

BOOK REVIEW

Sulstarova, Enis. 2006. *Arratisje nga lindja: orientalizmi shqiptar nga Naimi te Kadare* [Escaping from the East: Albanian Orientalism from Naim Frashëri to Ismail Kadare]. Chapel Hill, NC: Globic Press. ISBN: 978-0977666249 (paperback), 272 pp., US\$14.99.

Escaping from the East systematically examines Albanian orientalist discourse over the past century, from the Albanian Renaissance—during which the foundations for Albanian statehood were laid—through communist Albania and up to the present day. The author borrows the concept of orientalism developed by Said in his eponymous work. Sulstarova defines Albanian Orientalism as the “modernizing discourse of the Albanian local elites that objectify the Albanian reality based upon the West-East dichotomy, where West and East represent two completely opposite and very simplified categories of meanings, values and symbols; West symbolizes progress, light, knowledge, freedom, and everything good in general, while East is the very opposite, regress, darkness, slavery, ignorance and evil in general.” The author persuasively argues that orientalism has pervaded the discourses of Albanian political and intellectual elites over the past two centuries. These elites have portrayed the creation of Albanian identity and the modernization of Albania as a constant struggle to rescue the country from the East and to rid Albania of its oriental legacies. According to the discourse, these legacies have, time and again, impeded Albania’s progress along the path toward modernity, Europe, and the West. These discourses comprise a meta-narrative that explains every so-called Albanian “failure” as a result of lingering oriental influences which, despite her titanic efforts to let go, Albania never seems able to shed.

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The first chapter, "Orientalism," outlines the book's theoretical framework. It provides an elaborate treatment and definition of the term "orientalism." The author outlines the various meanings of the orientalist paradigm as elaborated by Said. The author proceeds to establish a narrower framework for interpreting Albanian orientalist discourse by drawing on both Said's definition of orientalism and Foucault's concept of "discourse." The methodology employed to explore orientalism is Foucault's genealogy, in which one explores the fields of possibility through which concepts and discourses are formed without referring to any transcendental factors or meta-narratives. This is a rather unique and odd theoretical combination since it merges humanist (Said) and poststructuralist (Foucauldian) theoretical approaches. The author defends the hybrid methodology by arguing that Foucault and Said are in fact similar in their approaches. Furthermore, his approach is to borrow appropriately from each author while attempting no reconciliation of their theoretical contradictions.

The second chapter explores the emergence of the orientalist discourse in the Albanian National Renaissance, which takes place at the turn of the 19th Century and the beginning of the 20th Century. Here, the author analyzes some of the most famous literary texts and authors of the Albanian National Renaissance, including Naim Frasheri, Sami Frasheri and Naum Veqilharxhi. The chapter includes a lengthy discussions of a famous poem by Naim Frasheri, "The History of Scanderbeg," which appears in Albanian school books. In this chapter, the author demonstrates that during the Renaissance the Albanian identity was constituted as a foil to the Oriental "other," which in most cases was the Turk. Albanians are described as Western, European, virtuous, capable, and full of potential. By contrast, the ignoble oriental "other" impedes Albania's development as a modern, European, Western society.

The next two chapters, entitled "The Westernization of Albania" and "Orientalist Characters: Ali Pasha and Xheladin Beu," trace the orientalist discourse through the interwar period. The author first provides a general overview of discourse during the interwar period, focusing on the writings of two major authors, Kris Maloki and Branko Merxhani. Both writers contributed to a political debate centered around the question of modernization and the necessity to free Albania from the clutches of its oriental past. The author shows how heavily these writers relied on stereotypes of the oriental and the occidental. The portrayal of the oriental is exemplified by Xheladin beu, a character in Mitrush Kuteli's well-known

story, “The Autumn of Xheladin Beu.” Xheladin beu is the oriental incarnate – sexually perverted, cruel, cunning, unfaithful, depraved, and consumed by his voracious sexual appetite. In short, he is the typical backward feudal who stands on the way of progress, that is, westernization and modernization. Throughout the chapter Sulstarova compares Xheladin beu with Ali Pasha, a non-fictional historical figure whose identity has been caricatured in orientalist narratives. The author shows that Ali Pasha, who is often portrayed as the embodiment of the orient in the West, is identical to Xheladin beu in almost every perversion, shortcoming and vice. Their function as oriental stereotypes supersedes their role as historical, fictional or artistic figures. This is what binds them together across time and space.

In the third chapter, “Orientalism in the Socialist Realism: The Case of Kadare,” the author argues that the orientalist discourse continued throughout the communist period despite the fact that Albania was part of the Eastern bloc. The chapter starts by arguing that the orientalist discourse was inherent in Marx’s thought, and is followed by an exploration of orientalism in Albanian literature of social realism. The author focuses on the work of Ismail Kadare as the greatest, most widely read and most influential Albanian writer under communism. He shows how Kadare relies on the orientalist logic in order to glorify Albania’s resistance to the Asian plague and the Ottoman Empire, drawing a clear parallel with Albania’s communist-era resistance to the capitalist, social-revisionist, imperialist world. The author shows that in the works of Kadare Albania must constantly resist the oriental threat – whether in fighting the Ottomans, separating from China, or freeing itself from the Soviet Union. Orientalism is furthermore portrayed as an imminent threat from within as well as from without. Albania’s modern, European identity is threatened by orientals within Albanian society who long for the East and who detest progress. At times the orientals are the overthrown bourgeoisie, at other times the feudal classes, and at still other times the enemies of the Communist Party.

Kadare’s post-communist orientalist discourse is explored in the next chapter, “The Contemporary Orientalist Discourse in Albania.” In the post-communist period, the orientalist discourse focuses on the continuing threat orientalism poses to the forging of Albanians’ European identity. Through the orientalist lense, the fall of communism was interpreted as Albania’s historic opportunity to return to its natural destination, Europe. By citing well-known literature and publicity of the post-communist period,

the author shows that the main concern in the orientalist discourse is that Albania's path towards Europe is hindered by oriental legacies of the past, such as the Ottoman Empire. The most problematic legacy is that of Islam, which is viewed as a serious obstacle to forging a full European identity for Albania. The consequences of Islamophobia and orientalist thought in general are explored in the concluding chapter, "The Poverty of Albanian Orientalism." Here, the author provides a general critique of the orientalist approach and outlines the challenges it poses to building an open and tolerant society.

Although a serious and well founded academic investigation, Sulstarova's work is susceptible to the same criticisms laid against Said's *Orientalism*, since it is from that work that the author derives his theoretical foundations and framework. The East-West dichotomy is simplistic and tends to reinforce the very two categories which it criticizes. In the process of exploring, analyzing and bringing to light this dichotomy, the author also produces it. As a popular saying goes, when holding a hammer in your hand, it is highly likely that you will see nails everywhere. The hammer in Sulstarova's hand is the orientalist paradigm, the nails are the orientalist discourses that he finds everywhere, spread from the Albanian Renaissance to the present day. The emphasis on the orientalist paradigm has sidelined the exploration of orientalist discourses per se. Consequently, orientalism is treated as a homogeneous, immutable discourse. This runs against the very theoretical foundations of the Foucaultian genealogical approach, the author's second analytic framework. Foucault's genealogy focuses on points of disruption rather than on continuity. Therefore, a truly Foucaultian genealogical approach would have sought to identify how the orientalist discourse has changed and evolved over time, rather than how it has remained the same. Otherwise, one would have to admit to an unchanging essence of orientalism, which again would run against a Foucaultian genealogical approach. Instead of exploring breaks within the orientalist discourse and its evolution, Sulstarova's meticulous documentation of orientalism in Albania depicts a continuous and immutable orientalist discourse; this discourse operates consistently within changing contexts. This is particularly problematic in the treatment of the communist period, where the orientalist discourse fails to explain Albania's alliances with Russia and China against the West.

Rather than simply focusing on documenting orientalism, a task that the author has completed exceedingly well, more attention should have been paid to the strategic uses of the orientalist discourse. From this

perspective, the necessity of using the oriental “Other” to describe the modern Albanian could have been explored in greater detail. Here, a Lacanian approach to identity formation could have proved useful. From a Lacanian perspective, the oriental would represent the “Other,” with a capital “O,” against which the Albanian identity, or at least part of it, is constituted. Such an approach could help show that, more than having an essence of its own; the orientalist discourse is manipulated strategically in different periods in order to assert Albanian identity. Therefore, it becomes futile to enlist the characteristics of the oriental, or their unchanging nature, because the oriental can only exist and function in relation to context-dependent processes of Albanian identity constitution and assertion. The locus of orientalist discourse is dynamic. Above all other purposes, it serves the needs of the identity-formation efforts of the times; therefore, it will change accordingly. It has switched from geography to ideology and from ideology to religion. One day the oriental is anti-Europe, the other day he is an anti-communist, today anti-Christian and so on. Today, the orientalist discourse focuses on Islam.

Sulstarova successfully exposes the Albanian orientalist discourse by documenting and analyzing it in a highly systematic and convincing fashion. Whether or not one agrees with his argument, the reader has to grapple with Sulstarova’s well-argued analyses and systematic research. Through his research and theoretical approach, Sulstarova has taken a bold and successful step in a field that is little known and even less explored in Albania. Therefore, in many aspects Sulstarova is a pioneer in a research field; local and international researchers interested in Albanian orientalist discourse can build upon his work. What is more, this serious work deviates from generally unprofessional academic work being produced in Albania, which ranges from poor to plagiarized. A genuine academic work, Sulstarova’s book fills a problematic void in terms of qualitative domestic research. Therefore, this work is, first and foremost, great news for the Albanian academia. At the same time, the book is a serious academic contribution to the study of Albanian identity. It is an important read for anyone interested in Albanian identity, culture, politics or society in general. In fact, the major shortcoming of this book is that it is available only in Albanian. It is a worthy candidate for being translated to English so that it may reach a wider audience.

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