vicinity, but always in conflict. This other, in the cases of Kadare and Andric, does not go beyond the boundaries of the Balkanian conflictual reality and, through imagination, affirms attitudes already known from reality.

3. EMPATHYZING AND SYMPATHYZING THE 'OTHER'

One of the Albanian authors who treated the other atypically is D. Agolli, from whose work we will set aside his novel *The Man with the Gun* and his story *A Small Greek Boy in the Household*. In the novel *The Man with the Gun*, main character, Mato Gruda, an uneducated peasant, takes in an Italian soldier after Italy has capitulated. Even though that was a common experience for many Albanian families during the war, the author pictures this relationship between the self and the other in an original way, showing that no matter how rough and uninformed the peasant is, he opens his home to the alien, accepting him as different, understanding and even sympathizing him for certain traits he appreciates in him:

> Meanwhile Zara came in, wearing a head kerchief. She shook the Italian's hand and sat by the aunt on the fireside. Augusto glimpsed at Zylo, then immediately looked away. Mato Gruda understood from this that the Italian was a behaved man after all and that he had learned some of the peasants' customs. Women should not be stared at, not looked at them in the eye; and he said to himself that the foreigner had to descend from a good house (Agolli, 1975, 67-68)

The correlation between *the self* and *the other* is particular in *A Small Greek Boy in the Household*. *The other*, initially marked as Greek, is a small child, the son of a family friend from a village across the border. In Agolli's work, *the other* is simultaneously *a Greek* (foreigner and "foe") and guest to the house; it is an alien but *small*, a mere kid, unaware of the differences and problems between the two peoples, innocent of the acts of others. Home is the territory where one feels safe, strong and secure, the place belonging to

them alone and where one is oneself. Consequently, allowing there somebody that could well be considered a foe is an unacceptable and frightening thing. Nevertheless, this fear turns to absurd when 'the enemy' comes to be a small kid needing help.

This scene clearly reveals our correlation with the forigner, as conditioned by history, which always placed the Albanians on the position of the invaded rather than the invador. The alien has been the one that tipped the ballance of the community, threatened their culture, and put to doubt their very identity.

In the Balkans context, those who are in a majority "us" in relation to the other always seek to exert their influence and make it similar to them. That is what the grandmother character does to the small Greek, who reminds her of the Greek andartes who had wounded her husband at the mill. She says that after he has come, the house smells of Greek to her and that if she had the boy done sünnet, the odour would disappear.

In essence, this endeavour to undo the features of the *other*'s identity and alter them into such traits that resemble our identity, is a refusal of *the other*, under the conviction that the right form of being is the one we belong. This justifies Bauman's view according to which all societies produce aliens in their own way. "Everyone is dirty to the other, but everyone fights the other's dirtiness on behalf of their own purity." (Jenkins, 2008, 33)

This is a mindset the Balkans peoples have suffered and are still suffering from. The present parallel between Agolli's textual figure and real life goes to show that, despite what we dress upon *the other*, despite the way we identifay our *self* in correlation to it, this *other* is basically so close to us that we weep and laugh with them, fight and rejoice, and we even err almost the same way as them.

Especially in the case of the story *A Small Greek Boy in the Household*, the *other*'s profile is one that fits best a characteristic conception for the Balkans peninsula, where old and keen as the conflicts may have been, there are quite as many shared values in the respective cultures and identities. The matter is that in the Balkans, the differences take such huge proportions, their value is inflated, and they get transformed and played with until they turn to deep irresolvable conflicts.

The correlation between the self and the other is specific in the story *A Small Greek Boy in the Household.* It comprises all the kinds of perceptions of *the other*. The other is demonized there by the character of grandmother, who identifies him with the Greek andartes, or the enemy, empathized by the boy who observes him and feels his pain, by the father and then grandmother, until later, when he is not only sympathized but also merged with the self.

The perception of another writer, Petro Marko, is of high interest too. His image of the other relates with concrete circumstances and events, such as his volunteering to Spain, along with others from around the world, in order to set resistance to fascism, where he met other Albanians like him, as well as many others from different countries of the world, who shared the same love of liberty and same ideals.

Petro Marko's novels are creations of a rather ambiguous status, as the reader may read them either as biography or as fiction. Many characters, impressions, and place or space descriptions in them come from living, and they have become a part of fiction. It may be owing to this experience too, why *the other* holds an important position in his novels, to such an extent that this literature was in obvious contrast with the time context when it was written and published, with the method of socialist realism, which encouraged a literature closed in the periphery and isolated from *the other*.

Petro Marko created wonderful characters of others who had ideals, aspirations, and courage the same as himself. His other is not only empathized and sympathized but also loved. The love in the novels *Hasta La Vista*, *The Last City*, or *The Night of Ustika* is an *other* who is called Anita and is Spanish, called Ana Maria and is Italian, and called Sonia, who is Serbian. The way this *other* is imaged in Petro Marko's prose has a specific that is related to the way Petro Marko narrates.

As the characters of the above novels are not mere fictional creations but a merging of the author's consciousness, his memory, experience, and his imagination, it is harder for them to escape "the author's voice," to such an extent that it seems as if the author speaks through each of them.

> Kebede was looking at the Aragona mountains … Kebede was thinking. He was pondering his country enslaved by the Italian fascism ... From those moments, Enco Ferruci started to think differently! He recalled the mass executions of the Abyssinian population and shook with a feeling of revenge. He recollected the rapes and tortures the Abyssinian women had to undergo by the enraged black-shirts and felt ashamed to call himself Italian (Marko, 2002:29-32)

The author's voice can hardly skip the other, who is such only because it is Italian, Spanish, or Serbian, and is called Kebede, Anita, or Sonia. There is no otherness in it except for some

characteristics as the liberty of the foreign girls, while the Albanian character is rather shy in relation to them. The others in his novels are people coming from different countries and cultures; yet the writer does not seek in them for what is different or distinctive, but rather for what is similar to him, what has brought all these youths together from all over the world to come and fight in Spain.

4. CONCLUSIONS

In this article I try to demonstrate that the image of *the other* in Balkans literatures is somewhere between the different one imagined as foe, demonized, or despised, and the similar, who is viewed as connected to self, empathized, sympathized, and unified.

Of course it is hard to speak of the Balkans as different from what it is, being such a heterogeneous territory in culture, religion and language. Nevertheless, fully aware of the conflict within our identity profile between east and west, we are in a position to avoid some *others*, who at times come from afar, at others are inhabitants of the same village, now differing in everything, now being almost like our *self*; it could even be said that, in the Balkans, this conflict between the self and the other is so severe not so much because of the characteristics that divide than because of those that unite.

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