

From frontier Orientalism to transnational communities: Images of the Tatars in modern Romanian literature *

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In a series of studies published over the last two decades, Andre Gingrich proposes a shift in perspective that is at once significant and beneficial to the understanding of Orientalism and to postcolonial studies in general (see, in particular, Gingrich 1996, 2010, 2015). In this context, it is worth mentioning that, to Edward Said, undoubtedly the most important theorist of “classical” Orientalism, this phenomenon (a) appears as a mainly “academic” construct (Said 1979, 2), (b) it refers exclusively to “the idea of overseas rule” (Said 1994, xxiii), and (c) it implies, paradoxically, the integration of the Orient into the Occidental discourse and system of political domination precisely by highlighting the alterity, i.e. the inferiority of the former. Gingrich’s “frontier Orientalism”, on the other hand, is a “systematic set of metaphorical figures and mythological explanations” (1998, 118) which (a) represents, first and foremost, an expression of the popular-collective mindset, whose scholarly value he does not rule out, (b) it applies to cross-ethnic interaction areas where the presence of Orientals – Muslims in particular – is a common reality, and (c) it rests upon a bipolar axiological mechanism in which the inclusion (as “Good Muslim”) and exclusion (as “Bad Muslim”) of Orientals operate in a complementary, albeit divergent, manner.

It is evident that the long term relevance of such an approach, the intrinsic utility of which is undeniable, would also concern the possibility of integrating within the area of postcolonial studies, as well as analyzing against a consistent conceptual framework, a series of regions such as Russia/the Soviet Union, Austria-Hungary or the Balkans, which the majority of the studies carried out in this field tend to overlook (for a critique of these limitations and for alternative perspectives, see Terian 2012 and Pucherová – Gáfrik 2015). However, in addition to its broad scope, the efficiency of such an endeavor would also rest upon the accuracy of its research tools. It is for this reason that, I believe, Gingrich’s two main typologies (of the European and of the Oriental) deserve closer inspection.

In his first study on “frontier Orientalism”, the Austrian anthropologist puts forwards a division of the countries of today’s Europe into four areas according to their former colonial policies toward the Muslim world. The first category covers the states

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that, due to their overseas colonies, constitute the primary concern of “classical” post-colonial studies, namely, in Said’s framework: Britain, France, the Netherlands and to some extent, Italy. As “countries with limited colonial power in more adjacent regions of Muslim periphery” (Gingrich 1996, 101), Spain, Austria, Hungary and to some degree, Russia fall into the second category. The third category includes the majority of European states, from Portugal, Belgium and Germany to the Nordic countries, the Baltic states and Poland, which have never had colonies or dominions, at least not in the Muslim world. The fourth class brings together “the countries of south-eastern Europe that for several centuries have had a significant Muslim population, either a resident majority or an old local minority” (101). This includes, in addition to Turkey, every state of the Balkan Peninsula – Greece, Bulgaria, Romania, Albania and the southern countries of former Yugoslavia—where the Muslim community is “one among the many outcomes from an inverse colonial past” (101).

This map calls, no doubt, for further nuancing. It is far-fetched, I reckon, to claim that Portugal, for instance, with its colonies in Indonesia, India and Southeast Africa, has never held any influence in the Islamic world. I also think that Russia may easily qualify for the first category, given its colonial policy toward Crimea, the Caucasus and Central Asia (and this without mentioning the support granted to the Arab nationalist movements by the Soviet Union during the Cold War). However, despite such nuances, the map proposed by Gingrich remains, by and large, quite accurate. Yet, its main fault lies not with the classification of the countries, but with his categories, which project retrospectively present-time criteria (current country borders) onto a much more complex past. For this reason, I find profoundly debatable Gingrich’s claim that Southeast European countries, which fall into the fourth category, have “had” a significant Muslim population, since their borders, broadly traced at the end of the 19th century and after World War I, are, to some extent, the outcome of political compromise rather than historical and demographic inquiry. For example, the fact that in the Balkans three wars aimed at redefining the borders were fought in less than two years (1912–1914) – the First Balkan War (1912–1913), which brought the Balkan countries face to face with Turkey, the Second Balkan War (1913), in which the Balkan countries turned their guns on each other, and World War I (1914–1918), which involved the entire world – shows that, time and time again, the countries in this region displayed an understanding of their “natural” territorial right far removed from their actual borders. On various occasions, for instance, when Northern Dobruja became a part of Romania (1878) and Bulgaria assimilated Northern Thrace (1913), the Balkan states annexed territories that accommodated large Muslim communities.

The second set of instruments Gingrich proposes with a view to understanding frontier Orientalism includes the ethical and axiological opposition between “Bad Muslim” (perceived as an aggressor and enemy) and “Good Muslim” (submissive and cooperating). These two categories illustrate the dual image of the Muslim in modern Austrian society and culture: “the ‘Turk’ is a metaphor for the Bad Muslim, the ‘Bosnian’ stands for the Good Muslim” (107). What should be noted here is not so much the identification of the Oriental with the Muslim, nor the ascription of

axiological values to certain ethnic groups – in both cases, Gingrich points to the possibility of using other contents to fill these categories – but rather the rationale behind them. Hence, in contexts other than the centuries-old Habsburg-Ottoman wars, judging an ethnic minority in terms of “good” or “bad” was, to some extent, a matter of whether the latter had its interests represented before a multinational or colonial power by a nation-state. A minority enjoying no support from a nation-state is, in principle, loyal to its host country. Before striving for independence, it declares its autonomy and it is for this reason that ethnic groups are sometimes talked out of their aspirations for independence and into a federation (as it did happen to the Bosnians in Tito’s Yugoslavia). Without logistic, economic and/or political support from a nation-state, a minority is but a marginal threat to the colonial empire or the multinational state. Conversely, when an ethnic group has its interests represented by a nation-state (as well), this double allegiance – to both the nation state and the host state – can cause a rift in its identity. Through their interactions with the “real” Motherland, ethnic minorities sometimes skip the autonomy phase, proclaiming their independence or claiming the transfer of territories to the nation-state with which they identify. Moreover, the nation-state in question, with its economic power, army, propaganda apparatus and diplomatic network, can either pressure the multinational state into granting additional rights to “its” minority or even declare war on its potential oppressor. These scenarios are thus just as many grounds for the collective conscience of a certain nation to deem minorities that lack support from another nation-state worthy of more favorable representation and the ethnic groups endorsed by such a state, worthy of a less favorable one. In this respect, we must not forget that while the Turks had their own country, which turned into an imperial power in modern times, the Bosnians established their own nation-state only later (1990s), eighty years after they no longer shared a common border with Austria.

I think the previous clarifications may be essential to understanding the manner in which frontier Orientalism operates in other areas of Eastern Europe than the one examined by Gingrich. To this end, I will analyze the image of the Tatars as reflected in modern Romanian literature, from the advent of the Romanian “national revival” (c. 1830) to the onset of the communist regime (1948). Consequently, I believe that two basic geopolitical premises must be taken into account: the absence of any significant territorial dispute between the Romanians and the Tatars in modern times and the fact that, during that period, Southeast European Tatars took no initiative to establish their own nation-state.

AN OVERVIEW OF ROMANIAN-TATAR RELATIONS

For the Romanians, their historical relations with the Turks played a crucial role in the shaping of their national identity. For more than five centuries (from 1369 to 1914), the Romanian princes and kings fought the Ottoman Empire on numerous occasions with varying degrees of success and for nearly four centuries, two of the historical Romanian regions (Wallachia and Moldova) found themselves under the more or less overtly asserted authority of the “Sublime Porte”. The Romanian political and cultural imaginary harnessed this geopolitical proximity, using it as a source of

inspiration for many heroic metanarratives and for an adage, frequently quoted by the modern local elites: “While we were fighting the Turks, they [the Westerners] were building their cathedrals.” As Lucian Boia puts it: “through this heroic argument, the delay in the development of the Romanian provinces is put down to attrition and the West is reminded of its debt to the Romanians” (2013, 63).

On the other hand, Romanian-Tatar relations were equally complex and discontinuous. Between 1241 and 1359, the current Romanian territory was repeatedly raided by the Tatar hordes, yet these attacks triggered no major population movements. A well-known Tatar legend nevertheless recounts that, in 1261, a Muslim group did settle in Dobruja (Williams 2001, 203), against the backdrop of the political rivalry between Byzantium and the Second Bulgarian Tsardom. At the beginning of the next century, in the waning days of the Byzantine Empire, Dobruja had become an autonomous despotate, existing as such until 1388, when the Wallachian voivode Mircea the Elder took notice of its strategic importance and seized control over the region before the Turks had a chance to do it first (Gemil 2009, 93–94). Yet, the Romanian rule over Dobruja would last for less than thirty years, until 1417, when the province was conquered by the Ottoman sultan Murad I (139). For the Turks, Dobruja was of vital strategic importance since it provided direct access to Poland, Lithuania and Crimea by land. By the end of the 15th century, the true geopolitical potential of the province was to be confirmed when the Crimean Tatars declared themselves vassals of sultan Mehmed II (1475) and the Ottomans conquered Budjak, i. e., Southern Bessarabia (1484), thereby creating a bridge between Istanbul and Crimea. In the coming centuries, the Turks would further secure this gateway, encouraging the settling of the Nogai Tatars both in Budjak and in Dobruja. By doing so, the Ottomans not only ensured the ethnic and religious homogeneity of their “Crimean bridge” but also extended their outposts, gaining firmer control over the Romanian principalities. Between the 15th and the 18th centuries, the Tatars conducted repeated punitive raids against the three Romanian countries, leaving a strong impression on both the collective memory and the chronicles of the time, where the image of the barbarian, savage Tatar had already begun to take shape (Fodor 2013).

The year 1783 saw the advent of a new chapter in the Romanian-Tatar relations: by annexing the Crimean Khanate, Russia put an end to the last Tatar form of state organization and thus to their raids against the Romanian territories. This moment marked the beginning of a series of Tatar immigration waves to Dobruja (Karpát 1985, 65), the most important of which occurred in 1783, 1812 (when the Treaty of Bucharest was signed, whereby Turkey and Moldova ceded Bessarabia – Budjak included – to Russia) and 1856 (when, during the Crimean War, Russia launched yet another persecution campaign against the Muslims). Yet, since these waves of Tatar immigrants did not settle in the then Romanian provinces, their inhabitants showed no significant reaction to them. It should be noted, even though we cannot further explore this hypothesis in the present article, that the images of the Turks and Tatars in Romanian literature are the opposite of those reflected in Russian literature. While the former portrays the Turks as a constant threat and the Tatars as figures of an increasingly picturesque nature, the latter paints a much more complex portrait of

the Turks, while the Tatars are seen mainly as constant aggressors who “embody the dark Asian element of the Russian heritage” (Ungurianu 2007, 44).

However, the real turning point was to come in 1878, when, soon after the end of the Russo-Turkish war, at the Congress of Berlin, Romania was not only officially recognized as an independent state, but was also ceded control over northern Dobruja as a form of war reparation, while the southern part of this region was given to Bulgaria. Although the Romanian elite was quick to fabricate a series of legitimizing meta-narratives on which to ground the “historical” right of its country to Dobruja, the truth is that, at the time when the Treaty of Berlin was signed (see Karpat 2002, 226), most of the 225,753 inhabitants of the province were Muslims (126,924 – of which the Tatar community, with its 71,146 members, was the largest ethnic group, and 48,784 Turks). The Romanians ranked only third in the number of members (46,504, amounting to 21% of the population), closely followed by the Bulgarians (30,237), which prompted the two Balkan countries to frequently dispute their control over the region. It is for this reason that, for Romania and Bulgaria alike, Dobruja was, as the British politician William Gladstone aptly puts it, “a gift ungraciously given and reluctantly received” (Iordachi 2002, 172). However, in the decades to come, the Tatar community was to prove a minority peaceful toward the young Romanian kingdom, so much so that, in their honor, King Carol I commissioned the erection of a “Great Mosque” in Constanța, the largest city in northern Dobruja, which he inaugurated in 1913 and which would henceforth bear his name (Williams 2001, 278).

ORIENTALIZATION OF THE TATARS IN MODERN ROMANIAN LITERATURE

In this specific geopolitical context, three major factors contributed to (re)imagining the Tatar figure in the Romanian literature of the 19th century. One of these is the privileged role literature played in shaping the identity of emerging nations (Thiesse 2001, 133–158) by creating an Other meant to reflect and enhance their ethnic profile. To this purpose, the Tatars, in a manner similar to the Turks, served as a convenient pretext for the writers of that time to highlight not only the heroism of the Romanian people, but also their alleged civilizing mission. On the other hand, it is worth mentioning that, despite the progressive intervention of the major European powers (especially Russia) in the Balkans, Moldova, Wallachia and later the United Principalities remained under Ottoman rule until 1878, which accounts for the Romanian writers’ constant concern not to offend Turkish sensitivities and the vilification of the Tatars. Last but not least, it is evident that the frequency of Tatar portrayals in the Romantic literature of the mid-19th century is influenced by the local history of each region. In Transylvanian literature, for instance, the Tatars are virtually non-existent; the literary works produced in Wallachia feature Tatars now and then, on a par with the Turks, while, for the Moldovan historical literature, the Tatar served as a main antagonist.

These characteristics are especially evident in the works of Vasile Alecsandri (1821–1890), probably the most iconic writer of the time of the Romanian “national revival”. A polymath born in Moldova, Alecsandri tried his hand at all genres, produc-

ing, among others, some of the first Romanian literary works devoted to the Tatars. A three octave poem, "Tătarul" (The Tatar, 1843), allegedly an "old song" collected by Alecsandri, cautions the medieval Tatar against invading Romanian territory (this and the following translations are those of the present author): "Oh Tatar, hold your horse,/ Oh Tatar, tighten its bridle,/ Oh Tatar, leave the shore,/ To cross the river try no more,/ Yes, on the holy cross I swear!/ Others like your horse and you,/ Across the river I once threw,/ Oh Tatar, Oh Tatar!" (1966/1, 55) Yet, the aggressor dismisses the warning, which leads to his demise at the end of the poem, when he falls prey to the ravens. It should be noted that, in this as in most Romanian literary works authored by Romantic writers, the Tatar is denied the right to express himself, his psychological profile being reduced to a stereotype: cruelty, aggressiveness or greed. Yet, in another poem, written and published three decades later, "Dan, căpitan de plai" (Captain Dan, 1875), the image of the Oriental is far more complex. Although the Tatar's portrayal remains that of a ruthless invader, he nonetheless acknowledges the courage and wisdom of the Romanian, embodied by a fictitious 15th-century Moldovan captain. In fact, his esteem of the enemy runs so deep that it verges upon camaraderie or even blind faith, as Khan Giray allows Dan, his prisoner, to return to his homeland and kiss the ground one last time before his execution (1966/2, 71–82). Nonetheless, this hardly points to an attempt by Alecsandri to understand alterity: regardless of how many virtues the Tatars have, in his works they serve either as contrasting elements or some sort of convex mirrors, meant only to reflect the merits of the Romanians.

In Alecsandri's series of *Legends*, in which the above-mentioned poem was included, the role of the Other is played not only by the Tatars, but also by different other nations – the Poles, the Magyars and, in a few cases only, the Turks, which the author approaches with tactical precaution in his pre-Independence War works. On the other hand, in *Bătăliile românilor. Fapte istorice* (Battles of the Romanians. Historical Facts, 1859) and *Legende istorice* (Historical Legends, 1865), written by Alecsandri's Wallachian counterpart, Dimitrie Bolintineanu (1819–1872), the Tatars and the Turks, whose roles and profiles are largely interchangeable, serve as the leading antagonists. Yet, a certain distinction is made between the two communities: while the Turks are frequently individualized (onomastically, too, by the names of certain Sultans or Pashas), they can articulate larger discourses and, in some cases, they are also characterized indirectly, through references to elements of the Muslim culture and civilization, the Tatars are, by and large, portrayed collectively, less vocal and devoid of any psychological and civilizational depth. Since they bring an end to any civilization they interact with, they are often associated with apocalyptic images: "The Khan and the Tatars march into the land/ Leaving behind mourning and graves!" ("Coroba" – Bolintineanu 1981, 703). After all, Bolintineanu is probably the Romanian poet that contributes the most to the medieval European stereotypes concerning the Tatars and the Central Asian peoples in general, which were portrayed as savagely fierce hordes (Balakaeva 2007, 124). Such a behavior, to the poet, calls for an equally violent response on the part of the Romanians. In "Preda Buzescu", for example, the Romanian hero strikes the Khan's nephew with a club (Bolintineanu 1981,

112), while in “Fecioara de la Prut” (Maiden on the Prut), the young woman revenges her partner’s and father’s deaths by beheading the Khan (686).

Yet, despite being relegated to such simplistic and naive stereotypes, the Tatars were, in the context of 19th-century Romanian literature, a key element in the shaping of national identity. The works of prose fiction produced during this time especially attest to this, since they allow for greater subtlety of character and insight into their motivation, as is evident in the historical novellas of Gheorghe Asachi (1788–1869). In “Dragoș” (1852), for instance, Tatars account for the foundation (*descălecat*) of the medieval Moldovan state, which, according to Romanian chronicles, came into being when a Transylvanian chieftain went bison hunting with his men and thus came to assume rulership of the new-found territory (which also explains the image of the bison on the coat of arms of Moldova). Unsatisfied with this legend, Asachi attempts to offer “a make-believe explanation” for the establishment of Moldova (1992, 5). Specifically, he advances the idea that the hunting party was actually a confrontation between Dragoș and a Tatar emir who had kidnapped his soon-to-be daughter-in-law, the fair Branda. As for the legend of the bisons, the author attributes it to the emir’s physical appearance, whom Dragoș kills with a spear towards the end of the story:

Haroboe, the Tatar chieftain, with his monstrous face and intimidating stature, was a heathen who stood, in his prime, taller than all other Kalmuks. On his broad, swarthy face, two knit brows arched over a pair of round eyes, and between them a flat nose with wide nostrils, bordered on both sides by a mustache which, with his beard and hair, reminded of a lion’s mane. On his helmet, taken from a famous German knight he had killed in a one on one fight and which, upon his triumph, he had sworn to wear for as long as he lived, two horn-like wings rose in a knightly fashion. His features, together with the helmet, gave the impression of a bison the likes of which roamed the mountains of Dacia. It was for his savageness that he came to be likened to this beast, and referred to as the Tatar *bison* (10–11).

Although Haroboe is the main antagonist of the novella, his portrayal focuses solely on his physical stoutness, while his psychological profile refers to nothing more than his swaying between rage and shrewdness. Asachi does not devote himself to exploring other aspects of the Tatar culture and civilization, which, in the author’s view, share many similarities with the average European people and whose citadel is of Dacian origin. More interesting, from this point of view, is another of Asachi’s historical novellas, “Valea Albă” (The White Valley, 1855), the title of which points to the theater of a major battle Moldovan voivode Stephen the Great fought against the army of Sultan Mehmet II. Particularly striking about it is the fact that, except for a brief account of this confrontation with the Ottomans, the greatest part of the novella is devoted to the Tatars, although they took no actual part in the war. This approach stands as additional proof to the precaution measures taken by the Moldovan writers in recalling these interactions with the Ottomans – and Asachi, who for same time served as the head of the Moldovan censorship bureau, was no exception in this respect. Of particular importance to our subject matter is that, in this context, the Tatars are no longer a metonymy for the Turks and that the author establishes an

ambivalent understanding of their ethno-psychological profile. The main plot of the novella, the romantic one, follows the love story between the Moldovan Ramadan and Fatme, daughter of the Crimean Khan Meñli I Giray and of a Romanian odalisque; the two lovers flee from Crimea, at that time under attack by the Ottoman troops, and take refuge in Moldova where the princess converts to her mother's faith and the young man enters the service of Stephen the Great. Besides this plot, the main Tatar characters of the novella are portrayed in antithesis to each other. The imam who attempts to kidnap Domnica – the Christian name of Fatme – stands out only for the “haughtiness of his blind fanaticism” (99), while Khan Meñli I Giray is at the same time a loving and tolerant father (virtues which become especially evident in the context of his daughter's conversion), as well as a wise and peace-loving ruler, “the greatest of the Crimean Khans”, who “shares with Mithridates the honor of bestowing upon this country glorious historical memories” (75). Asachi is therefore to be remembered not only for painting the first favorable portrait of the Tatar in Romanian literature, but also for advancing the idea that one's ethnic or religious identity does not dictate their personality.

However, it would be wrong to assume that this novella marked the beginning of a campaign aimed at rehabilitating Tatars in the Romanian collective imaginary. On the contrary and paradoxically, probably the most eloquent evidence to the persistence of negative stereotypes about the Tatars in mid-19th century Romanian society comes in the form of a literary work where none of the characters are Tatar. It is the case of “Domnul Vucea” (Mister Vucea, 1888), a novella by Barbu Delavrancea (1858–1918), in which the author evokes the atmosphere of the early 1860s Romanian primary schools. In fact, the novella is but a series of variations on the theme of an appellation (“Ha, the Tatar!”), which, to the main character – a tyrannical teacher –, is the epitome of ethnic and moral inferiority. “Tatars” are, to Mister Vucea, not only his lazy, naughty students, whom he humiliates rather than educates, but also common criminals or even his dog, Pripășel, which is constantly in heat. It is hardly surprising that the teacher thinks the way he does, since he expects his pupils to give the following answer to his question regarding the number of minorities that live in Romania: “*More than one, yet the most numerous and the most intelligent are the four and a half million Romanians, since the Romanians outsmart all others: Turks, Muscovites, Germans, Tatars, priests and Gypsies*” (Delavrancea 1982, 227). Nonetheless, by presenting these nationalist views through a highly negative character, the narrator implicitly satirizes rather than endorses them.

TOWARDS TRANSNATIONAL COMMUNITIES

Despite their different attitude towards the Tatars, the Romanian literary works of the 19th century seem to have one thing in common: the absence of background elements, caused by precarious knowledge of the culture and civilization of the Tatars. In fact, such ignorance regarding the Orient characterizes, with few exceptions, the largest part of the Romanian culture up to the 20th century. According to one of the first Romanian specialists in Oriental studies, “we are here at the gates of the Orient but we are not acquainted with the Orient and its inhabitants” (Popescu-Ciocănel

1909, 25). It is true that this situation – and, with it, the attitude towards Tatars – started changing gradually towards the end of the 19th century when, in step with the growing interest in Oriental studies of the Romanian elites (see Ciurtin 1998, 213–449), there is an obvious development of critical methods in historiography; this would later lead to a gradual deconstruction of medieval myths about the Tatars and to a closer scrutiny of the circumstances of their interactions with the Romanians over the centuries. Still, perhaps more important than these transformations of the academic field was the fact that Northern Dobruja became part of Romania, which led to the Tatars changing their status from quasi-legendary figures to a common presence in the Romanian society. Besides, their fully cooperating attitudes towards the new administrative regime gradually led to a diminishing of negative stereotypes and, later, even to a reversal of such stereotypes. For example, the “national poet” Mihai Eminescu (1850–1889) had a significant position in the matter, since, despite his xenophobic reactions against other ethnic minorities, he defended the Tatars as early as 1878, in response to certain speculations according to which the Romanian state was supposed to support and govern a savage population:

[T]he peoples of Dobruja are not savage. [...] [T]he Tatars are, for the most part, migrants from the Kuban steppes, that is from Russia, and are farmers, who have produced significant amounts of grain for export since the time of their settlement, which proves their dedication to regular farming work well above and beyond their daily needs. People who work for export and become both producers and consumers as part of the entire economy of Europe cannot be called savage (Eminescu 1989, 87).

A change of paradigm is seen in literature as well, even though, in the context of the shift of the Tatars from myth to reality, Romanian writers showed a significantly lower interest in this ethnic community at the end of the 19th century and the beginning of the 20th century. However, the Tatars became prominent literary figures again, once the historical Romanian novel (re)emerged, with its canonical expression in the works of Mihail Sadoveanu (1880–1961). In this respect, it is worth noting that, despite the nationalist ideology that is, to some extent, inherent to the genre in which he wrote, Sadoveanu, as opposed to his predecessors, practiced a certain type of ethnocultural ecumenism. This is particularly visible in his novels *Neamul Șoimăreștilor* (The Șoimărești Clan, 1915) and *Frații Jderi* (The Jder Brothers, 3 vols., 1935–1942), where the Tatars are substantially represented. For instance, in *Neamul Șoimăreștilor*, the author portrays the political instability that marked the beginning of the 17th century, when, for several decades, the succession to the Moldovan throne had been disputed by rival factions that depended for support on the neighboring countries and on foreign mercenaries. Yet, despite the obvious patriotic undertones of the novel, Sadoveanu's attitude is not in any way xenophobic, on the contrary, given that one of the most well-rounded characters of that novel is the Tatar Bey Cantemir, the chieftain of the Budjak Nogais. Saved by the protagonist Tudor Șoimaru during the opening battle of the novel, Cantemir becomes the Moldovan captain's sworn brother, whom he would later join in most of his heroic and political adventures.

Apart from his courage and loyalty (of which there is no lack in Asachi's novels), the Bey displays a psychological and cultural depth that had never been seen before

in the Romanian portrayals of the Tatars. For example, upon his victory over the Movilă clan, Cantemir takes as slaves as many members of the former ruling family as he can, yet not with a view to collecting the bounty hanging over their heads, but as a means of preventing their execution at the hand of the new voivode (Sadoveanu 2011a, 41). Moreover, the Tatar Bey is the one who warns Şoimaru that the boyar girl for whom he fell is “as fickle as an April’s day” (108). Yet, perhaps even more striking than Cantemir’s psychological depth is his openness towards other cultures and religions. Educated by a Polish teacher and dressed in the French fashion, he avoids judging people by their religion: “The same God that created me is the same God that created any other man who is virtuous in his dress and conduct. [...] [T]he laws of Muhammad, of ‘Īsā [Jesus] and of Moses were given by the same God” (49). Although he does not share the Moldovans’ affection for their homeland, he expresses his disagreement in a poetic and philosophical manner: “A man must be like the bird in the sky, and his eyes must not fixate for too long on a rock [...]” (51). Moreover, he finds the vastness of the world so fascinating that he is tempted to leave for “the New World found by the Spaniards” (192). However, what truly bonds Cantemir to Şoimaru, apart from their duties and friendship, is the feeling of belonging to small(er) nations, at the mercy of the neighboring empires: “This is what wars are like [...] especially in Moldova. Here, even storms swarm across the sky relentlessly; they rush upwards, bringing with them dust and sand, only to return from the mountains and pour down in torrents” (200). It is for this reason that Sadoveanu himself sympathizes with the character: Cantemir suggests allegiance to a transnational community, namely to an “international of small nations” (Casanova 2004, 247–253) where solidarity between the Romanian and Tatar peoples is based on structural similarities.

Although none of its Tatar characters lives up to Cantemir’s level of complexity, *Frații Jderi* is nevertheless of great importance in the context through the variety of the situations in which the Tatars find themselves. As opposed to the previously mentioned novel, the plot of *Frații Jderi* takes place towards the end of the 15th century, during the rule of Stephen the Great, when the social and religious differences between the Tatars and the Moldovans were especially visible. In fact, one of the most important events in the first volume of the novel focuses on the Volga Tatars’ invasion of Moldova, which lead to a direct confrontation between the two peoples. Even though Sadoveanu portrays the Tatars as a group of ruthless aggressors, the combined forces of two literary techniques greatly contribute to the softening of their image. On the one hand, before describing the invasion, the narrator sketches an ethnographic profile of the Tatars, carefully distinguishing between the “Steppe Tatars” and those of a Crimean origin, who “were well-versed in the ways of the world, lived in houses and had rose gardens above the level of the Black Sea” (2011b/1, 245). Moreover, some of the atrocities committed by the Volga Tatars are recounted indirectly, which may suggest that they were exaggerated or even altered by the popular imagination:

Rumor had it that many people from Poland or Moldova had gone to release their brothers, children or wives from slavery; rumor also circulated that many worthy men fled to the desert, hiding behind reeds and clumps of bushes during the day and, at night, chasing

the Holy Ghost, who had left behind a trail of bright smoke and stars by the name of The Road of the Slaves [i. e., the Milky Way] (245–246).

Aside from these collective portraits, the novel proposes numerous other portrayals of the Tatars that attest to their peaceful cohabitation with the Romanians. Undoubtedly, the most eloquent of them is that of Gheorghe Botezatu, a “true Tatar” who had converted to Christianity when very young and who would become “the most trusted friend” of the Jder family. Loyal and quiet, yet intelligent and practical, Gheorghe is a lesser version of Cantemir, loosely associated with the image of the “Good (ex-)Muslim”. This, however, does not automatically mean that, to Sadoveanu, loyalty and religious conversion were prerequisites for a favorable portrayal of the Tatars; on the contrary, the narrative innovation that *Frații Jderi* proposes lies in its representation of the parables of the ethnic and religious relations between the two peoples as seemingly insignificant, picturesque anecdotes. This is, for instance, the case of the story of Mănăila the miller (2011b/3, 166–171), taken as a slave by the Tatars at an early age and transported to Crimea. There, the prisoner teaches the Tatars how to prepare *urdă* (sweet whey cheese, which the locals would later call *mănăilă* in his honor) and regains his freedom, but not before the Tatars show him how to hammer down thirty glasses of wine, one after another. What this story shows is that, even at such a small scale, Sadoveanu advances (perhaps more convincingly than in other contexts where the ideological undertones are more evident) the idea of a transnational community devoid of any relevant form of cultural difference.

CONCLUSIONS

Based on the analysis carried out above, the following conclusions can be drawn:

1. As is evident from the above examples, the Tatars are not a strong presence in Romanian literature, mainly as a result of their fluctuating and discontinuous relations with the Romanians. Yet, from a strictly literary point of view, it would not be too far-fetched to assume that these very fluctuations provided an opportunity for Romanian writers who could, in turn, more easily ascribe to them certain roles and significances: from archetypal enemy and irreconcilable Other, to mythical catalyst of the foundation of the medieval state, mirrored reflection of the “national character”, and last but not least, peoples sharing a similar ethnic fate.

2. Apart from these variations in the portrayal of Tatars, this study also reveals that, between the middle of the 19th century and the middle of the 20th century, the images of the Tatars in the Romanian literature showed an evolution from the status of “Bad Muslim” to that of “Good Muslim”. In other words, the tendency on the part of Romanian writers to Orientalize the Tatars as malefic Others waned and the modern authors started to see them rather as potential members of a transnational community.

3. On a larger scale, the above-mentioned evolution suggests that the moral values (good vs. bad) assigned to an ethnic group are anything but fixed in the context of a nation’s literature, let alone in national literatures sharing the same geopolitical area. Far from contradicting the concept of “frontier Orientalism”, such findings reinforce its comparative potential, which could be explored not only “horizontally”

(by analyzing the representation of different ethnic groups within a single national literature), but also “vertically” (by analyzing the comparative portrayal of the same ethnic group in different national literatures).

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From frontier Orientalism to transnational communities: Images of the Tatars in modern Romanian literature

Frontier Orientalism. Tatars – literary images. Romanian literature. Transnational communities. Ethnic minorities.

This article is both an analysis of the image of Tatars in modern Romanian literature (c. 1830–1948) and a theoretical reflection on the manner in which, in some Central and Eastern European literatures, such as the Romanian one, “frontier Orientalism” (Andre Gingrich) contributed to the creation of transnational communities. Thus, although the Tatars are not very frequently depicted in Romanian literature, they have acquired a pivotal function here. In contrast to the image of Oriental Muslims in the Western area of Central and Eastern Europe, which tends to polarize along the ethical axis of good vs. evil (e. g., the Bosnian vs. the Turks), Tatars have an ambiguous function in modern Romanian literature, caused both by their Orientalization as a Muslim Other and by the discovery of various ethnic similarities with the Romanians, generated by their common status of “small(er) nations”.

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