

Artigos Multitemáticos

Europe as Other in Contemporary Balkan Literatures

A Europa como o Outro nas literaturas balcânicas contemporâneas

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Resumo: Os Balcãs são uma região que tem oferecido diferentes imagens do mundo, bem como diferentes pontos de vista sobre a ideia da própria Europa. A riqueza vem da diversidade de nações, pessoas, línguas e culturas, sendo a principal característica desta região em particular. No entanto, algumas ideias já se tornaram um conceito «regional», criado e desenvolvido dentro da diversidade acima mencionada.

Embora os Balcãs pertençam à Europa, geográfica e historicamente, a partir do momento em que o conceito de «Outra Europa» foi criado para definir esta região, a distinção já estava feita. Geralmente vistos pelos europeus como Outros, o povo balcânico começou a criar sua própria ideia de Europa como Outra. As nações balcânicas têm apoiado a ideia da Europa como um sonho, desejo ou realidade, desejando juntar-se (ou voltar a juntar-se) à grande família europeia. Algumas tornaram-se, recentemente, estados-membros da União Europeia; outras aguardam ainda a sua vez. Mas, outro conceito também está presente, muito próximo da ideia do ocidentalismo, criado como uma resposta ao orientalismo de Edward Said ou ao balcanismo de Maria Todorova. Este conceito está relacionado com os novos contextos sociais decorrentes do período pós-comunista de transição. Foram formulados diferentes estereótipos e preconceitos sobre a Europa, que podem ser facilmente encontrados em obras literárias. No nosso artigo, tratamos de alguns desses conceitos imaginários, presentes em diferentes obras de ficção publicadas nos últimos anos em vários países balcânicos: Macedónia, Sérvia, Roménia, Grécia, Albânia e Turquia.

Palavras-Chaves: Balcãs; o Outro; Europa; literatura; estereótipos.

Abstract: The Balkans are a region where different images of the world have continuously been offered, as well as different points of view regarding the idea of Europe itself. The richness comes from the diversity of nations, people, languages and cultures, and is the basic characteristic of this particular region. However, some ideas have already grown as a «regional» concept, created and developed within the above-mentioned diversity. Although the Balkans belong to Europe, both geographically and historically, from the moment the concept of «Other Europe» was invented for them, the distinction was already made. Usually seen by Europeans as Others, the Balkan people started to create their own idea of Europe as Other. Balkan nations have mostly supported the idea of Europe, as a dream, desire, or reality, longing to join (or to return to) the big European family. Some of them have recently become Member States of the European Union; others are still waiting their turn. But, another concept is also present, very close to the idea of Occidentalism, created as an answer to Edward Said's Orientalism or Maria Todorova's Balkanism. This is mostly related to the new social circumstances during the post communist period of transition. Different stereotypes and prejudices of Europe have been created, and can easily be found in literature works, too. In our paper we deal with some of these imaginary concepts, which are present in different works of fiction, published in the last few years in several Balkan countries: Macedonia, Serbia, Romania, Bulgaria, Greece, Albania and Turkey.

Keywords: The Balkans; the Other; Europe; literature; stereotypes.

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The Balkans is a region where various images of the world have been continuously offered, as well as different points of view regarding the idea of Europe itself. The richness comes from the diversity of nations, peoples, languages and cultures, which is the fundamental trait of this particular region. A paradox occurs when we think about the Balkans today. It is well known that in geographical, historical, and cultural sense this region belongs entirely to Europe. And it is a common statement that Balkan peoples have contributed significantly to the common European values throughout history. But nowadays we often hear that the Balkans has too much history, too much memory; much more than it can bear. Besides, we should never study Balkan history exclusively in reference to the European matrix, because of the different evolution, especially because of the long centuries under the Ottoman Empire, when a totally different pattern was proposed. The Balkans has established its own measures, its own criteria.

The above-mentioned richness and diversity of cultures unfortunately do not always provoke a positive attitude. For example, the concept of *balkanization* has been established, meaning the division of a region in many smaller entities, which are mainly hostile towards each other (Compact Oxford English Dictionary). It is not a simple fragmentation or disintegration, but a very particular one, aggressive and unfriendly towards the Other. Although this is an imaginary concept, we

must admit that on many occasions in their history, Balkan nations have been interested in segregations, in emphasizing their particularities. This often led to violence, and is the basic reason for the origin of the concept of the Balkans as a «powder keg». In relation to this, an important idea is the «narcissism of the small differences», which comes from Sigmund Freud. It is very frequently used in relation to the Balkans, especially to the efforts of each nation to distinguish the specifics of its language, people, ethnic tradition etc. (Freud, 2008). Each Balkan nation, says Vesna Goldsworthy in her marvelous book *Inventing Ruritania*, prefers to see itself as a defender of European values; but never as a barbarian at the gates of Europe (Goldsworthy, 2000: XIII).

Is it possible, then, to consider the Balkans as a unique cultural entity that can produce a picture of another complex cultural entity, such as Europe itself? I would like to answer this by using the words of Jacques Le Goff, who says: «If we look at Europe as a community, then we should consider it a *family*; and among the members of this family there is a certain similarity, but each of them is a separate person, with its own physical aspect, character and attitude» (Le Goff, 1998: 11). The same method could be applied to the Balkans, too. Maybe it is better to propose an *areal* model of the world, supranational, based on the common traces and common points of the memory. Instead of multiculturalism, which is an empty concept, although a politically correct one, it

is better to consider the active intercultural, or even better «intracultural» relations among the neighboring Balkan countries. What does it mean? It means that instead of raising the «narcissism of the small differences», it is not so difficult to discover the points which represent identical characteristics within the Balkan diversity. When we speak of literature and the arts, the idea of the specific «inter-literary community», invented by the Slovak scholar Dionyz Durisin, seems to be the most appropriate one (Đurisin, 1984).

The next step in our reflections is to find out how the Balkans have become the Other in relation to Europe. As we know, from ancient times, from the *History* by Herodotus, the Others are nothing but a mirror where we only see ourselves (Hartog, 1988). In our case, it is a mutual process: while the Balkans has been seen as the Other from a European point of view, vice versa, Europe has been imagined as the Other from a Balkan point of view. So, either Europe or the Balkans can be the subject and object of this observation. We and the Others! We have become a measure for all things; the Others are a deviation. The common ground and the common tradition seem to be forgotten; the division is already made. Since the end of the 19th century, a negative perception of the Balkans has appeared. The notion of *balkanization* has become a synonym for all the brutal divisions, hostilities and irrational fragmentations. The Balkans became something to avoid. The Balkans as

a margin, according to the lesson learned from G.Ch. Spivak, could only be invented by a center, by Europe, so that it could be easily identified (Spivak, 1993: 55). The separation between the two worlds includes a clear hierarchy; and the Balkans finds itself in a colonial position. That's why the discussion about these problems is becoming a postcolonial one. Nowadays we can often hear the concept of the «Other Europe», which means a Europe that is not yet European; a Europe that is yet to become as such. And from the moment they were seen by the Europeans as Others, the Balkan peoples started to create their own idea of Europe as Other.

During their history, Balkan nations have mostly sustained the idea of Europe – as a target, a dream, a desire or reality, longing to join (or to return to) the big European family. Some of the Balkan countries have recently become member states of European Union; others are still waiting for their turn. Finding themselves in a situation of a subaltern collective, mostly related to the new social circumstances during the post-communist period of *transition*, they elaborated a critical thinking about Europe and the Western world in general. This concept is very close to the idea of *Occidentalism*, created as an answer to Edward Said's *Orientalism* or Maria Todorova's *Balkanism* (Said, 2003; Todorova, 2001). We are of course talking about imaginary concepts, not real ones, especially in the way they have been represented in works of literature. No matter

how those images have been constructed, it is obvious that they arise from some previous knowledge, which does not necessarily have to be true.

Every imaginary concept deals with stereotypes and prejudices, frequently creating mistaken or distorted pictures. If we agree that a stereotype is a mental image of an individual or community sharing some particular characteristics, or a preconceived and over-simplified idea of the characteristics which typify a person or thing (Compact Oxford English Dictionary), then we must be aware that it has a strong manipulative power. These pictures are especially convenient for imagological illustrations, which do not represent the reality, but do have a great power to represent a vision of that reality. Exhausted by long-awaited expectations and the failed idea of a better life, Balkan people have started to express their skepticism and bitterness about it.

Let us quote some examples taken from works of fiction. In the novel *Sahib* by the Bosnian writer Nenad Velickovic, the protagonist is a local driver who tries to explain the postwar reality to the young Englishman, who works in Sarajevo on the implementation of Western principles and policies. When Sahib explains the war tragedy in ex-Yugoslavia, especially in Bosnia and Herzegovina, it is the Western countries and Europe, of course, being judged. «Some developed countries, says Sahib, sell weapons to developing countries, which then

destroy each other. Then the developed countries help by reconstructing the developing ones.» And further more: «Europe is the one that governs the Balkans, in particular Bosnia and Kosovo. Its representatives employ professors to work as drivers», concludes Sahib, pointing up his own professional problem (Velickovic, 2002). Velickovic's novel is full of similar mutual imagological representations, which are treated in an amusing, comical and ironical manner.

Another example of an amusing narration on some very current and very crucial issues is the novel by the Macedonian writer Dragi Mihajlovski, titled *The Prophet from Thiscountria*. The author has invented a sarcastic story which deals with the «postcolonial» problem regarding the name of his own country. The difficult name issue related to Macedonia inspired this mockery on how European politicians try to avoid the name of the country, even if they have come to visit it. Their efforts result in expressions like «this country», «your country» etc., which leads to the strange notion in the title of the novel: *Thiscountria*. Another key problem is treated in this novel: the forced isolation of the Balkan people, caused by the visa system, which makes the inhabitants of Thiscountria feel as if they were locked into a huge prison. The mythical figure in the novel is the Wall: tall, hard, solid and resistant. It obviously represents the Schengen convention system, which has become an Schengen wall that is practically impossible to surmount. At

the other side of the Wall is Europe, desired and dreamed of by the *Thiscountrians* (Mihajlovski, 2001). Sahib, the hero from Velickovic's novel, also talks about the visa problem, taking into account the European anxiety and fear of the Other: «Looking through the prism of irony, he says, this can put the pure Western race in danger. This is why we are kept in our reservations by the visa regime» (Velickovic 2002). The painful and long-lasting process of approaching the European Union is metaphorically represented in Mihajlovski's novel by a train of hope, but a train which is not yet ready to take the *Thiscountrians* to the desired destination (Mihajlovski, 2001).

Another Macedonian writer, Goran Stefanovski, who actually lives in exile in England, has written amusing pages about his perception of Europe. In the book of essays entitled *Tales from the Wild-East* he describes all the confusion his name has provoked in European official documents, in banks, railway stations, hotels etc. He has collected more than 50 pages with his name misspelled, although it is one of the most common names in his country. He feels a similar confusion and anxiety every time he uses his computer: «The keyboard of my computer has some English letters totally useless to my native language. When I type the letter "I", which is a conjunction in Macedonian, the computer automatically writes it as a capital letter, because in English, when it stands alone, it designates the first person singular of a personal pronoun. So, writing in

my mother tongue is a continuous fight with a globalizing creature, a kind of multicultural fire machine... Every Macedonian text is automatically underlined in red by the computer as absolutely incorrect, even illegal». But not only computer problems bother Stefanovski. «I can think in English, he says, but I can't *feel* in English.» Or further: «It is not enough for me to be at home in Europe, I want Europe to be at my home» (Stefanovski, 2003).

Europe seen as an apparent paradise opposed to the Balkan hell – this is the picture shown in the autobiographical novel *The House in Puerto* by Serbian writer Gordana Cirjanic. In this gentle female story, the author describes her departure from the Spanish city of Puerto de Santa Maria and return home to Belgrade at the time of the worst war action in ex-Yugoslavia. Contrary to all exile directions, she is headed the opposite way – leaving Europe and arriving in the Balkans, just when every sane person is trying to escape. The secret lies in the death of her beloved, which is the reason she cannot any longer stand the beautiful Spanish house by the sea, and is willing to come to a familiar place, although life is supposedly much more difficult here. Home is related to love, insists Cirjanic. That's why she describes her strange experience of a person «who has managed, with so many great efforts, to save herself from paradise» (Cirjanic, 2004).

Several novels from different countries deal with European humanitarian missions in the

Balkans. How do Balkan peoples look at West European initiatives, especially in the current geopolitical context? In the novels *The Heart of the Earth* by the Serbian writer Svetislav Basara and *The Balkan Scapegoat* by the Albanian writer from Macedonia, Luan Starova, humanitarian missions arriving from European countries are received with a humorous, cynical and even derisive stance. In Basara's novel, located in Cyprus, humanitarian organizations have completely abandoned their «voluntary» role, becoming a «perfect mask for rotten people» (Basara, 2004). In the novel by Starova, located in the high mountain of Prokletija, in the midst of the Balkans, a helicopter full of European (Italian) missionaries has crashed down, and a «clash of civilizations» is already in progress. But in this case «Europe doesn't understand and does not want to understand», claims the author (Starova, 2003). Both novels talk of some old, primitive tribes, the Hurubi in Cyprus and the nameless Neolith tribe in the mountain of Prokletija. Naturally, the writer's sympathy is on the side of the primitive. Europe seems to be afraid of the Balkan truth. Europeans are afraid of taking the offered scapegoat, a symbol of vitality, energy, wisdom and sacrifice, because they are not able to understand its deeper meaning, its symbolism.

The problem of misunderstanding between Europe (Western pattern) and the Balkans (Eastern pattern) is also considered in the theater play *The Slavic Chest* by the Macedonian writer Venko Andonovski. The author par-

ticularly emphasizes the stereotype of Western rationality and Eastern irrationality:

THE PUPPET: How do you know I'm from the East?

SNAKE: You entered without a greeting. You lit a cigarette without asking. And then you cough.

PUPPET: What do you have against the East?

SNAKE: I have nothing against the East, young man. I'm against the insanity that comes from the East. Do you know what schizophrenia is? A disease of dreamers. And the dreamers come from the East. When the whole is split in two, that's schizophrenia. A madman is mad because he has an alternative world. What impudence, what sheer Eastern schism! What scorn for the world! (Andonovski, 1999).

Finally, an amusing narration proves that the relation between the Balkans and Europe can also be treated with humor and plenty of self-irony. This is what happens in the novel *Mission: London* by Bulgarian writer Alek Popov, where a sarcastic projection of the Bulgarian diplomatic élite has been proposed. An employee of the Bulgarian Embassy in Great Britain, the author is extremely successful in presenting the funniest and most entertaining details of his compatriots' manners and behavior (Popov, 2001).

Conclusion

What should we say in conclusion? The examples taken from Balkan works of fiction written recently, in the period of *transition*, although being imaginary concepts, show that we are still far from true mutual understanding. It is

clear that we still treat each other with prejudice. We should initiate a change in both Balkan and European views of the Other by improving the existing projections based mostly on negative stereotypes. We should finally reject binary oppositions based on ideas of *us* and *them*. Such expectations are neither easy nor simple to achieve. But we should start working.

Balkan peoples should stop blaming the Other for their tragic destiny; Europe should stop practicing its long-standing and sometimes irritating *Eurocentrism* (Kapuscinski, 2006: 15). Maybe Europeans really need Others to remind them it is now time to *decolonize* their minds (Gnisci, 2004). So, maybe the question Jose Ortega y Gasset posed in the early 50s, «Is there a *European* consciousness?» should today only be stressed differently: Is there a *European consciousness*?

The discussion about the Other and Otherness is nowadays becoming essential and can have a twofold effect: for powerful, dominant cultures it is a way to show and express their open-mindedness and their conscience; for the less powerful, subaltern, marginal cultures it is a way to express their historical pain and trauma, sometimes presented as a creative act.

It seems appropriate to finish this paper quoting the above-mentioned Stefanovski, who once said: «I want to see a Europe in

which my diversity will not be a *problem*, but a *solution!*» (Stefanovski, 2003).

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