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**THE REPRESENTATION OF THE TATARS
IN THE POLISH AND ROMANIAN HISTORICAL NOVEL:
A CASE STUDY ON MIHAIL SADOVEANU AND HENRYK
SIENKIEWICZ**

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Abstract: The article proposes an analysis of the representations of the Tatars in two historical novels published in Poland and Romania, respectively, from the end of the 19th century and the beginning of the 20th century. First of all, the article discusses the history of Sienkiewicz’s reception in the Romanian literary field and interrogates the possible interferences between two (semi)peripheral literatures (Romanian and Polish) as symptoms of the polysystem (Even-Zohar) of the Central and Eastern European literary field. Secondly, the case study on Sienkiewicz’s *With Fire and Sword* and Mihail Sadoveanu’s *Neamul Șoimăreștilor* [The Șoimărești Clan] discusses the imaginary constructions articulated in the description of the Tatars ethnic minority. Using the “frontier Orientalism” concept (Andre Gingrich), the article shows how the representation of the Tatars has different roles, being a pretext for defining national identity and becoming a pretext for “the creation of transnational communities” (Terian). Therefore, the paper aims to identify the ideological stakes behind the representation of the Tatars, as well as to discuss the intersections between Sienkiewicz and Sadoveanu and their effect on the historical novel’s evolution.

Keywords: historical novel, polysystem theory, imaginary, frontier Orientalism, transnational communities

In 1905, the Polish writer Henryk Sienkiewicz received the Nobel Prize for the novel *Quo Vadis*, published in 1896. The prize has a decisive importance in the international consecration of the writer. In the Polish literary field, the Nobel Prize comes as further proof of recognition of the writer's merits, who had already gained popularity and critical appreciation for other historical novels. This being the beginning of the 20th century, a difference between Sienkiewicz's local and international recognition can be observed. As Pascale Casanova shows:

In the early years the governing criteria were political, reflecting the heteronomous notions of literary value. Thus the first definition of legitimate literary art, a quite minimal one, identified it with political neutrality, a sort of *juste milieu* devised before the war of 1914-1918 as a counterweight to the nationalist "excesses" of the literature of the day and, above all, out of respect for the perceived necessity of exercising diplomatic caution. (Casanova 149)

But in the Polish literary field, Sienkiewicz had won his fame not exactly through political "neutrality": his most important work, *Trilogy* (1884-1888), had had an important social role due to the political situation of the partition (Poland did not exist as a national state, being partitioned by the empires of Russia, Prussia, and Austro-Hungary). More than that, *Trilogy* "belonging to the canon of nineteenth-century Polish literature, reflects the geopolitical and cultural ambiguity of Polishness and its contradictory attitude toward colonialism" (Ostrowska 503). Therefore, if the center (through the institution of the Nobel Prize) offers literary consecration in the early 20th century for "neutrality", it remains to be seen how other peripheral literary systems read such ambiguous political literature as Sienkiewicz's. Pascale Casanova states that:

The dominant position of the Nobel Prize in the pyramid of literary recognition and publication is the outstanding feature of a system that permanently accords the work of

European authors a central position while relegating to the periphery everything that comes from other parts of the world. (Casanova 151)

In the following, I will discuss the interferences between two (semi)peripheral literatures, the Polish and the Romanian. Apart from the Nobel Prize itself, Sienkiewicz enjoys a constant reception in the Romanian literary field and, more than that, influences/ serves as a model for the Romanian historical novel from the beginning of the 20th century. Frequently, literary critics discussed the comparison between Mihail Sadoveanu and Henryk Sienkiewicz, as representatives for the historical novel. Their novels share similarities in both form and content. Furthermore, the article proposes an analysis of the representation of an ethnic minority, namely the Tatars, in two canonical novels, to see if the social and ideological stakes behind the imaginary constructs can also be discussed as part of the (semi)peripheral interference phenomenon.

Three stages in the reception of Henryk Sienkiewicz in the Romanian literary field

The polysystem theory, proposed by Itamar Even-Zohar, discusses “the network of relations that is hypothesized to obtain between a number of activities called «literary», and consequently these activities themselves observed via that network” (Even-Zohar 28). Even if it is a very broad and relative perspective on the way the literary system works, his theory manages to bring into focus the extra-literary factors that contribute decisively to the dynamics of a literary system. In the reception of Sienkiewicz in the Romanian literary field, the stakes differ from one historical period to another, which proves that the interferences between (semi)peripheral literatures are not always coherent, systematic, and they depend, in turn, on the literary “rules” produced at the center. Even-Zohar states that „literatures are never in non-interference” (Even-Zohar 59). Hence, those factors that make possible the interference between the Polish and Romanian literary systems will be identified through a focus on the variations between economic and political elements.

Reception for the sake of increasing popularity (1900-1950)

At the beginning of the 20th century, Henryk Sienkiewicz was a constant presence in the Romanian literary press: his translated novels were frequently brought to the attention of the public. Moreover, the public is interested in Sienkiewicz's "public person", events from his personal life being published in the press. Some translations start to appear in this period, short stories or novels. The author gained popularity once he received the Nobel Prize in 1905, and *Quo Vadis* is his first novel translated into Romanian, in 1900 (DCRT); before that, only several short stories have been published.

There are two constants of his reception at the beginning of the 20th century: the commercial stakes (the short articles in literary magazines about Sienkiewicz function as "advertisements" for the increasing popularity of his books) and the rhetoric of the articles also responds to the commercial interest: Sienkiewicz is presented in a romantic setting, as a singular author, genius, etc.

The literary genre most representative of his work is *the historical novel*. At the same time, the short commercial articles seem to address a young audience: Sienkiewicz's literature would be, at the beginning of the 20th century, children's literature, whose purpose is instructive. Therefore, the view of the historical novel as a way of learning about the past, suitable especially for a young audience, prevails. As Lionel Gossman shows, the relationship between literature and historiography was often debated in the 19th century. He argues that "the relation had been unproblematic before the nineteenth century, for history had been considered a branch of literature" (Gossman 227). Sándor Hites explains that in the East and Central European context, historiography and novels "are interpreted politically in particular historical situations and from ideological premises" (Hites 469). All these debates had taken place in the Polish literary field at the time of the publishing of Sienkiewicz's novels: because the novels appeared during the Partition period, they are seen as a compensatory narrative that succeeds in creating the reviving sense and feeling of nationalist belonging. In the Romanian press from the first half of the 20th century, Sienkiewicz is not "politicized", but his novels enjoy success with the public for their instructive utility in the process of learning about the past.

The reception for commercial purposes and with amateurish rhetoric is also due to the translation system: in this period, Sienkiewicz is not translated directly from Polish, but through other intermediate languages. For example, the historical novel *With Fire and Sword* is translated by Al. Iacobescu (a very active translator of Sienkiewicz at that time) from French, and Sofia Nădejde (one of the most important female writers and women's rights activists of the 19th century) from German (in 1909) (DCRT). Thus, the lack of translators specialized in Polish literature seems to affect the lack of professional criticism regarding the reception of one of Central European literature. In the peripheral polysystem of reception, Western culture is needed to mediate: Sienkiewicz's reception takes place relatively late from his most active period in Polish literature, and meanwhile, the interest in the historical novel as a genre is not visible in literary criticism.

Therefore, although Sienkiewicz is a constant presence in the Romanian literary press, there is a lack of relevant critical articles about his literature. Literary criticism seems to put it aside before assimilating him. One reason, along with the fact that there are no translators, i.e. professional mediators for Polish culture, is the fact that the historical novel was no longer a strong trend for the first half of the 20th century (see Terian 2020 and Terian 2021)

Thus, the literary interferences between Sienkiewicz and the Romanian literary field are influenced, at the beginning of the 20th century, by economic factors: the historical novel still represents a source of entertainment, with an important place in the book market, even if literary criticism avoid theoretical discussions on this subgenre. Even-Zohar also notes that “[a] highly interesting paradox manifests itself here: translation, by which new ideas, items, characteristics can be introduced into a literature, becomes a means to preserve traditional taste” (Even-Zohar 49). Therefore, even if at the beginning of the 20th century, the (sub)genre of the historical novel is “historicized”, the translation of Sienkiewicz's novels retains its entertainment value and contributes to the preservation of the subgenre. In this process of preserving and popularizing the genre among the general public, Mihail Sadoveanu will have an important role.

2. Propagandistic reception (1950-1960)

In the first years of Communism, Sienkiewicz's position shifts in the Romanian literary press. From an author of novels especially for the young audience, he becomes a symbol of "social progress, for the liberation of the people from oppression". The commercial stakes of translation become ideological stakes. At the beginning of the '50s, a whole series of articles appeared in the Romanian press, which tried to introduce Polish culture to the Romanian public. These appear to be signed by Polish names, suggesting the beginnings of a much more coherent system of cultural mediation. Sienkiewicz's reception, however, remains schematic even in this context: he is often present among other writers to suggest their role in the so-called "struggle for progress" and only his writings with a social approach are discussed (*Trilogy* had been banned in Poland at that time).

However, the reception acquires a degree of professionalism: first of all, the author is placed in a context, associated with other important names from the Polish canon. Then, this period also marks the beginning of bilateral interference. As Even-Zohar notes,

[i]nterference can be either unilateral or bilateral, which means that it may function for one literature or for both. It can function for one or another part or sector of the system, whether chiefly for the repertoire (which is the most "visible" or "transparent" process) or for other components of the system. (Even-Zohar 55)

More often than not, the interference between central and peripheral literature is unilateral: peripheral literary systems take models, imitate and translate them from a central literary system, without equal cultural exchange. The literary polysystem developed in the second half of the 20th century, through Communism, offers a different model, in which bilateral exchanges are possible (they remain selective and dominated by political interests). Thus, Polish literature begins to be translated in the Romanian literary field and vice versa, Romanian literature to be presented in the Polish literary field, as parts of the Communist polysystem.

3. Professional critical reception (1960-1989)

After the first decade of Communism, a whole generation of translators from Polish begins to be active. The Slavic languages departments in universities are developing and more translations appear, as an effect. Sienkiewicz is translated, this time, directly from Polish language. Therefore, there is a professionalization of the field of translations from the literature of the Communist bloc. The translators from Polish also contribute to cultural mediation through sustained critical activity. Stan Velea, for example, publishes numerous volumes about literary movements in Poland, about the most important writers, comments about translation and the history of translation of Polish literature into Romanian, as well as comparative studies discussing Romanian-Polish literary interferences (See Velea). Without using comparative theoretical tools, his studies have an educational character, introducing Polish culture to the Romanian public. His comments on previous translations of Sienkiewicz's novels are rather prescriptive, and normative, criticizing semantic choices most often. When he discusses Romanian-Polish cultural relations interferences, he mainly refers to common themes and imaginary. A Sienkiewicz monography is published in Romania, in 1972, written by Olga Zaicik, another very active translator and literary critic in the period. She claims that Sienkiewicz is more connected with the romantic paradigm than with critical realism or positivism. The interest in Sienkiewicz seems to have two motivations: on the one hand, translators and experts in Polish literature are trying to fill the gaps in the reception of Polish literature. On the other hand, the professional and engaged reception is also a reaction to the schematic reception from the first decade of Communism. Precisely for this reason, the critics' interests shift their focus to literary history and aesthetics rather than ideology.

In this era, comparisons between Romanian and Polish writers became commonplace. The most common is the one between Sienkiewicz and Sadoveanu. Both write historical novels, most often set in the 17th century, and use the same kind of imaginary. Other examples of comparisons are Sienkiewicz's novellas with those of Al. Brătescu-Voinești, Rebreanu and Reymont, Sadoveanu and Reymont and so on.

The comparison of Sienkiewicz's historical novels with Sadoveanu's can be interpreted as an attempt to legitimize Romanian literature: the Polish models chosen are those legitimized on a global level (through the Nobel Prize). On the other hand, the

comparison can also be seen as an attempt to have a dialogue with other peripheral literature, the dialogue made possible, especially by the translation system developed during Communism.

Besides critical interest, Sienkiewicz remains a “popular” author. This fact is because literature is no longer the only *medium* through which his narratives are disseminated: there are movies dedicated to his work. Jerzy Hoffman is a Polish director who is consolidating his career by adapting Sienkiewicz’s novels to cinema. The movie *Pan Wołodyjowski* appears in 1968, followed by *The Deluge* in 1974, both with enormous success with the public and critics. As Elżbieta Ostrowska shows,

After World War II, Sienkiewicz’s *Trilogy* was adapted for cinema. Two parts were made during the period of Communism, the third appeared after its collapse. The post-Yalta political order in Europe can be seen as the realization of the colonizing project of Soviet totalitarianism. In this new political context, Sienkiewicz’s nostalgic vision of Polish colonialist aspirations could play a compensatory role for the Polish nation once again, even if many domestic readers and literary critics disparaged the novels as anachronistic and parochial. (Ostrowska 504)

The films become an export product of the Polish national culture and thus also reaches the Romanian public, where they do not necessarily have a compensatory role, but retain their entertainment value.

The literary reception of Sienkiewicz in the Romanian field goes through three stages, with a variation between economic, political, literary, and social stakes. His reception is symptomatic for the interferences between two (semi)peripheral literatures and proves that these interferences end up being dominated, to varying degrees, by other elements of the polysystem than the literary repertoire itself.

The representation of the Tatars: from antagonistic community to transnational community

Even if Sienkiewicz and Sadoveanu have been discussed and compared, the parallelism has often focused on the similarities between form (the narrative structures specific to the historical novel), and imaginary. The imaginary will be analyzed further, but with a

focus on the representation of the Tatars, as a minority group present in the writings of both authors. I will focus on Sinkiewicz's first part of his historical trilogy, the novel *With Fire and Sword*, published in 1884, and on Sadoveanu's, *Neamul Șoimăreștilor* [The Șoimărești Clan] published in 1915 – both being set in the 17th century and both tackling the topic of the political instability of the regions.

In the representation of Tatar alterity, the narrative mechanisms used by the two authors are symptomatic of frontier Orientalism, defined by Andre Gingrich as “a relatively coherent set of metaphors and myth that reside in folk and public culture. It places the home country and its population along an adjacent territorial and military borderline which is imbued with a timeless mission” (Gingrich 119). His concept is another version of Said's Orientalism. The main difference is that Said discusses Orientalism as a construct produced mainly in the academic field. For frontier Orientalism, these imaginary constructs are generated often in folk and public culture. Because the “oriental” is in this case at the borderline, he is seen not only as primitive, but as a dangerous rival or as a possible ally, caused by “the folkloristic glorification of decisive local military victories in past times, either against Muslims or together with Muslims, but serving present nationalistic purpose” (Gingrich 123).

Furthermore, as Elżbieta Ostrowska notices,

In both the novels and the films, the images of the Other, as represented by the figures of Cossacks and Tatars, construct a vernacular fantasy of the Orient that problematizes the Saidian binary model. In neither Sienkiewicz's novels nor in Hoffman's films does this vernacular variant of orientalism eventually produce cultural or political hegemony. (Ostrowska 507)

Ostrowska especially insists on the representation of the “East” as masculine in Sienkiewicz's novels, and not feminine, according to the Saidian model. Thus, the concept of frontier Orientalism is more operative when discussing the representation of the East from a relatively close geographical perspective, rather than a Western perspective. As shown by Iver B. Neumann, “There are many «Easts» in the world, and none of them is without signification” (Neumann 15), especially, according to him, in political relations.

The description of the East appears from the beginning of the novels because both writers focus on describing the status of the nation. The plot is represented by the unstable political situation of the Poles and Moldavians at the beginning of the 17th century. Thus, for defining their nation, Sienkiewicz and Sadoveanu use a typical narrative device for the historical novel: comparison with the other ethnic communities. In this case, the Tatars' collective character becomes a basis of comparison for the main nation presented in the novel. In this sense, one of the most important differences between Sienkiewicz and Sadoveanu's narratives can be seen in the perception of their history. The image of Poland is one of greatness, whose huge territories end up becoming a field of battle, because of the Tatars and Cossacks: "The land belonged in name to Poland, but it was an empty land, in which the Commonwealth permitted the Tartars to graze their hears; but since the Cossacks prevented this frequently, the field of pasture was a field of battle too" (Sienkiewicz 2).

On the contrary, Moldava is seen as being a "victim" of Polish and other big nations' imperialist intentions. Ștefan Tomșa, the main character, is complaining because „they devastated and impoverished the poor country! They settled there like a nest of wasps, without the permission of the locals and the Turks”¹ (Sadoveanu 8). More than that, „they interfere again in the affairs of the country”² (Sadoveanu 9).

Hence, if the Polish nation is presented in *With Fire and Sword* in terms of glorification, the Moldavians from *Neamul Șoimăreștilor* emphasize their status in terms of victimization. In both cases, it can be seen as a compensatory stake. At the end of the 19th century, when Sienkiewicz published his novel, Poland did not exist as a state on the Europe map, as an effect of partitions between Prussia, Russia, and the Austro-Hungarian Empire. In this sense, the historical novel had a very important national(ist) role for the public. As Ryszard Koziolok shows, Sienkiewicz is

a victim of Prussia's and Russia's historical success and of the defeat of his own state; thus, he is in search of an alternative which would confirm that things did not have to be that way. Therefore, he is not convinced that it was a defective systemic construction that was the cause of the fall of the Polish state. (Koziolok 78)

¹ "Au pustiit și au sărăcit biata țară! S-au așezat aicea ca un cuib de viespi, fără învoirea pământenilor și a Porții" (Unless otherwise stated, all translations from the Romanian are mine.)

² "se amestecă iar în trebile țării."

In the case of Sadoveanu, the novel does not have the same direct political implications, although the narrative of victimization is a constant in the Romanian literary field at the beginning of the 20th century, as an echo to the inferiority complexes articulated mostly in the 19th century (see Martin 1981).

Further, the imaginary developed towards the character of Tatars have some common patterns. Two constants can be seen in both novels: on the one side, the presentation of the ethnic group as often being a collective character. Even when he is individualized, as the character Cantemir appears in Sadoveanu's novel, he is most frequently called "the Tatar", without using his first name. Both authors operate with a generalization, which they intensify throughout the novels. On the other side, the image of the Tatar in these novels is connected with the image of the steppe and wilderness:

The armed herdsmand guarded his flock, the warrior sought adventure, the robber plunder, the Cossack a Tartar, the Tartar a Cossack. It happened that whole bands guarded herds from troops of robbers. The steppe was both empty and filled, quiet and terrible, peaceable and full of ambushes; wild by reason of its wild plains, but wild, too, from the wild spirit of men. (Sienkiewicz 2)

The minority ethnic groups are assimilated at the same level in the imaginary of the Polish author's narrative. Tatars and Cossacks are portrayed as wild Others, i.e. passing through an Orientalist filter. Differentiation between the Poles and the others is based on the religious factor, as it happens in typical cases of frontier Orientalism. Moreover, a natural determinism can also be seen in Sienkiewicz: in his view, the wild environment of the steppe is the cause of the inferiority of these people. Sadoveanu reproduced the pattern of the wilderness: "The Tartar, child of the wilderness, had more penetrating looks"³ (Sadoveanu 237). In his case, the dichotomy of nature-culture is not so visible. If Sienkiewicz uses the metaphor of wilderness as a pretext for emphasizing the image of a civilized Polish nation, in the case of Sadoveanu, the same metaphor has a more aesthetical role: it is a narrative device that contributed to the "romanticization" of the freedom associated with Tatars: "I have never understood, replied the Tatar slowly, your

³ "Tătarul, copil al pustiei, avea priviri mai pătrunzătoare."

stubbornness for the land, the quarrels, and the blood shed for a little corner of the garden when God's world is so big"⁴ (Sadoveanu 234)

Another common narrative device in Sienkiewicz and Sadoveanu is the portrait of the Tatar as a wolf. As Elżbieta Ostrowska notes,

The opposition between Nature and Civilization in Sienkiewicz not only creates a mental map of the region but also forms a linchpin around which the characters of his novels are constructed. The antagonist is invariably played by the figure of the Other who stands on the side of Nature and functions as a counterpart to the Polish hero representing the forces of Civilization. Sienkiewicz invariably describes the Other men as animal like. (Ostrowska 511)

Even though both authors use the comparison of the Tatars with a wolf, the stakes are different. There is a difference between "[t]hose horrifying eyes were shining like a wolf's eyes in a dark forest" (Sienkiewicz) and "[w]ith his hand on the glass, he was constantly smiling, showing his sharp teeth like a young wolf. But his face was serene."⁵ (Sadoveanu 84). If Sienkiewicz's novel presents the image of the wolf to articulate an effect of fear toward the otherness of Tatars, in Sadoveanu's novel, the image is more plastic, performing sympathy and friendship toward the Tatar who becomes a friend and an ally of the Ștefan Tomșa.

In the case of Sienkiewicz, it is presented the case of the Tartars servants of Polish noble families. They are described as being loyal, friendly, and trusting people. Thus, as a necessary condition for a Tatar to be a positive character in Sienkiewicz's novel, they should be a servant. They are displaced from their "original" space (from the wilderness) to a domestic, civilized world. In Sadoveanu's work, Cantemir, a Tatar character, is very close to the Moldavian protagonist, Ștefan Tomșa. Their strong friendship suggests as Terian pointed out, "the feeling of belonging to small(er) nations, at the mercy of the neighboring empires" (Terian 59).

Therefore, if in Sienkiewicz's novel the representation of the Tatars is connected with the vision about the Cossacks (as enemies), in Sadoveanu's novel the perspective is

⁴ "Eu n-am înțeles niciodată, răspuse încet Tătarul, îndârjirile voastre pentru pământ, certurile și sângele vărsat pentru un colțisor de grădină, când lumea lui Dumnezeu e așa de mare."

⁵ "Cu mâna pe pahar, zâmbea neconținut, arătându-și dinții ascuțiți ca de lup tânăr. Era însă senin la față."

different. As Terian points out, “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” (Terian 60) This proves that the imaginary regarding the Tatar otherness is passed, in both cases, through a national filter, and articulated different ideological stakes.

Conclusions

The present essay presented Polish novelist Henryk Sienkiewicz as a constant presence in the Romanian literary field throughout the 20th century. His literary reception (through translations, through critical articles in the local literary press) is symptomatic of the interference between Romanian and Polish literature. The history of Sienkiewicz’s reception shows that extra-literary factors, such as economics or politics, are decisive.

Regarding the representations of the Tatars, as a minority ethnic group, both Sienkiewicz and Sadoveanu employ a certain type of imaginary according to their national agendas. If the Tatars are seen as an antagonistic community in *With Fire and Sword*, the pretext being the glorification of the Polish nation, the Tatars become part of a transnational community in *Neamul Șoimăreștilor*. Although symptoms of frontier Orientalism can be observed in both analyzed novels, the ideological stakes are different.

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