

## The Hauntologic Imagination of Lesley Blanch: The Exotic Other, Mission Civilisatrice and Lost Objects in *The Sabres of Paradise*

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### Abstract

*The Sabres of Paradise*, a book written by British historian Lesley Blanch is a novel that focuses particularly on the so-called “Murid Wars”, an important instance of Russia's conquest of the Caucasus and the subsequent genocide and deportation of its autochthonous peoples. Drawing from accounts of the descendants of figures such as Imam Shamil and Hadji Murat, the novel also uses Russian and British accounts to paint a picture of the resistance of the peoples of the Caucasus against the invading Russians. However, Blanch's book, despite painting a seemingly favorable picture of the Caucasus and its peoples, suffers from a reproduction of the colonialist narrative that is pushed by Imperial Russia. The reasoning behind this unfortunate reproduction lies in the authorial unconscious of Lesley Blanch, which is analyzed through a comparison of *The Sabres of Paradise* and her another work *Journey Into the Mind's Eye: Fragments of an Autobiography*. By adopting an approach that utilizes the work of Jacques Derrida, Jacques Lacan and a number of psychoanalytical critics, this study aims to trace and put into perspective Blanch's reproduction of the Russian colonialist narrative towards the Caucasus by drawing from work of scholars such as Irvin Cemil Schick and Madina Tlostanova while at the same time analyzing the reviews of *The Sabres of Paradise*. The study argues that Blanch reproduces the colonial narrative due to a process of loss that is highlighted in *Journey into the Mind's Eye: Fragments of an Autobiography*. This argument is supported by utilization of concept of hauntology put forward by Derrida, an application of the theory of loss and mourning put forward by Freud, and a summary of Lacan's approach towards desire. The postcolonial [or decolonial] framework of this study owes its debt chiefly to Madina Tlostanova's *Gender Epistemologies and Eurasian Borderlands* as it is used as a framework for Blanch's exoticizing and fetishizing perspective

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towards the Caucasus Male and the Caucasus Women in *The Sabres of Paradise*.

**Keywords:** *Lesley Blanch, Postcolonial Studies, Decolonialism, Psychoanalysis, Ghost Studies, Poststructuralism, Psychoanalytic Literary Criticism*

### **Lesley Blanch'in Hortolojik Hayalgücü: Cennetin Kılıçları'nda Egzotik Öteki, Medenileştirme Misyonu ve Kayıp Nesnelere**

#### **Özet**

İngiliz tarihçi Lesley Blanch tarafından yazılan *Cennetin Kılıçları*, “Mürid Savaşları” olarak isimlendirilen, Rusya'nın Kafkasya'yı fethi ve bunu takiben meydana gelen bu bölgenin otokton halklarının sürgün ve soykırımına odaklanan bir romandır. Hacı Murat ve İmam Şamil gibi dönemin önemli figürlerin soyundan gelenlerin aktarımlarına dayanan bu çalışma aynı zamanda Rus ve İngiliz tarihçiliğine dayanarak, işgalci Ruslara karşı bölge halkının ortaya koyduğu direnişi belgelemektedir. Blanch'ın eseri her ne kadar Kafkasya ve halklarına dair görünürde olumlu bir tasviri ortaya koysa da Rusya İmparatorluğu'nun kolonyal anlatısını yeniden üretir bir konumda kendisini bulmaktadır. Bu talihsiz yeniden üretimin ardında yatan gerekçelendirme ise Lesley Blanch'ın bir yazar olarak bilinçdışıyla yakından ilişkilidir. Söz konusu bilinçdışı, *Cennetin Kılıçları* ile yazarın bir diğer eseri olan *Zihnin Gözüne Yolculuk: Bir Otobiyografiden Parçalar*'ın karşılaştırılması vasıtasıyla açılanmaktadır. Jacques Derrida, Jacques Lacan ve bir dizi diğer psikanalistin perspektifini kullanan çalışmanın amacı, Blanch'ın Kafkasya'ya yönelik Rus kolonyal bakışını yeniden üretmesinin izini sürmek ve bu yeniden üretimi bir perspektife oturtmaktır. Çalışma bu amacını, Irvin Cemil Schick ve Madina Tlostanova gibi uzmanların çalışmalarından faydalanarak ve *Cennetin Kılıçları*'nın incelemelerini ele alarak yerine getirmektedir. Çalışma, Blanch'ın kolonyal anlatıyı yeniden üretmesinin arkasında yatan sebebin *Zihnin Gözüne Yolculuk: Bir Otobiyografiden Parçalar*'da öne çıkan bir yas ve kayıp sürecinden dolayı ortaya çıktığı düşüncesini öne sürmektedir. Söz konusu argüman, Derrida tarafından literatüre kazandırılan hortoloji kavramının, Freud'un yas ve kayıp kuramının ve Lacan'ın arzu kavramının metin üzerinde uygulamaya konulmasıyla gerekçelendirilmektedir. Çalışmanın postkolonyal [veya dekolonyal] perspektifi ise varlığını çoğunlukla Madina Tlostanova'nın *Cinsiyet Epistemolojisi ve Avrasya Sınır-Ülkeleri* isimli eserine borçludur ki bu eser, Blanch'ın Kafkasyalı erkeklere ve kadınlara yönelik egzotize ve fetişize edici bakış açısını yorumlamak için kullanılmıştır.

**Anahtar Kelimeler:** Lesley Blanch, Postkolonyal Çalışmalar, Dekolonyalizm, Psikanaliz, Hayalet Çalışmaları, Postyapısalcılık, Psikanalitik Edebiyat Eleştirisi

### Introduction

*The Sabres of Paradise*, published first in 1960, is a novel written by Lesley Blanch, a British historian and novelist who is also known with her work entitled *Journey Into the Mind's Eye: Fragments of an Autobiography*, a book in which Blanch elaborately mentions her travels and escapades that take place in today's Russia. These escapades and the mind behind these escapades provide the reader with the same eloquent descriptions found in *The Sabres of Paradise* which this study aims to present a study of. In order to understand and provide a literary analysis of *The Sabres of Paradise*, however, one must first understand the author behind the novel, which brings this study to a review published in *The Atlantic Monthly*, written by Phoebe Lou Adams on 1969. In this review which offers a peek into the *bohemian extraordinaire* named Blanch, Adams describes her as a woman who "(...) Fell in love with ikons, samovars, troikas, wolves, Cossacks, snow, gypsies, boyars, and jeweled Easter eggs" (Adams 132). Judging from such a sentence and by Blanch's own words in the novel such as: "I must have been four years old when Russia grabbed me with its giant hands" (Blanch 4), it is evident that Blanch possessed a certain fascination with Russia and its history. The emphasis on the giant hands does certainly mark the impression, and perhaps the involuntary seduction Russia held over Blanch. The fascination felt by Blanch as she's impressed by Russia, according to Adams, also had a perhaps erotic or romantic dimension, for the image of Russia in Blanch's mind was constructed by a certain "Tartar gentleman" (Adams 132). The hint of an erotic and romantic dimension is established in the novel firmly by Blanch herself, converting the suspicion to an actuality, for the gentleman in question says to a young Blanch: "'But you're so nearly Russian, my darling, so sentimental and *tétue* (...) Let's get on with the loving" (Blanch), affirming the fact that they were, throughout Blanch's travels within Russia, lovers.

There are quite a few instances to name when it comes to the liaison of Blanch and this particular gentleman who is narrated as “The Traveler” throughout the novel but this particular instance must be underlined due to the fact that the “Tartar gentleman” attests a Russian identity to Blanch, and secondly he underlines her sentimentality, or in another word, her Romanticism for the gentleman also states that she is “willfully romantic” (Blanch). This particular Russian identity, which is implied to be internalized by Blanch in the novel as “(...) Countless Russians had been drawn to the Riviera, finding it beautiful and romantic, perhaps I could do the same” (Blanch 140)[Blanch already identifies with ‘Russianism’ by following the example of the Russians, as in the maxim, ‘when in Rome, do as the Romans do’] and her romanticism underlined by the gentleman needs to be stressed, for both the attestation of this identity and Blanch’s romanticism become prevalent in her perception of the Caucasus in *The Sabres of Paradise*, enabling the novel to construct an Orientalist narrative despite the fact that it is stated by Georgia de Chamberet in her introduction of *Journey Into the Mind’s Eye*: “She [Blanch] had a strong dislike of colonialism” (Blanch 5).

The inadvertent consequences of Blanch’s romanticism are implied in a review of the novel conducted by William Henry Chamberlain in the *Russian Review*. In this review, Chamberlain states that Blanch is “Obviously carried away by the romantic possibilities of her subject” (Chamberlain 160), which paves way to the various implications and tendrils of Romanticism to foster in her narrative. One of the key tendrils that one must recall when it comes to the Romantic tradition of the Anglosphere is most certainly, exaggeration. From Byron to Wilde<sup>1</sup>, Romantics have been known to exaggerate, exoticise, and to fetishize. This tendency of Byronesque, perhaps Wildean exaggeration is

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<sup>1</sup> While Wilde is generally thought to be in the school of Aestheticism, this notion does not remain unchallenged as seen in Harald Pittel’s *Fin du Globe: Oscar Wilde’s romance with decadence and the Idea of World Literature*: “One may argue that Wilde, in his aversion to truth and realism, recedes to the irrationality often attributed to romanticism (...)” (Pittel 2021).

emphasized by another critic, Collier in *The Geographical Journal*. In their review, Collier states: “Miss Blanch is a firm believer in Oscar Wilde’s dictum that ‘nothing succeeds like excess’. She likes to write of excessive passions of all sorts, and here she has plenty of opportunity. The result is a rich mixture of excessive savagery, excessive tyranny, excessive luxury, excessive debauchery and, at times, almost excessive heroism” (Collier 238). However, neither reviews touch upon the fact how Blanch exoticizes and fetishizes the Caucasus, nor the literature contains such a study. In fact, one might say that, literary criticism on Blanch is severely underrepresented in the literature and this study aims to fill such an important gap which pertains to both British Literature and postcolonial studies. It must be acknowledged though, Blanch’s romanticism and her tendency to create excess and to exaggerate is underlined in the reviews of *The Sabres of Paradise*.

Blanch’s visions of excess in regard to Caucasus plague the narrative of *The Sabres of Paradise* as the novel criss-crosses through historical figures such as Imam Shamil, Lermontov, Tzitzianov, Catherine II, Nicholas I, Yermolov, Hadji Murad, Fatimat, and Pakou-Bekkhe. In the novel Blanch talks about heroic, albeit sometimes savage Caucasians excessively described by her romantic imagination as in the example of Imam ShamyI: “In 1834 he sprang on to the scene in a flash of steel, a clap of thunder, like some flamboyant Prince of Darkness” (Blanch 13), presenting exaggerated qualities in regard to the personality of ShamyI. Blanch’s exaggeration or excess also borders to the realm of fantasy as seen in another example which describes ShamyI: “[He] was at once warrior and mystic, ogre and saint, foxy and innocent, chivalrous and ruthless” (Blanch 13). Throughout the novel, Blanch presents the Caucasus, and the Caucasians in a quality that is charming and ferocious, valiant but tyrannical at the same time; Blanch depicts the Caucasus, and the Caucasians in bipolar, opposing extremities that are either fascinating, or terrifying to behold; sometimes she mentions severed heads were good coinage (12) while sometimes she praised their love to their companions, mentioning that ShamyI’s love for Fatimat was his sole earthly tether in his extreme austerity (141). In Blanch’s

narrative, both the violence and the love of the mountaineers is excessive and *braque* indeed. Throughout the novel, the reader is presented with the burning of aouls, oaths of Gazavat, ShamyI's loss of Djamal-Uddin, Catherine II's strategems on the region as she chronicles, or imagines her way through ShamyI's surrender, his descendants in Istanbul, and the place of Muslim Mountaineers in the USSR. One thing that remains constant through this shifting *topos*, characters, and years however, is the wild imagination of Blanch which depicts the people of the mountains either through a material excess [in terms of austerity] which deconstructs Edward Said's depiction of the lavishness of the Arab perceived by the West (Said 320), or through a bodily alertness and capacity that subverts Faure as depicted in *Orientalism* (Said 253). In the novel however, contrary to popular Orientalist imagery, the reader does not see an Oriental in stupor, a feminized, passive subject that should be governed and ruled by the Westerner. Rather the novel paints a picture of a race of noble, albeit savage people who live and die by violence and vengeance, their religion, freedom, and glory being paramount. Such an approach however, does not excuse Blanch from using a Westerner gaze, and a colonial, fetishistic eye towards the people of the Mountains, and the reasons of this gaze, and fetishistic eye is what is to be examined in this study.

By the use of the concept of Hauntology by Jacques Derrida, while also drawing from the works of scholars such as Sigmund Freud, Jacques Lacan, Edward Said, and Madina Tlostanova, this study aims to critically examine Blanch's perception of the Caucasus – and the peoples who inhabit this particular *topos*. The study will draw from the love affair of Blanch with The Traveler as a point of reference when applying the concept of Hauntology to *The Sabres of Paradise*. The main argument of the paper will demonstrate how the ghost of a past or a "lost future" haunts the novel and its depiction of the Caucasian male, pivoting a way to its fetishization and exoticization as it establishes a *bricolage* that dwells on the thresholds of post-structuralism and postcolonial studies. Afterwards, the study will draw from the Decolonial approach of Tlostanova and the postcolonial approach of Layton in

order to assess the depiction of the feminine and femininity in the Caucasus as portrayed by Blanch. The study will thus argue that Blanch regenerates and justifies the grounds for colonialism as she perceives the women and men of the Caucasus from the eye of a Western woman.

### **The Specter in and The Textual Unconscious of *The Sabres Of Paradise***

In regard to the presence of the ghost, it would be appropriate to say that a specter is haunting the Caucasus – the specter of a love affair that created whirlwinds in the consciousness of a young English woman. This specter, in the form of a Tartar man in Russia is first presented in *Journey Into the Mind's Eye* in living flesh. It is a man who gives Blanch affectionate nicknames in Russian such as little cat (61), a man that firmly states that Blanch is almost Russian (138), a man that shares untame passions with Blanch when she was only seventeen. This half-Russian, half-Tartar [or Oriental] figure will become a revenant in *The Sabres of Paradise*, as it will be demonstrated by this study.

According to Jacques Derrida in *Specters of Marx*, the specter, which is the chief object of his concept of “Hauntology” is described as a revenant that is the owner of both the future and the past (45), while it is argued by Fisher that the specter is also the “failure of the future” (Fisher 1). What then, is the specter? According to Fisher, the specter arises at a failure of the future. To Derrida, it is certainly of the past but also it belongs to a future. It is of a future that has failed, or never existed. The specter is a lost future, the foundation of its ontology lies in the irrevocability of that particular future in question. The specter owns the future as Derrida is paraphrased, by solely by the virtue of the fact that future did never come to be. Yet it must also be acknowledged, that the specter is not solely a revenant, it is a revenant but it is also inhabited by a spirit: “[if] the specter is always animated by a spirit (...)” (2), Derrida puts it in *Specters of Marx* and not without reason, for when looks at the quote Derrida drew from *Hamlet* to establish his theory<sup>2</sup>, it becomes evident that the ghost is also a

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<sup>2</sup> “Rest, rest perturbed Spirit!” (Hamlet 69)

spirit, as seen in the case of Hamlet's father. In other words, the presence of the ghost always implies the presence of a spirit. The study argues that, this spirit, in Blanch's case belongs to none other but the Tartar gentleman from Russia because Blanch herself already describes this gentleman as "the passionate companion of my reveries – this revenant, part Traveler, part Mongol rider from the steppes – where was he?" (Blanch 162). What would one make of such a description? Of course, the identification of the Traveler as a revenant could be attested to mere coincidence, yet this coincidence vanishes if one considers that the revenant, the ghost himself accompanies to the reveries of the author of *The Sabres of Paradise*, whose romantic imagination and nature with a tendency towards reveries have already been mentioned by other critics. In short, the study argues that the presence of the revenant, despite not being the *prima causa* of Blanch's romantic imaginings, is present through her perception of the Caucasus – and the males of the Caucasus who are depicted as the Oriental, as the Traveler was in *Journey Into the Mind's Eye*.

As a counter-argument, one could of course argue that authorial intent, at least consciously does not make such a reference in *The Sabres of Paradise*. There is no mention of The Traveler in the novel. However, such a counter-argument would only present the critic with one side of the coin. If one can argue about authorial conscious, then, it would also be possible to argue an authorial unconscious, or a textual, or a literary unconscious, and such an approach is insightfully crafted by a number of psychoanalytical literary critics such as Jonathan Culler. In his "Textual Self-Consciousness and Textual Unconscious", Culler argues: The literary unconscious is an authorial unconscious, an unconscious involved in the production of literature; and the notion is thus useful for raising questions about the relation between what gets in to the work and what gets left out, and about the sorts of repression that may operate in the production of literature" (Culler 369). Culler's summary of this textual unconscious however, despite being insightful, does not offer a full picture; for the textual unconscious not only deals with the sorts of repression that are crafted through the production of literature.

In fact, one may infer this from the quote “what gets into work” for just like repression, other defense mechanisms such as projection and identification, as in the case of the melancholic which is demonstrated as “where love-investment is substituted with narcissistic identification, is the survival of the love relationship itself” (Popa and Reynolds 172), do *get into the work* as inadvertently as what is left out from it. It also must be stated that the presence of a specter – or a revenant, from the perspective of the one who seeks a revenant instead of one who averts the revenant, implies a sense of loss, or a sense of mourning. This sense of mourning paves way for the subject to identify with the object as stated by Freud in his “Mourning and Melancholia”, the withdrawn libido into the ego “serves to establish an identification of the ego with the abandoned object” (Freud 248). Such identification by all means would include incorporating the *weltanschauung* of the object, which this study will explore in its later outcomes. The loss of the object itself however, still hovers over the subject, the cathexis is still present in the way of Derrida’s supplement, which is described as: “[the thing] which is ‘added on’ and also that which ‘substitutes for and supplants’ the original” (Gibson 292).

If one recalls the Lacanian formula which argues that lack presupposes desire and “Through the experience of lack that the human being begins to use the imagination, and constructs symbols, fantasies” (Horrocks 68), the substitution and the supplantation of the original as argued by Derrida in his *The Work of Mourning*, exits the photographic form and latches onto the physical, or the fantastical [in a way that resembles a phantasm]. This latching to the physical –which borders into the fantastical in *The Sabres of Paradise’s* depiction of the men of the Caucasus– only forms a half of the perspective of this study for what this study presents is that the specter exists in a two-fold form, in one of its forms, it latches into the physical through the fantastical in a way that recalls the lost object and a way that is haunted by its specter. In its other form, the specter presents itself as the *weltanschauung*<sup>3</sup> of the lost object, or the *weltanschauung* the

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<sup>3</sup> Viz. “world-view”.

lost object attests to the subject, as evidenced by Blanch's point of view towards the women of the Caucasus.

### **The Caucasus Male as The Exotic Other**

In order to elaborate on Blanch's perspective on the men of the Caucasus throughout *The Sabres of Paradise*, this study must acknowledge its debt to scholars such as Madina Tlostanova and Irvin Cemil Schick. In his *The Sexual Margin*, Schick asks an important question "How did women travelers' depiction of Orient differ from men's"? In order to answer such a question within the context of *The Sabres of Paradise* one must invoke how the Caucasus Male, an "Oriental", was perceived in the literary corpus of the Orient of the Russia, due to one of the aims of this study. In her *Gender Epistemologies and Eurasian Borderlands*, Tlostanova aptly answers such a question by saying that "The Caucasus male was used by the Russian officers as an attractive sexual role model (...)" (Tlostanova 78), highlighting the object of a colonial gaze that is imitated by the colonizer. Such an element is also present in *The Sabres of Paradise*, despite the fact that the writer of the novel is a British woman who is not employed in the Russian army. Blanch more than once underlines the attractiveness of the Caucasus male; highlighting the "magnificent physique" (Blanch 58) of "these virile creatures" (58), replicating the Russian point of view towards the Caucasus Male while at the same time enabling one to answer the question posed by Schick.

Blanch's case, despite being the photographic negative of a colonial gaze, is where the specter steps into the narrative through the eyes of a British woman, and such a step into the narrative is two-fold. Despite the fact that the specter in this study is a Tartar, an "Asiatic", it is by virtue of the age-old Orientalist trope that the supplement which is required by the lack is projected towards the Caucasus Male: the lost object gives way to its fantasy [or its phantom] in a way that invites replacement, or replication because of the presence of the cathexis. The replication and replacement is possible due to the work of an Orientalist imagination, for Blanch repeatedly highlights the "Asiatic" qualities of the Caucasian males such as the instance she depicts Djamal-Uddin, ShamyI's son as

"[His eyes] set slanted in high cheekbones and his black hair – that densely dark glossy hair of the Asiatics which seems plumage rather than hair – still told of his origins" (Blanch 313) while not overlooking to mention his "his handsome dark features" (Blanch 313), establishing an interplay of desire and race as the specter looms through the text. The Tartar's ghost exists as a specter that exists as a hidden signified in the text: the Caucasus Male, his handsomeness and attractiveness exist as a signifier that point towards this revenant that haunts, or accompanies Blanch's reveries; leaving the time out-of-joint. The time is out-of-joint, for the Traveler cannot exist in the chronotope of the Caucasus during the Murid Wars and for the specter can never exist within the accustomed laws of temporality.

In her aforementioned book, Tlostanova also states that the Caucasus Male was associated with violence (Tlostanova 78) in the narrative of the Russian Empire. Tlostanova further argues that the image of the mountaineers is presented as "impulsive, courageous machos unable to control themselves and in need of the supervision of the Russian Empire" (79). The association of the Caucasus male with violence, and their impulsivity, courage, and machismo is also highlighted by Blanch as "Vengeance and violence: such was the Caucasus throughout its dark history" (Blanch 11), "[The Caucasians] were savage, yet brave and chivalrous" (231) or as "[the] manly inhabitants" (285) of the mountains. Blanch's narrative, despite an apparent admiration, and attraction towards the Caucasus Male inadvertently reproduces the colonial justification of the Russian Empire due to the presence of the specter foras stated before, the specter's surmising about the fact that Blanch is "almost Russian", serves only to enhance Blanch's romantic view towards the Caucasus. Blanch, despite her love, or perhaps because of her love –for when narcissistic identification takes place in the work of mourning, the object of affection also starts to take a despicable form<sup>4</sup> –

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<sup>4</sup> Hatred and disdain for the lost object is a prevalent theme in studies of psychoanalytical melancholia such as: Rustin, M. (2017). *Narcissism and Melancholia from the Psychoanalytical Perspective of Object*

reproduces the colonial narrative of the Russian Empire. This unconscious reproduction can be attested to the fact that, just like Russian Empire, despite its “conquest” was unable to tame the Caucasus, Blanch as well, despite her escapade with the Traveler, is never able to make the traveler settle, in other words she is never able to tame the Traveler, who is also of Caucasian heritage by the virtue of his mother, as Russia failed to tame the Caucasus since the “conquest”. Such a failure to tame the Traveler and its failure results in a dislocation of Blanch’s original desire, Blanch unconsciously reproduces the Colonial narrative towards the mountaineers, for she herself is unable to subdue this Oriental mountaineer who is the subject of her escapades.

This study had already stated that Blanch makes a certain emphasis on the virility of the Caucasus Male and such an emphasis is another example where Blanch reproduces the Russian colonial narrative in one quotation correlating to a Hadji Mourad in captivity, stating: “The drawing-room sycophants who circled round the Viceregal Court peered at the virile creature, who seemed to look over, and through, them as he gazed out, with his wide, dark, inscrutable eyes” (268). As a counter-argument could have been made to this assessment, of course one might be inclined to think that Blanch’s narrative of the event may just be a representation of the Russian point-of-view towards the mountaineers, as highlighted before by Tlostanova. However, this counter-argument is subverted when one considers the fact that the sexual attractiveness of the Caucasus Male in a way that underlines his machismo has already been highlighted by Blanch herself in a way that could be identified as a projected, romantic fantasy. Blanch states, or rather assumes brazenly: “It had been secretly every woman’s dream to be seized, flung over the saddle of a pure bred Kabarda steed and forced to submit to the advances of some darkling mountaineer (Blanch 15). Such an assessment naturally reproduces the colonial gaze of the Imperial Russia towards the mountaineer and brings another answer to the

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Relations. In: Sheils, B. , Walsh, J. (eds) *Narcissism, Melancholia and the Subject of Community*. Studies in the Psychosocial. Palgrave Macmillan, Cham.

question posed by Schick. Female travel writers such as Blanch<sup>5</sup> view the Orient in a way that inadvertently reproduces the colonialist narrative. However, it is not possible to say that Blanch's point of view towards the Caucasus Male is without redeeming qualities, it is already a well-established fact that colonial narratives or their reproductions are far from homogenous and this applies to Blanch as well. Despite the fact that Blanch reproduces the Russian colonial gaze and anxieties towards the sexuality of the Caucasian Male as highlighted in *Coloniality of Gender in Eurasia* (Tlostanova 78), Blanch also underlines the fact Tlostanova emphasizes in her work, the fact that the accepted images of stereotypes between the colonizer and the colonized are shaken as seen in the affair of a Russian estate owner named Khonyakova and a Kabardian nobleman named Astemir Shemiyev (79). Another assessment of Tlostanova in regards to the Russian women of the era also rings true when one reads the "secret dream of every woman" through that assessment: "Some Russian women (...) were attracted by the exotic erotic difference of a forbidden sexual partner" (Tlostanova 78-79).

### **Blanch's Perception of The Caucasus Women and The Reproduction of Colonial Narrative**

A question remains to be answered when it comes to the general aims of the study. The study so far talked about how Blanch perceived the Caucasus Male in *The Sabres of Paradise*, offering critical analyses that are drawn from multiple theoretical frameworks from psychoanalysis and postcolonialism to poststructuralism. Yet how Blanch perceived the Caucasus Woman as a woman herself and whether such a perception reproduces or overrules the colonial narrative towards them? This is a question that denies a singular, homogeneous answer. In *The Sabres of Paradise*, Blanch at times reproduces the colonialist narrative underlined by Tlostanova as "(...) We find typical notions of

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<sup>5</sup> It would not be a far-fetched assumption to consider Blanch a travel writer, both by the virtue of her travels in *Journey into the Mind's Eye* and by the virtue of the travels she conducted in order to meet Shamy's descendants.

extremely early puberty, heightened sexuality and relative social freedom, and unscrupulousness of the local young girls which helped justify the pedophilic inclinations of the Russian officers” (Tlostanova 73), referring to the poem “Guasha” written by Martynov. In *The Sabres of Paradise*, Blanch reproduces this narrative underlined by Tlostanova to the point of uncanniness by stating:

It was the custom for Caucasian girls to be laced into a tight corselet of deer skin which constricted and formed their narrow bodies, (and was said to induce lung disorders), but undoubtedly accounted for much of their attenuated grace. This corselet was put on with ceremony, around the age of eight. It was never removed until their marriage, generally at the age of fourteen, or thereabouts, when it was the bridegroom’s privilege to rip open the seams with his kindjal (Blanch 144-145).

Blanch’s statement in regard to the extremely early puberty can be inferred from the marriage age she “observes” for the women of the Caucasus. Such an assessment, when one considers the legal marriage age in Imperial Russia was a minimum of 16 for women as stated in “Peasant-Marriage in Nineteenth Century Russia” by Avdeev et. al as: “(...) After 1830, it was raised to 16 and 18 years respectively”, implies that the women of the Caucasus “matured” earlier than the women of Russia in a way that could be used to justify the inclinations of the officers highlighted by Tlostanova.

Another instance where the colonial narrative is reproduced by Blanch lies in the “token rape” mentioned in *The Sabres of Paradise*: “(...) In some marriage ceremonials, along with the token rape, or abduction, of the bride found all over the near East” (Blanch 145). Such assumptions, considered within the framework of the sexual violence inflicted by Russians in the Caucasus present a dangerous possibility, firstly, it can be weaponized to justify colonial rape and secondly it justifies the presence of Russian Empire on a civilizing mission in the Caucasus as lampshaded by Tlostanova: “(...) Gender and sexual problematic were used by the Russian imperial rhetoric in its justification of colonization coded

as emancipation of the local women from the horrible male dictate” (Tlostanova 78). Blanch’s perspective towards the Caucasus women as “women need to be saved” echoing Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak’s work, “Can the Subaltern Speak?” is a *par excellence* example of the mission civilizatrice assumed by the “more advanced” peoples in a way that echoes –a compatriot of Blanch– Kipling’s “The White Man’s Burden. ”

Another question that needs to be addressed is why Blanch – apparently not consciously but unconsciously– reproduces the Russian colonial narrative towards the Caucasus Women, especially one considers the pervasive sexual violence of the Russians? Considering the Caucasian origins of the Traveler’s mother, and the psychoanalytical aspect of this study, a filial competition would be a feasible answer to some. However, such an argument would spectacularly lack in depth, especially when one considers that the attitude towards the object of mourning, in this case, the specter that is ever-present in Blanch’s narrative of the Caucasus, assumes a more sinister tone according to Popa and Reynold who underline that “(...) The experience of loss is also an opportunity to reveal the initial ambivalence of love relationships themselves, with their cohort of setbacks and disappointments, motivating the sadistic satisfactions one takes through the late punishment of the internalized love-object” (172). In this quotation, Popa and Reynold underline that the subject assumes a [characteristically unconscious in order to keep psychic conflict at bay] sadistic position towards the introjected love object throughout the process of mourning. Such a sadistic, punitive position towards the Caucasian Women in *The Sabres of Paradise*, in the light of Popa and Reynold’s study correlates to an expression of mourning which dons the mantle of a sadistic impulse towards the object that is mothered by a Caucasian. Due to the fact that Blanch is unable to “tame” the Traveller, a process of mourning and narcissistic identification takes place and such an intermingled process is defined by Freud as a process in which “(...) Hatred goes to work on its substitute object, insulting it, humiliating it, making it suffer and deriving sadistic satisfaction from that suffering” (Freud 318).

One might be inclined to ask however, how does the “salvation” of the Caucasus women correlate to this sadistic, unconscious impulse derived from the loss of the object? After all, Russian Empire used the sexual rhetoric to construct a “mission civilizatrice”, despite the fact that this mission is, as stated by countless scholars, nothing but a veneer. Here, it would be feasible for one to remember that the colonial discourse towards women always had multiple faces, while one face would argue for the sexual violence committed on women, or the penetration of the land, which is depicted chiefly as feminine, another face would argue for the liberation of the women who had inhabited this land. Therefore, Blanch’s unconscious adoption of the colonial gaze both as punisher and liberator, while containing ambivalence in itself, is not a far cry from the colonial outlooks that have been a part of history.

One more thing that this study needs to touch on is the anxious, but violence inducing position of the Russian colonial narrative in the Caucasus towards women and how this particular position becomes manifest in Blanch’s *The Sabres of Paradise*. Tlostanova argues that, the women of the Caucasus were considered “savage” by the Russians (73) and such a perception is also reflected on *The Sabres of Paradise* for Blanch writes in regard to the siege of Akhulgo: “(...) And when the men were gone, the women flung down their children as living missiles, and leapt after them” (Blanch 12), giving further voice to such a narrative presented by the Russians. However, there is one more side to this narrative, further solidifying the colonial gaze’s ambivalent approach towards women, also the ambivalent approach of Blanch. Madina Tlostanova argues that “Central Asia and in Caucasus up to today it is the local woman that manifests purity, sexual passivity, and piety” (Tlostanova 81) and rightfully so for such a perspective is also adopted by Blanch herself in her reproduction of the colonialist narrative when describing ShamyI’s wife Fatimat: “She must have learned to put away all considerations of personal happiness, submerging herself, knowing herself to be of little moment beside the goal of Murid faith and Caucasian independence” (Blanch 145), underlining her

piety in regard to Muridism, her passivity [albeit not in a sexual way], and purity for her self-sacrifice.

It must be stated that, due to the strategy adopted by the colonial narrative and Blanch, one tends to feel a mixture of admiration and pity towards the women of the Caucasus, especially when one also considers the “amazonlike qualities” (Blanch 11). Yet all in all, one must also consider the psychological ambivalence that Blanch harbors towards these women as she underlines their savagery on one hand and as she unconsciously paves way to the justification of sexual violence towards them, she on the other hand attests to their “grace”, “submissiveness”, and “femininity” in instances that make one recall the age-old Orientalist trope of “Circassian Beauty”. It can be therefore said that, despite being a woman herself, Blanch for one reason or the other, reproduces the colonial narratives towards women, and this also becomes highlighted as she does the same for the men, regardless of her praise and attraction to them, or rather, perhaps because of it.

### **Conclusion**

In conclusion, it can be surmised due to the arguments presented in this study that Blanch, both due to the presence of a specter and its *weltanschauung* and due to the sadistic impulses triggered by a lost object, is unable to distance herself from the tropes presented in the Russian colonial narrative of the Caucasus. Blanch’s approach could of course be perceived as a praise to the untrained eye however, a critical reading of the novel manages to display both the darker recesses of Blanch’s psyche and a colonialist narrative that is presented as nothing short of praise. As a mourner on the verge of a spectral turn, Blanch displays almost all of the qualities that are expected from a mourner, or from someone who is haunted, no matter how destructive these qualities are and no matter how they are put in the service of a colonial reproduction.

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