

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.

Sulstarova's book is one of the first and most systematic attempts to apply the framework of Edward Said's *Orientalism* (1978) to the analysis of Albanian nationalism, as it emerges in literature, historiography, and contemporary political discourse. And it is, by many measures, a very successful one. Sulstarova analyzes the emergence of Orientalist dichotomies with key nineteenth century Albanian nationalist authors and their evolution (or persistence, rather) throughout the key eras of Albania's history as discursive mechanisms used to define modern Albanian identity. The analysis extends to the writings of contemporary Albanian intellectuals where Sulstarova uncovers an escalating reemergence of strong Orientalist dichotomies as intellectuals attempt to explain the problems, difficulties and pathologies of Albania's postsocialist condition, as well as give historical meaning to Albania's newly established relationship with the politico-cultural complex they refer to as "Europe." The analysis of contemporary Albanian Orientalism takes as its object not the work of nationalist authors working at the fringes of cultural production, who might have been easy targets for an Orientalist critique, but that of popular, mainstream authors and writers generally considered as "liberal" and "pro-European" in cultural and political leanings. Sulstarova convincingly shows that Orientalism, and at times outright racism and Islamophobia, deeply structures the thought of these authors, making what Sulstarova

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appropriately terms “Albanian Orientalism” more than just a question of a by-gone mode of thought.

In defining his method, Sulstarova follows Said in turning “Orientalism” from a (now largely defunct) Western scientific tradition based on the study of the “Orient,” into an analytical concept that is intended to expose and examine the perseverance of the fundamental epistemic dichotomies that organized the Orientalist tradition of knowledge. Such a theoretical move is intended to establish the historical role that Orientalism served as a means of constructing the self-image of the West and its modernity, as set against a seemingly a-historical and unchanging “Orient,” representing a vast but seemingly homogenous geo-historical and cultural conglomeration. Surely, Sulstarova does not fail to note that the discipline of Orientalism was established during the height of modern Western colonialism and that it had an intimate relationship with colonial structures of power and domination. But given that Albania was not a colonial power and Oriental studies were never established there as a scientific tradition, Sulstarova takes Orientalism for his purposes to mean, “thought that is premised upon a division between West and East,” in which the West as a singular, unified and relatively stable social and cultural formation is consistently identified with a set of superior traits and the Orient with the opposite ones. Thus, for Sulstarova the analytical category of Orientalism is used to understand the self-construction by nationalist authors of national identity based on the premises and groundwork provided by the Western tradition of Orientalism, and how the resulting nationalist discourses employed and deployed Orientalism in narrating the historical identity of their respective nations by situating themselves and their Others within Orientalism’s ontology.

Sulstarova’s book contains, besides the Introduction, seven chapters, the first of which provides the analytical framework, and the rest devoted to the analysis of Orientalism as it manifests itself in distinct periods of Albania’s history. That history spans from the nineteenth century origins of Albanian nationalism in the Ottoman era, to Orientalism’s continuity throughout the domination of pre- and postwar political regimes in Albania, up to present debates on contemporary Albanian identity and Albania’s relationship with the West.

The book’s historical analysis is centered around Albania’s famed nineteenth century nationalist poet and writer, Naim Frashëri. Sulstarova shows how Frashëri and his contemporaries relied heavily on Orientalist dichotomies in their efforts to distance Albanian historical identity from the

Orient, embodied at the time by the chief enemy of Albanian nationalists, the Ottoman Empire. Frashëri's work is the chief focus of the chapter, given Frashëri's immense influence in defining Albanian nationalism and his status as celebrated poet of what in mainstream Albanian historiography is referred to as the period of "national renaissance." For instance, Sulstarova observes how the emphasis by Frashëri and his contemporaries on the ancient, Pellasgian and Illyrian origins of Albanians was used not only as a means of identifying ethnic roots, but was also a form of stressing the distinctly European origins of Albanians, differentiating them strongly from the "Asiatic" Turks. However, merely constructing difference from the Other was not the only way Orientalism was put to use, as Sulstarova shows. As a cultural discourse, Orientalism went much deeper in structuring the historical narrative of Albanian identity, acting, in key ways, as its constitutive element. Ottoman domination over Albanians comes to represent not only the denial of national self-rule, but also a scandalous, five-century long attempt at tearing away Albania's historical ties with the West. Through an outstanding analysis of one of Frashëri's most popular poems, *Istori' e Skënderbeut*, Sulstarova examines Frashëri's use of the medieval Albanian figure Skënderbeg to portray the image of an era in which Albanians are, in part due to their Christianity, part of the West.

Sulstarova shows how Frashëri's historical understanding of Skënderbeg and his era is heavily influenced by the Vatican scholar Marin Barleti's sixteenth century biography, which consistently portrays the "Turks" as barbarians of a lower race set to conquer and destroy all of Christian Europe—a standard theme in Orientalist historical narratives of Ottoman expansion in Europe. The image resurfaces in Frashëri's poem, where the Turk figures as a ruthless destroyer, a lustful and unrestrained barbarian out to destroy Western civilization altogether. Skënderbeg thus emerges as Europe's defender, and Albania Europe's port of entry. For Frashëri, the present moment is the historical opportunity for Albanians to finally wrest themselves away from the Orient and claim their rightful place in (Western) civilization. The West in Frashëri's poem though now represents something quite different than what it did in Skënderbeg's era. For Frashëri, a Bektashi Muslim, the West of his time is the epitome of modernity and secular progress, and it is that which in his eyes Albania aspires to.

While the analysis of some of Frashëri's key texts, the influences on his work and the cultural context of his writing are used as a means to examine the introduction of Orientalist thought in Albanian nationalist discourse at its beginnings, a larger set of authors are used to analyze Orientalism as it manifested itself in the polemics of politicians and intellectuals set to reform and modernize Albania after independence in 1913. The book's chapter on interwar Albanian Orientalism is appropriately titled "The Occidentalization of Albania." Sulstarova illustrates how "Occidentalization" partly meant "de-Orientalization," that is, the purging of all social and cultural remnants inherited from the Ottoman era—an undoubtedly complicated question in a country where the population is predominantly Muslim and where Ottoman-era landowners, the *beys*, continued to dominate society and politics. During this era, Orientalism provided not only the field of vision that defined what was and was not "Oriental" about Albania, but it also became a tool that nascent, Western educated modernizers used to denounce political enemies. For this group of modernizers, such as that gathered around the *neoshqiptarizma* (neo-Albanianism) school of Branko Merxhani, Orientalism served not only as a polemical tool, but also as a means of defining the historical project of post-independence Albania as that of a systematic political and cultural "Occidentalization."

In another chapter, Sulstarova provides an excellent exegesis of the literary construction of what he calls "Orientalist characters." These are fictional portrayals of (usually powerful) figures that are alleged by their authors to illustrate the personality traits associated with persons that represent the (sensuous, stubborn and irrational) Oriental spirit. The Orient is thus found to exist not only as a cultural formation with which Albania shared its past, but a spirit residing deep in the body of the Oriental character, a being who has stricken Albanian society like a disease. And the moral features that this character exhibits are downright repulsive. By examining the fictional character of Xheladin Beu as it appears in an influential poem published in 1937, intended by its author to represent the stereotype of an Albanian *bey*, Sulstarova finds that the Orientalist persona is portrayed as essentially unchanging, ruthless, cunning, untrustworthy, genetically degenerate, and keen on sexual perversions such as homosexuality and pedophilia, at the same time exhibiting an unrestrained desire for women. Sulstarova has found an ingenuous way of examining the literary figure of Xheladin Beu, which he accomplishes by comparing it

with K.E. Fleming's (1999) critical historical discussion of Orientalist depictions of the nineteenth century regional Ottoman ruler, Ali Pasha. In this comparative analysis, Xheladin Beu, rather than representing an original character invented by an Albanian author, is found to largely reproduce an historically persistent portrayal of powerful "Orientals" as they emerge in historical Orientalist discourse.

The book's perhaps most interesting finding is in locating Orientalist thought at the crux of Albania's socialist era literary and historical works. Socialist Albania no longer longed to join the West or for becoming Western—to the contrary, the capitalist West was, for Albania's communist leadership, Albania's greatest enemy, and dominant Western values the antinomy of those of communism. But, paradoxically, Albania's political repositioning as an enemy of the West did not entail an abandonment of Orientalism in cultural production or in political discourse, as Sulstarova demonstrates. He shows how socialist era discourse subjected Orientalism to a displacement of its geo-historical coordinates, as it was no longer the West that represented its central historical subject defined against the Orient as its Other, but socialist Albania as the beacon of true socialism. As Sulstarova states, "Orientalism in socialist realism was used in the representation, within artistic works, of the Turks of the Ottoman Empire, of *beys*, *agas*, *kulaks*, *hoxhas*, *dervishes*, Muslim believers—that is, all those that were associated with Ottoman rule in Albania, but also those representing 'exploitative classes and enemy collaborators' even after the Ottoman period" (129-130). In historical discourse, Orientalism finds, especially in the literary works of Albania's celebrated author Ismail Kadare, its traditional application as a method of constituting Albanian national identity vis-a-vis the backward, violent, barbarous, and adamantly non-European Ottoman Empire. With many of his narratives having as their setting the Ottoman period, Kadare consistently relies on Orientalist dichotomies to define the barbarous, Islamic "Turks" as the antinomy of still "Western," Christian Albanians, and with Ottoman conquest signaling not only the end the political independence of medieval Albanian principalities but also the violent plucking away of Albania from Europe into Asia. What is more interesting, Sulstarova finds the themes of Kadare's works to reflect major policy shifts in Albania, and with it, the subject representing the Orient in Kadare's works shifting as well. This is demonstrated, in one example, after Albania's break with the Soviet Union in the 1960s. Interestingly, in

Kadare's works, the former superpower itself becomes the subject that comes to stand in for the Orient. For example, in Kadare's poem published during this period, *Vitet gjashtëdhjetë* [The Sixties], we find the lines: "On the Soviet flag, the sickle / Suddenly appeared to us as a crescent," thus drawing a direct parallel between the Soviet and Ottoman empires. Sulstarova then shows, by a series of examples, how after Albania's break with China, that country becomes "Orientalized" in Kadare's works. In one of his novels, the Chinese communist leadership seems set on using Albania as a pawn which the large Asian country was to use in a cunningly secret plan to dominate all of Europe. Small but heroic Albania once again stands as the lonely bulwark defending against the onslaught of the Orient, with the Soviets and the Chinese representing what once were the Ottomans.

After the exposition of Orientalism in socialist-era artistic production, the more openly blatant Orientalism, racism, and Islamophobia that Kadare and his contemporaries exhibit in the postsocialist era, while disturbing, at least become less surprising. In this period, the relentless need of Albanian intellectuals to situate Albania's cultural and political identity as essentially European and Western seems to reach the point of hysterical paranoia.¹ And one of the central questions that drives these intellectual debates is the question of Islam and its relationship to modern Albanian national identity. In the early 1990s, Kadare famously proposed that Albanians collectively abandon Islam and embrace Catholicism, as a way of returning to the religion of their ancestors. Islam is continually chastised by intellectuals who, so it seems, are prone to judge it by the use of stereotypes and superficial impressions, as Sulstarova shows in the case of influential public figures such as Aurel Plasari, Piro Misha, and Mustafa Nano. The efficacy of such "critiques" against Islam is made possible by their anchoring in historical Orientalism, allowing for an easy invocation of stereotypes and images associated with "the Orient," which emerges as a discrete and unproblematic entity. Hence, these authors argue, a true Westernization of contemporary Albanians requires, if not the outright abandonment of Islam, then at least establishing a certain distance from that particular religion. As these debates are heavily influenced by the course of daily politics, the question of Islam and its role in Albanian society became increasingly urgent after the September 11, 2001, attacks in the US and the beginning of the US-led "war on terror." Sulstarova finds, for instance, an endorsement by Albania's leading intellectuals of Samuel Huntington's (1996) notion of new global rupture based upon a "clash of

civilizations,” with September 11 signaling the commencement of such a conflict. The historian Aurel Plasari, for instance, in 2002 writes how September 11 confirmed the Huntingtonian vision by “exposing the world bare,” that is, that religiously-defined civilizations are the only real entities demanding allegiance in the present-day world. Such ideological vision, grounded deeply in Orientalist divisions of the world, may partly account for the highly controversial 2005 speech of the Albanian President, cited by the author, in which the President attempts to distance Albania from Islam by claiming that it is “an Islam with a European face” and that it is a “shallow Islam” (260). Orientalism is also invoked by various intellectuals to explain a large set of political and social issues in postsocialist Albania, at times even used to account for the brutality of communist dictator Enver Hoxha as symptomatic of Albania’s inability to overcome its Oriental heritage. The cases which Sulstarova documents and invokes to discuss contemporary Albanian Orientalism are plentiful, attesting to the fact that Orientalism is not only an historical form that Albanian nationalism used to construct its Other, but a phenomenon with deep implications in Albania’s postsocialist political discourse and cultural identity.

Sulstarova’s book is an excellent archeology of Orientalist dichotomies in Albanian political thought and cultural discourse, and is a must read for anyone interested in Albanian politics, history, and culture. The book systematically documents and shows the rise and persistence of Albanian Orientalism, from its origins in nineteenth century Albanian nationalism to present-day debates on Albanian identity. It is a ravaging critique of Orientalism in its present-day form, which emerges not only as a mode of stigmatizing the non-West, but as an increasingly racist and Islamophobic discourse permeating mainstream political and cultural thought. Sulstarova effectively uses historical analysis to demonstrate deeply buried—and perhaps partly unconscious—dichotomies used to construct modern Albanian identity, exposing part of its basis in categories of thought that would by many present-day measures appear as discriminatory and racist. And precisely on that point Sulstarova identifies the greatest paradox of Albanian Orientalism, in that it employs a mode of thought criticized in the West, in order to construct Albania’s identity as one that is Western.

In that sense Sulstarova’s efforts stop at the level of a liberal critique, in some ways suggesting that Orientalism must be abandoned in the name of truly joining “Europe” (and, more specifically, the European Union). His critique could, however, be further radicalized. Given that Sulstarova’s

main inspiration for his study is the work of Michel Foucault (1977, 1980), the deepening of Foucault's genealogical method may indeed show that some of the key categories that define Albanian nationalist discourse (and, for that matter, the discourse of nationalism more generally), may be intricately tied to Western traditions of racism, social Darwinism, and colonial knowledge, as those that historically spawned Orientalism. As a discourse in the truly Foucauldian sense, why would the history of nationalist thought be any different from that of other discourses of power that Foucault analyzes in his now well-known studies? That is, that nationalism is a discourse of power in the most profound sense, but also a discourse that is historically contingent, and one that is evidently unable to break from its epistemic roots. That would then suggest that Albanian Orientalism is not a mere local pathology of Albanian intellectual and political culture, but that Orientalism could be seen, in a truly postcolonial mode, as more generally providing the essential groundwork for the historical emergence of many if not all nationalist discourses.² But herein, I suppose, lies the greatest value of Sulstarova's analysis, because it potentially points to something beyond itself. Through the many new questions it raises, it can potentially clear the path to a theoretical mode enabling us not only to "provincialize Europe," as Chakrabarty (2000) once proposed, but also to critically deprovincialize Albanian nationalist thought, which, like most nationalisms, tends to be treated as an insulated phenomenon developing after an immanent logic that is entirely its own. To the contrary, finding Orientalism to be an important—if not central—organizing principle of the dominant discourse of Albanian nationalism, and that Orientalism continues to lend itself so easily as an underlying assumption in intellectual debates on Albanian identity, would indeed suggest a very different picture. What was once Europe's most isolated state no longer appears to be too removed from what are historically European traditions of thought—even if they are some of Europe's worst traditions.

It would be up to others to perhaps more strongly elucidate the deep historical connections between Orientalism and Albanian nationalist discourse, and the persistence of Orientalist (hence colonial) epistemologies within it, which would enable students of nationalism to break new theoretical ground. Bringing the connections, both historical and epistemic, between Orientalism and nationalism further into view would allow us to construct a dialectical circle in which Orientalism can not only serve to critique Albanian nationalism (to argue, in a sense, that Albanian

intellectuals rely on forms of thought now largely out of favor in most Western academic institutions and mainstream political discourse, thereby requiring some revision on their part), but that the Orientalist critique of Albanian nationalism can also serve to expose those very Western and modern strands of knowledge that continue to permeate and structure nationalism itself. In some sense, what can nationalism, and Balkan nationalism in particular, represent historically but a defense against Orientalism using the theoretical weapons of Orientalism?³ Paradoxically, it would seem then, nationalism achieves its autonomous subjectivity at the cost of actively appropriating an historical mode of knowledge that is not of its own making. From this perspective, far from representing a mere “derivative” discourse, the historical discourse of nationalism could be seen as an embodiment of a Western mode of knowledge par excellence. What then, would be the real basis of the ongoing ideological struggle of Albanian intellectuals to have Albania “join Europe,” when the efforts of contemporary Albanian intellectuals to construct an essentialized and purified Albanian national identity and culture by racializing, stigmatizing, and vilifying the Other—an Other that has become fully transparent to knowledge—are discursive strategies that are only too modern and too European? For the purposes that go beyond intervening in local intellectual and political debates in Albania, however, one would strongly hope to see an English translation of *Arratisje nga lindja* in the near future.

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Endnotes

¹ Soon after the publication of Sulstarova’s book, Kadare published a tract entitled “The European Identity of Albanians” (Kadare 2006). The tract, while reiterating Kadare’s standard points on Albania’s deep historical ties with the West, also attempts to assure Albanians of their “Europeanness” by pointing out the color of their skin.

² Partha Chatterjee, for instance, shows how Orientalism operated in Indian nationalism in the pre-independence era (see Chatterjee 1986). Other scholars have observed the use of Orientalism in contemporary Balkan nationalism (for a review see Fleming 2000).

³ Related to this claim, Nergis Canefe notes that a similar de-Orientalization was seen necessary in Turkish nationalism. He writes that Turkish nationalism’s “foundational premises were related to proving that the Turks were not an ‘Oriental lot’ and that they constituted a society which had political progress and cultural revolution as endemic features. In this regard, the denial of the Ottoman heritage became a matter of necessity” (2004:108).

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