Early encounters with the world of Islam in Latvian literary culture

Frontier Orientalism. Latvian literary culture. The world of Islam. Travel notes. Literary representations.

The aim of this paper is to trace different representations of the encounters with the world of Islam in Latvian literary culture of the 19th and early 20th century. The Latvian case is contextualized within trends in 19th-century Orientalist representations shaped by the Western European and Russian imperial imagination. Other nations, and especially those with different religious beliefs and practices, have characteristically been perceived either with an incredulity characteristic to Western attitudes toward the Orient, or with the inevitability of direct confrontation and “Othering” in the cases of military conflicts involving the imperial forces of Russian empire and their political antagonists. At the same time, personal encounters that occurred in geographically peripheral areas of Russia as well as beyond the state borders, often led to unexpected revelations, bringing about an understanding of the fate shared with other, relatively distant societies and cultures. In our paper we demonstrate that these experiences played a substantial role not only in establishing first-hand contacts with other cultures but also contributed to the identity formation of the Latvian nation. We first provide theoretical reflections of the topic that position the discussed representations within broader contexts of Orientalism, as introduced by Edward Said, and point to the differences between the classical Orientalism and “frontier Orientalism” of close and immediate contacts, as proposed by Andre Gingrich. In the following, we focus on different images and stereotypes characteristic to the Orientalist representations in Latvian literary culture and propose a subdivision of different kinds of Orientalism. They include representations of potentially “bad” Muslims, perceived as a real or imaginary threat; travel notes and personal impressions in the vein of classical Orientalism but with a considerably greater degree of involvement if compared to the above case; and, finally, subjective portrayals of domesticated or “good” Orientals who embody a number of admirable features as they share their lives with the Christian community within the Russian empire. The first case deals predominantly with the Turks, who are involved in warfare with the Russian imperial forces; the second features both imagined and first-hand experience of exotic lands with a substantial presence of Muslim culture, legends, tales and historical monuments; the third is focused on the life in the Caucasus before and during the Great War.

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