

## Travels among “backward heathens”: J. I. Bajza’s “The Adventures and Experiences of the Young Man René” as a frontier orientalist fantasy

DOBROTA PUCHEROVÁ

*René mládenca príhodi a skúsenosti* (The adventures and experiences of the young man René; henceforth only *René*), first published in 1783–1785 in Pressburg, Upper Hungary (today’s Bratislava), is often considered to be the first novel in the Slovak language (Marčok 1968, 9). It is preeminent on a regional level as well, preceding both its Hungarian and Czech counterparts: in these languages, only adaptations (loose translations) of French novels had been published before, but no original novel (Brtáňová 2016, 98). Written by Jozef Ignác Bajza (1755–1836), a Catholic priest, satirist and Slovak nationalist, it constructs an image of Middle Eastern Islamic cultures to express Enlightenment social critique as well as nationalist sentiment. In this sense, the novel is part of a genre and shows influences by a number of both Enlightenment and classic texts. Bajza, who had studied at Vienna’s Pazmaneum and besides Slovak and Hungarian read in Latin, German and French, was a cosmopolitan intellectual who was familiar with the European genres and discourses of his time. *René* can be read as an amalgam of several genres: the Enlightenment novel of education, a heroic romance, a satirical novel, a gallant novel and an orientalist fantasy, with picaresque, sentimental and didactic elements (compare Brtáňová 2009, 571–581). While in many ways an original story, its ideological, narrative and imaginal inspirations can be traced to Enlightenment and classic novels such as Francois Fénelon’s *Les aventures de Télémaque* (1699), Ignác Meszáros’s *Kartigám* (1772), Achilles Tatius’ *τὰ κατὰ Λευκίππην καὶ Κλειτοφῶντα* (The Adventures of Leucippe and Clitophon, 2nd century AD), Montesquieu’s *Lettres persanes* (1721), Voltaire’s *Candide* (1759), or William Darell’s *A Gentleman Instructed in the Conduct of a Virtuous and Happy Life* (1732), which Bajza read in Hungarian translation (Brtáňová 2016). In this sense, it is simultaneously cosmopolitan and local, unique in being both “peripheral” and “classic”.

Bajza’s novel was written to both entertain and educate, with very particular ideological intentions. Published at a time when Slovak national identity was emerging through the literary and educational work of Slovak nationalist intelligentsia, it was written to promote the idea of the Slovak people as a modern European nation rooted in Christian values and in step with Enlightenment modernity. Bajza, as is well known, was an ardent promoter of the Enlightenment reforms of the Habsburg Emperor Joseph II. He was deeply concerned about the cultural and political margin-

alization of the Slovaks in Hungary and in particular by the widespread illiteracy, lack of learning and the resulting absence of national consciousness among the Slovaks. As he laments in Part II of *René* through the mouth of a character: “[T]his folk has never had books in the right sense of the word. [...] Whatever caused it, it means that we are now fumbling in deep darkness if we want to know anything about the origins of this tribe or when it came to this territory and whether it came as a winner” (Bajza 1970, 222).<sup>1</sup> To write his novel, Bajza was the first to codify the Slovak language (even though this version was rejected by his successors). To portray the Slovaks as a modern European nation, he used an imagination typical of his time: an orientalist fantasy. As will be analyzed, Bajza’s images of the Muslim cultures of Syria and Egypt are used to fashion a Slovak modernity, confirming the Slovak people’s Christian, European and Slavic identity at a time when it was politically just starting to come into being as a nation, seeing itself as distinct from the Hungarians, the Czechs and the Jews.

### CENTRAL EUROPEAN ORIENTALISM

As critics have noted, Bajza’s representation of Syria and Egypt (both then part of the Ottoman Empire) did not have any presumptions of authenticity and was simply following a popular convention of the time, designed to excite the readers’ imagination and enhance the entertainment value of a text (Mráz 1948, 106). Writers who did not have a direct experience of the Orient, and also those who did, copied orientalist tropes from each other (see Said 1978; Kabbani 1986; Staud 1999), as is the case also with Bajza. Yet, as Edward Said (1978) was the first to point out, the ideological meaning of these exotic elements is undeniable. It came out of a historical European perception of the Middle East as a civilizational threat and at the same time Europe’s most significant cultural contestant. Starting from the medieval crusades to recapture the Holy Land from the Muslims, through the expansion of the Ottoman Empire to Europe, the Orient would occupy in the European imagination “one of its deepest and most recurring images of the Other” (1). As Said has famously argued, the establishment of the academic field of Orientalism in the 17th century, in combination with European colonial interests in the Orient, led to the proliferation of a discourse that was engaged in epistemologically, culturally and politically dominating the Orient by producing knowledge about it – knowledge that is considered superior to what the Orientals produce about themselves. A crucial function of Orientalism is the construction of European identity in juxtaposition to the Oriental Other. The presumed irrationality, backwardness and primitiveness of the Oriental cultures was set against the European cultural identity to confirm the latter as superior: “The Orient is irrational, depraved (fallen), childlike, ‘different’, thus the European is rational, virtuous, mature, ‘normal’” (Said 1978, 40). In addition, the Orient is static (208), passive (97, 105, 311), barbaric (150, 175) and degenerate (172, 286), meaning that Europe is dynamic, active, cultured, well-bred, and so on.

Europe, for Edward Said, is Western Europe and especially Britain and France, which had colonial interests in the Middle East. Central and Eastern Europe, on the other hand, had a specific relationship to the Muslim Orient that was mainly shaped by its experience of being along the frontier between East and West and by the series

of Ottoman invasions to these lands starting from the 13th century. At the Battle of Kosovo of 1389, the Ottoman Empire was poised to conquer the entirety of the Balkans. In 1526 at the Battle of Mohács, the Ottomans gained control over one third of the Hungarian Kingdom including Budapest. In 1683, the Ottoman army was defeated by the united forces of the Habsburg Monarchy, the Holy Roman Empire and the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth at the Battle of Vienna, which is often perceived as the decisive battle that ended the 300-year-long threat of the Ottoman Empire and saved Christian Europe from Muslim domination.

The Austrian anthropologist André Gingrich has coined the term “frontier orientalism” to describe the perception of the Orient by nations that did not have contact with Muslim cultures through colonizing them, but were themselves threatened by and sometimes the colonial subjects of the Ottoman Empire. In this sense, the Orient for Central and Eastern European nations was never a remote and abstract Other, but familiar and very real. According to Gingrich, the Habsburg narrative of Muslim Orientals has a dual register, differentiating between the “Bad Orientals”, who represent the threat of the Ottoman Empire, and the “Good Oriental”, the defeated Turk who becomes a Bosnian colonial subject and eventually a loyal ally against new enemies. This narrative helped to consolidate the identity of the Habsburg Empire as a major European power (Gingrich 1998, 110; Gingrich 2015, 63). The Slovak-American scholar Charles Sabatos has followed upon Gingrich’s work in his analysis of the representation of Ottoman Turks in Central European literatures and folk genres from the 16th century to present. As he emphasizes, “In East Central Europe, in contrast to the expansive Western empires, the image of the Turk was not a discursive justification for imperialism or colonialism but a means of preserving cultural identity” (2014, 15). As he has argued, the historical menace posed by the Turkish Other paradoxically

served to strengthen individual national identities, which eventually led to the fall of the very empire this image had been intended to unify [...] However, the Turks portrayed in historical songs, captivity narratives, and other genres often did not reflect a factual representation of the conflict between these two cultures, but served as a means for “self-fashioning” in which Czechs, Slovaks, and Hungarians could assert Christian, European, and later national identities (32, 81).

As I will analyze below, all of these characteristics, and others, can be found in Bajza’s self-fashioning of a Slovak modernity in *René*. In casting his protagonist René as a Venetian rather than a Slovak young man, Bajza wanted to associate the Slovak people with Western Europe (and especially with the ancient European civilizations such as the Greek and Roman, as is evident from his casual references to Greek and Roman myths, gods and goddesses) and differentiate them from the Hungarian people under whose political and cultural domination they lived. Ottoman Turkey, on the contrary, becomes the common enemy of the Europeans, its civilizational anti-thesis (see also Istvánová 2016, 115). However, as will be shown, not all Turks are necessarily “Bad Muslims” (Gingrich 1998; 2015) – some of them can become allies in the nationalist narrative. Finally, I will analyze the narrative and ideological function of the representation of Ancient Egypt, the only truly “remote” culture in the novel.

## THE PLOT OF *RENÉ*

The novel is divided into two parts: Part I narrates René's adventures in the Orient; Part II tells of René's experiences in Austria and Upper Hungary. This analysis will focus solely on Part I. The narrator's frequent didactic monologues suggest Bajza uses the narrator as a device to express his own opinions, as is typical for an 18th-century satirical novel or novel of education; therefore, I will treat the narrator and the author as the same person.<sup>2</sup>

Part I includes many side plots, hidden histories and chance encounters and some details will of necessity be left out. René, a young Venetian, leaves home with his teacher Van Stiphout in search of his lost sister, Fatima. Their boat arrives in the Lebanese port of Tripoli di Soria, which is controlled by a pasha under the rule of the Ottoman sultan. The pasha's daughter Fatima recognizes René as her long-lost twin brother. His plan to take Fatima with him to Venice is thwarted by the bandit Aboris, who kidnaps her. René and Van Stiphout leave Tripoli, are shipwrecked and separated. René's lifeboat takes him to Egypt, where he is enslaved and bought by a Cairo merchant, an Arab of Coptic Christian faith, who grants him liberty. A Cairo mufti employs René to teach his son and daughter Hadixa. She falls in love with René and writes him a love letter, but he believes this is nothing more than a treacherous plot to convert him. He is influenced in this belief by the devious family doctor (who has been rejected by Hadixa and jealously observes her feelings for René). He writes to Hadixa that he does not share her feelings and asks to be released from service. Soon after, he is poisoned, but his life is saved. He believes he was poisoned by Hadixa, while she is distressed to learn that René's life is under threat and begs her father to release him from service.

René realizes he had been misled by the jealous doctor and falls in love with Hadixa. Before the two are able to elope, the mufti has them imprisoned, as he cannot accept a non-Muslim for a son-in-law. Like René before him, the mufti falls under the influence of the unscrupulous doctor and his hired dervish who performs "miracles" to prove that Allah wishes both René and Hadixa dead. When facing a public execution, Hadixa proves her innocence by exposing all those "miracles" as fake. The mufti recognizes he has been manipulated and consents to the marriage of Hadixa and René under the condition that René convert to Islam. René refuses and leaves for Venice, where he and Hadixa are reunited, but he tells her he cannot marry her (yet), since he first needs to learn about the world and choose his profession freely.

The second parallel storyline concerns René's and Fatima's history as abducted babies taken at birth from their Christian mother by Ottoman pirates. Her captor gives away her babies and wants to marry her, but she refuses. The pirate (now a qadi) sends her back to Europe. René, then named Ibrahim, and his sister Fatima grow up in Tripoli di Soria as the children of a rich mullah who later becomes a pasha. From childhood the siblings are drawn to Europeans. As a boy Ibrahim runs away from home, reaching Venice under the protection of Don Varlet, a Venetian merchant, who adopts him and calls him René. In the end all are reunited in Venice: René; Fatima, who manages to escape from Tripoli with the help of Van Stiphout; Don Varlet, who turns out to be their birth father; the nanny from the house of the

Cairo Coptic merchant, who turns out to be their birth mother; and Hadixa. Fatima wants to marry Van Stiphout, who had saved her life, but that is not possible as he is a Catholic priest.

### ORIENTALIST PLOT MOTIFS IN *RENÉ*

The story of René's adventures in the Orient features a typical repertoire of Orientalist motifs present in European Orientalist narratives at least since the 15th century (see Sabatos 2014; 2015; 2018). These include Christian children abducted by the Turks who later rediscover their Christianity; the battle with pirates or bandits; captivity, the pressure to convert and the struggle to preserve one's cultural identity; the harem rescue; as well as stock characters such as the Oriental despot, the sadistic Muslim soldier, the janissary helper and the Oriental princess who falls in love with the Christian hero. Below, I will analyze some of these, mapping also the sources of Bajza's imagery.

#### The harem rescue

The motif of "harem rescue" – European men rescuing a European, Greek or Oriental woman from an Oriental harem – is widespread in 18th- and 19th-century European literature and arts (see DelPlato 91–95). The representation of a harem as a prison serves to portray Muslims as violent tyrants incapable of true love and European men as romantic lovers. Its best-known representations are in W. A. Mozart's *Die Entführung aus dem Serail* (1782), based on a libretto by Christoph Friedrich Bretzner, or in Lord Byron's epic poems *The Giaour* (1813) and *The Corsair* (1814), upon which Verdi's opera *Il Corsaro* (1848) and Saint-Georges' ballet libretto *Le Corsaire* (1856) are based. Bajza took this motif from the novel *Kartigám* by the Hungarian author Ignác Mészáros, published in Pressburg in 1772 and extremely popular at the time (see Brtáňová 2016). The novel is in itself an adaptation of the German heroic novel *Der unvergleichlich schönen Türkin wundersame Lebens- und Liebesgeschichte* (1723) by Menard, which in turn was an adaptation of a French novel (see Staud 1999; Bednářová 2015, 40). It tells of the destiny of Kartigám, the virtuous daughter of a Turkish pasha. Her story begins in Hungary, when Buda is recaptured from the Turks. She is captured as war booty by a French lieutenant and taken to Paris, where she is baptized as Krisztina and becomes a Christian. Prince Sándor asks for her hand; after overcoming many obstacles in their journey, they finally get married. It then turns out that Kartigám/Krisztina is not really Turkish, but the daughter of a Hungarian nobleman who had fallen in battle for Buda. This confirms that only a European Christian woman can be virtuous, while the Ottomans are immoral barbarians.

According to André Gingrich, frontier orientalism differs from colonial Western orientalism in its gendered tropes. As he argues, the Oriental of frontier orientalism is

an almost exclusively male person. [...] Frontier orientalism is a tale of male confrontations and alliances; the only women playing any role in it are "our" women, who are threatened by the Bad Muslim and have to be protected by our men. [...] It has no repertoire of standard European, male erotic fantasies about Muslim women (1998, 120).

This is evident in Mészáros as well as in Bajza, where the only two female Oriental characters – Fatima and Hadixa – are “our women”: both dislike their own culture, are intensely drawn to René and Van Stiphout and desperate to run away to Europe; one of them is later revealed to be a European-born woman. Fatima, surviving shipwreck, is devastated to have to return to her father’s harem, where her destiny is an arranged marriage. She is “eager to free herself from this Mohammedan prison [...] when René learned this, he firmly decided he would help her, whatever effort this would require” (Bajza 1970, 108). Eventually, Fatima is rescued by Van Stiphout while René is in Egypt. Hadixa takes her destiny into her own hands and escapes her father’s house without waiting for René’s rescue because she wanted, as she explains to René, “become yours with my own doing, so that you suffer no risk” (164). This female independence is a deviation from the harem rescue motif and serves to underline Hadixa’s agency (see also Istvánová 2016, 118). Arguably, however, Hadixa finds the motivation to escape only after she falls in love with René; he is therefore instrumental in her liberation. Fatima’s and Hadixa’s escape from the harem thus serves to emphasize the backwardness and violence of Muslim men and the heroism and gallantry of European men who know how to treat women.

### **The double identity transformation**

The motif of double identity transformation, in which a Turkish person converts to Christianity to find out he or she was born a Christian, Bajza also borrowed from Mészáros. It was also very popular in orientalist literature and a similar example can be found in the Slovak epic poem *Turčín Poničan* (The Turk of Poniky, 1863) by the Romantic author Samo Chalupka. It reflects the actual reality of Ottoman Turks capturing young Christian boys for janissaries, who were then sent to occupy the European lands they came from. In Bajza it is primarily a narrative device to preserve and celebrate the Christian identity of the Slovak people at a time when the memory of the Turkish invasions was still alive. It confirms René’s and Fatima’s Christian identity as heroic and virtuous and the Muslim culture of their rearing as barbaric. Bajza gives many advance signs that Fatima and René (Ibrahim) were born Christians: both are from childhood instinctively drawn to Christians and dislike the Oriental culture; both are highly intelligent, brave and virtuous; both express romantic love.

### **The abduction by pirates and the saving of a maiden from execution**

The abduction by Ottoman or Barbary pirates (corsairs) is another orientalist trope typical of 17th and 18th century European adventure narratives, present, for example, in Defoe’s *Robinson Crusoe* (1719), *Ebenezer* (1675), a British narrative by William Okeley of his forced service on an Algerian pirate ship, or *The Algerine Captive* (1797), a fictitious memoir by American author Royall Tyler. Bajza most likely took this motif from the Ancient Greek romance *The Adventures of Leucippe and Clitophon* by Achilles Tatius, a 2nd-century Greek author from Alexandria (Števček 1989, 96–97). It involves two young lovers, Clitophon and Leucippe from Tyre, who elope together on a ship, are shipwrecked and captured by the Nile delta pirates. If in Tatius the Egyptian pirates are barbaric because they are not Greek, a difference

marked by their shaven heads (Tatius Book II, Episode 7), in Bajza they also have shaven heads (95) but it is their Islamic faith that makes them evil. In addition, Bajza evidently borrowed from Tatius the episode with a raging boar (Book II, Episode 34) that appears in Hadixa's dream (74–75), the description of the hippopotamus (Book IV, Episode 2), the crocodile (Book IV, Episode 19) and the Egyptian irrigation of the fields (Book IV, Episode 14) that all appear in Chapter 2 of *René*. He may have been inspired also by the mock public sacrifice of Leucippe in Book IV, Episode 2 that bears similarities to the thwarted execution of Hadixa (126–137). The key images of this motif are an innocent, beautiful maiden, “our woman” (Gingrich), to be killed by cruel barbarians in a public, extrajudiciary execution for religious or ideological purposes. The maiden is saved by “civilized” men who trick the barbarians, thus demonstrating their moral and cultural superiority.

Hadixa is imprisoned by her own father, who is under the influence of the dervish's “miracles”. She starts to hate her own religion that condemns her to die (89). Through her loyal janissary, René sends Hadixa messages in which he “instructed him and the maiden about what needed to be prepared and how to proceed” (134). Thanks to René's scientific knowledge of herbs, potions and chemical substances, Hadixa exposes the dervish's “miracles” as fake: she smears her hands with rose mallow and submerges her hands into burning lead harmlessly; she smears her soles with tallow and walks on hot iron without pain; she creates a “burning” inscription on a blackboard using white phosphorus, and so on. René thus saves Hadixa's life without physically being there: “René was filled with great happiness to learn that it was he, with his ingeniousness and sharp wit, who had saved Hadixa and himself from the death prepared for them by villains” (148).

### THE REPRESENTATION OF ISLAM AND MUSLIMS IN *RENÉ*

Islam and Muslims in the novel are a central trope that serves to define Europeans as culturally, morally and intellectually superior to the Orientals. Through a confidential narrative voice that assumes the Slovak reader shares his opinions, the narrator draws a sharp distinction between the Christians and the Muslims that confirm the superiority of the Christian culture (including the novel's Slovak readers). The stereotypical representation of the Muslims can be divided into four groups for a close analysis:

- Muslims are described as heathens or infidels. Their religion is a collection of superstitious and blasphemous ideas, while Christianity is the only legitimate religion that teaches virtue. Islam is also a violent religion.
- Muslims are described as backward, uncultured barbarians who have no conception of culture, justice, romantic love or good governance.
- Muslims are deeply immoral: false, devious, treacherous and cruel. They engage in sinful sexuality such as polygamy, homosexuality and sodomy.
- Not all Muslims are Bad Muslims; there are also some Good Muslims.

## Islam in *René*

Muslims are described as infidels from the very beginning. Don Varlet tries to dissuade René from travelling among the “backward heathens” (“zaostalí pohania”, 15). Muhammad is described as a treacherous, stupid bandit (18), “the greatest criminal” (55) and a “mad criminal [...] only a completely blind person could believe in his fables” (139). Islam is described as a “godless” (141) and dogmatic religion: “nobody can ever argue with anyone about the smallest segment of their faith, nor examine its veracity, but all must believe everything with humble obedience, which is the greatest blindness” (140). Here, Bajza is a typical rationalist humanist. He describes Islam as a collection of superstitions and false myths and mocks the Muslims who believe that dreams are divine revelations: “[M]ad followers of a madder leader! Undoubtedly they swallowed the deception of the creator and originator of their faith, as Muhammad made up many magical stories [...] Can one wonder that this nation believes in such trickery when such superstitions are imbibed even by respected and learned people?” (76) The narrator offers his own theory of dreams: dreams reflects the dreamer’s character, especially if they occur repeatedly.

Islam is described as a violent religion. “If anyone tried to question anything, he would be running the risk of torture” (141). Muslims convert people to Islam against their will (43, 47) and forcefully circumcise anyone who dares to criticize their religion or their prophet (48). In Cairo, René witnesses a conversion ceremony and is terrified the same might happen to him. The person undergoing conversion is described as a “victim” that is forcefully circumcised (42) and the entire ceremony as a deep humiliation: “When the circumciser finished, he started shouting that the honouree is a Mamluk, which in Arabic means a bought or a forcefully captured person” (43). The Muslims have “mouldy brains” because they spread their religion by violence (43). Anyone who abandons Islam is tortured and killed. René reveals to Hadixa he is the lost boy to whom she had been engaged at birth; therefore, he is a Muslim and Hadixa did not commit a sin by loving him. Hadixa suspects René would be executed for revealing he gave up Islam in favour of Christianity and keeps René’s true identity a secret from her father (88–89).

Ramadan is seen as a senseless ritual, since it forbids day-time eating and drinking during the hottest season of the year; Bajza recommends avoiding this irrational self-torture by sleeping during the day and staying awake at night (45). Muslims praying in a mosque are described as mad: “they beat their breasts and hips, shout as loud as possible, gesticulate wildly and nod their heads like Jews. Some of them lose their senses, others foam at mouth, turn pale, and half-dead fall down, hoarsely reiterating the word ‘hou’, meaning god” (46). The perceived madness of Islam is evident here, while the comparison with Jews emphasizes the otherness of Muslims and the strangeness and even perversity of their religion.

The narrator describes in detail the institution of Muslim priesthood and monkhood. He spares no good word for the monks (dervishes), whom he describes as madmen, gypsies, robbers and bandits (123–124). He derides the practice of ritualistic masochism among the dervishes as “deranged” (125) and the superstitions that inspire it: “When they drink a drink called mašlok, they lose all sense and the faithful



believe they are visited by the holy spirit and see all divine secrets. My own feeling was that they had gone mad. [...] They stab and cut themselves and even stuff a burning beam into their wounds” (125). To mock the “saint” dervishes even more, Bajza writes that “they look as if they had escaped from hell” (124).

On the contrary, Christianity is represented as the only true, legitimate religion. Christians are the only people who offer compassion and help René in his quest: the janissaries, Fatima (his twin sister, therefore a Christian by birth), his birth mother, who saves him after he is poisoned (without knowing his identity), Don Varlet, who takes him to Venice as a boy, and the Cairo merchant of Coptic faith, who rules his house with wisdom and tolerance:

As soon as René stepped into the Arab’s house and saw its decorations and splendour, he immediately saw that his saviour did not belong among those who idle with Iros [...]. His grazing fields were full of cattle and his palace boasted a variety of riches. And since he was refined by the wiser and more tolerant religion, he possessed rationality, moderation and tolerance. This was clearly visible also in his house, where the greatest order presided. It was however not the result of the servants’ fear, but their devotion (37).

The wiser and more tolerant religion is of course Christianity: the Cairo merchant is a wise, rational and tolerant master because he is a Christian and as a result his house flourishes.

### **Muslim cultures in René**

Bajza’s opinion of Muslim cultures is very low indeed. The only enlightened Muslims are those who abhor their own culture and want to become Christians, like Hadixa, who “was resentful that her compatriots still rotted in stupidity and savagery” (17). Muslims do not have the notion of individual liberty. They abduct and enslave people, their marriages are arranged and women are the property of the husbands. In an Egyptian market, “they sold all arrested foreigners who refused to convert to Muhammad’s faith, just like we sell cattle”. They are cruel slave-owners who “believe they have right not only to the products of their slave’s labour, but also the slave’s life” (33). Undoubtedly, Bajza had this information from the widespread Ottoman captivity narratives by European writers (see Snader 1998; Sabatos 2015).

Muslims have “no operas or theatres” and their forms of entertainment are described as primitive, such as a street festival with performers, dancing camels, equestrian acrobats, and so on. “The reason why there are no merrier or wittier amusements is the inborn stupidity of the people, who are not only incapable of anything better, but hostile to anything cleverer” (100).

Muslim rulers are invariably corrupt and devious. The Tripoli pasha takes the fruits of the people’s labour “as soon as they create it”, resulting in the people’s neglect of their fields and everything going to ruin, since “everyone knows that by accumulating property he is making a rod for one’s own back and prefers to be idle” (106). The pasha is killed by the sultan, who fears any potential rivals. The sultan also routinely kills his sons-in-law so that he can get hold of their property (104).

On the contrary, European culture is superior in all respects. The Coptic Christian merchant of Cairo asks René that he teach his son “your language, morals and

manners, educate him, according to your best conscience, in the customs of the more cultured world” (37). Subsequently, a Cairo mufti employs René to teach his children in order to “lift them from the unbearable stupidity of their ancestors” (41). As a young boy, René runs away from his Tripoli family, because something “irresistibly” drew him to Don Varlet: “I therefore asked him to take me with him, because I wanted him to be my father, and not the beglerbeg” (87). The point here is not that René is instinctively drawn to his biological father, but that he is drawn by the European culture, just like his sister Fatima and his lover Hadixa: “and in this way I reached a much more rational and honest world” (92). The rationality of the European culture is emphasized throughout, juxtaposing it to the superstitious Muslim culture. Thanks to his scientific knowledge, René saves Hadixa’s life by giving her detailed instructions on how to perform the dervish’s “miracles” and later uses his medical knowledge to cure Hadixa’s wounded leg while the others helplessly look on (147).

### **Muslim morality and sexuality in *René***

Muslims are described as false, treacherous and devious. In his letter to Hadixa, René writes of “your damned heathen race [...] your devious, false and treacherous ways, that even savages living without any laws have always condemned as loathsome” and claims that “you have made these devious, I repeat, false and treacherous ways your own to the extent that you consider them not only permitted but unavoidable [...] we will never be able to trust any of you, because everyone lies, male or female, young or old” (55).

Bajza’s most damning criticism of Muslim morality, however, comes half-way through Part I. Here, the author dares to attack the holy scripture of the Muslims – the Quran: “What else could this nation carry in its heart and on its tongue but embraces, given that they believe in eternal embracing. They imagine their celebration in the other world as a continuous banquet with food, drink and many beautiful women” (69). The narrator goes on to cite Surahs 46, 48, 54, 62 and 65 and comments:

What sort of paradise is this! [...] First-degree saints will enjoy seventy women [...]. And this teaching causes that the Mohammedans consider their eulenmech [polygamy] not only permitted and honest, but also unavoidable. [...] If the husband develops a dislike to a wife, he can let her go, drive away and divorce. This trick was probably made up by Muhammad to cover up his own dishonesty when he kidnapped the wife of his servant Zeiden and closed her in his own harem (70).

Bajza’s condemnation of Islam’s hedonistic imagination and polygamy is nothing unexpected from a Catholic priest. However, he also expresses his Enlightened modernity by embracing the romantic idea of love: “A marriage is not instituted for property or even dusty portraits of the ancestors, but for what is created by faithful and devoted love” (72). Unlike Muslims, European men are capable of romantic love: René writes to Hadixa he would rather accept death than a forced marriage, since “love is based on freedom” (53–54). This romantic idea of marriage, presented as European, is ranked as superior to the arranged marriage, polygamy and female submission of the Muslims.

Muslim men, in contrast to Europeans, are described as violent, cruel and even sadistic, incapable of true love. The mufti orders the execution of his own daughter without a hearing. Similarly, the doctor and his helpers have no qualms about preparing Hadixa's death only because she is in love with another man. After their treachery is exposed, the mufti has the dervish and a servant brutally tortured: "Every day they brought them out on the main square and pinched them with hot pincers, but not fatally, so they could torture them as long as possible. After long suffering, when they were almost dead, they cut off their heads and hanged them on minarets. Their bodies were cut into pieces and also hanged along main streets" (152). These images emphasize the barbarity of the Orient.

The epitome of despotic Oriental masculinity is the sultan Mehmed the Conqueror, whose legend is recounted by Hadixa on p. 79. To affirm and consolidate his power, he publicly and with his own hand executed his favourite concubine, a Greek maiden named Irene. The legend has passed down through a number of orientalist writers including the English George Peele (1589), Richard Knolles (1603) and the Hungarian Kelemen Mikes (1794) (see Sabatos 2014). Like *One Thousand and One Nights*, it emphasizes the perversity of Oriental men who treat women as disposable objects.

In addition to polygamy, Muslim men also engage in sodomy with the janissaries:

Pashas in the entire empire received the sultan's orders to rob every Christian citizen of his third or fourth son in childhood years. These, or those captured in war or kidnapped in foreign countries, were all brought to Stambul. There the sultan chose the most beautiful ones for his servants and also for committing sodomy (159).

Sodomy is another typical trope of orientalist writing. On the one hand, it reflects the reality of a rich tradition of same-sex sexuality in the Ottoman Empire that had passed on from Ancient Greek and pre-Muslim Turkish and Balkan cultures and is well-documented in European travelogues (see Drucker 2012). On the other, its function is to portray the Orientals as sexually depraved, as is the case here.

### **The Good Muslim in *René***

André Gingrich's analysis of the Habsburg narrative of Muslim Orientals as having a dual register can also be recognized in Bajza's narrative. In contrast to the corrupt, violent, and cruel Muslims, the narrative also includes one Good Muslim: the qadi (a Tripoli judge). Originally one of the pirates who captured René's and Fatima's parents, he showed compassion and instead of killing both prisoners sought to smuggle them to safety. Unable to carry the wounded Don Varlet, he at least raised his chances of survival: "I carried him out of the cave so that he was not found and killed by the others. I hid him in a better place, quickly anointed and bandaged his wound. I also slid some precious gems into his clothes, for him to live on if he survived and managed to get out of there" (117). The qadi then took the young woman with him to Jerusalem as his booty. There, she gave birth to twins, whom he gave away for adoption, hoping she would forget about them and the other man. "I repeatedly asked her to become my wife. But since she continuously resisted, I could not and did not want to force her to love me" (118). By not raping the young woman, and later setting her

free, the qadi demonstrates an extraordinary civilized behaviour that separates him from the other, Bad Muslims. His good character is confirmed in the closing speech of the mother of René and Fatima, who, seeing her adult children for the first time since their birth, unexpectedly grants the qadi forgiveness:

Good man [...] your only sin is that you were helping your mates when they captured us [...]. What followed later I do not keep against you, rather, I thank you from all my heart, since I know none of the others would have treated me like you. It is true that you kidnapped me as your booty, but when you saw that I was unwilling to submit to you, you did not try to satisfy your desire by force, which among your kind is unheard of and so even more extraordinary (166).

According to Gingrich, the trope of the Good Muslim shows that the Muslim can be an ally. The question is, whose ally is a Muslim man who captured a pregnant Christian woman, tricked her into walking away from her wounded husband and after she gave birth to twins took her newborns from her by force? The answer is that he is the ally of Christian men, because he protected “their” woman from violation by Muslims. This shows, as Gingrich suggests, that the Central European orientalist narrative is a “tale of male confrontation and alliance” (1998, 120). In this narrative, women figure only as objects of contestation between men and symbols of male honour, glory or degradation of their manhood. This is confirmed by the fact that René’s mother, as opposed to his father, remains nameless in the story. Her only role in the story is to give birth to René and later save him from poisoning, symbolically giving birth to him again (62) and enabling him to fulfil the destiny of his name, which means re-born. Clearly, this is a story of male quest, in which the main heroes are René, Van Stiphout and Don Varlet, while women are for the most part in passive positions of objects of desire, war booty or awaiting rescue. However, this is not a story of romantic quest. Contrary to expectations, there is no marriage at the end: René refuses to marry Hadixa and Van Stiphout refuses to marry Fatima; instead, they embark upon a new adventure together.

This unexpected ending suggests that Bajza’s central concern in the novel is not the heterosexual romance but the homo-social nationalist self-fashioning. René and his teacher Van Stiphout are drawn to each other through asexual, selfless love, which stands in contrast to Oriental sodomy. This idealized affection between men is expressed verbally and through unspoken innuendo. When they face death in a sea storm, René calls Van Stiphout “my beloved friend... Van Stiphout understood what he wanted to say, that he was more worried about his than own life” (30). He responds: “Don’t torture yourself, you have rewarded me for my love. But you will reward me even more if you [...] completely give yourself into my protection” (31). Van Stiphout then carries “the half-dead René on his shoulders from the flames like Anchises had been carried by his son from burning Troy” (31). The references to total trust, self-sacrifice and the classical hero Aeneas suggests Bajza was thinking about the Aristotelian *philia*, or asexual love between lifelong friends, parents and children, fellow-voyagers and fellow-soldiers, etc., as the purest form of love. At the end of the story, Van Stiphout confirms “I have done everything out of true love and not for a reward” (167). It could even be argued that René hesitates to marry Hadixa

because his love for Van Stiphout is much stronger and mutual. When René selflessly encourages Van Stiphout to abandon priesthood and marry Fatima, “Van Stiphout said nothing and only gave René an affecting look” (“rozčítene pozrel na Reného”, 167), suggesting that their unspoken love is stronger than any affection they might feel for women.

The observations above all reinforce the now widely accepted notion that nationalism, and especially anti-colonial nationalism, is always figured as an enterprise of male solidarity among brothers, fathers, and sons (see Boehmer 2005). While the men represent the nation, as the questing heroes, historical players, and agents of change, the woman, or rather her body, is only a sign of the state of the nation. This confirms that patriarchal gender hierarchy is essential for imagining the nation, which is figured as a traditional family in which the sexes are intrinsically different and unequal. This inherent sexism of nationalism does not merely reflect transhistoric patriarchal attitudes; as Elleke Boehmer has pointed out, nationalism ideologically depends on gender structures, legitimating itself through recourse to traditional organic social and cultural forms (31, 22). If Fatima’s and Hadixa’s subjection to unpredictable Oriental men symbolize the Slovak nation’s subjection to Hungary, then their role in the story is to be liberated by René, who in this way proves his heroic European masculinity and his belonging to the nation, which is figured as a community of men (which is emphasized even more in Part II, where no speaking Slovak female characters appear). This is clearly expressed through the figure of Hadixa, who, as I show below, becomes reduced to her body that stands as a metaphor for male ideas of a nation’s racial purity.

### RACIAL IMAGINATION IN *RENÉ*

While the novel does not focus on racial descriptions, race becomes crucial in the moment when Hadixa is brought to her execution. Even though Hadixa is by all accounts an Egyptian Muslim, the narrator takes pains to show that her features have none of the Oriental colour or shape, but possess evident European characteristics. The narrator makes clear assumptions about race: Oriental features are ugly (“excessively wide and round”, resembling “soot and charcoal”), while European features are beautiful. It is her European beauty – her whiteness – that make Hadixa “amiable” and stirs the crowd to believe in her innocence:

She bore no resemblance to other Mohammedan women. Her body was not as wide as it was tall, and neither was her face excessively wide and round, even though she ate local dishes. Her complexion did not have the yellow or sallow colour, and even though the Egyptian climate had darkened her, there was nothing in her face resembling the colour of soot or charcoal. Everyone was delighted by her brightness and loveliness, a rare, exceptional amiability that had never before been seen. Her wrinkle-free forehead shone more brightly than fresh snow and its whiteness could shatter darkness like a growing moon. [...] Her cheeks were flowering gardens, comparable to Venus’s roses and Diana’s lilies [...] The nape of her neck needed no gems, being whiter than milk (126–127).

Hadixa’s European features synchronize with her hatred of Islam and her desire to escape to Europe. She becomes less Egyptian and more “like” a European woman,

“our woman” (Gingrich) worthy to be saved and adored. Her white femininity, compared to Roman goddesses, is the prize for René’s heroic deed of saving her life in a way that Oriental femininity could never be, since Oriental women are marked by the stereotypical characteristics associated with their race: sexual voluptuousness and deviance, seductive but treacherous eroticism linked to the darker elements, passivity, stupidity, lack of personality, and so on, belonging to the Orientalist repertoire of Arab and Turkish femininity from the 17th century onwards (see Kabbani 1986). This is important, because Hadixa can be eligible to become René’s wife and the mother of his European children only if she is described as white. At the end of the narrative, René confirms Hadixa’s superior Europeanness by comparing her with Ancient Greek and Roman goddesses: “Oh, Hadixa, you are all Juno, Diana, Venus, Palas Athena!” (165) As Istvánová also confirms, Hadixa, despite her independent arrival in Venice, “does not represent modern female emancipation; on the contrary, she embodies tradition, more specifically, Christian tradition: the Virgin Mary is the originator of the body of the soul [...] the woman is in this sense the symbol of the body, the material principle” (120). Hadixa’s virginal figure (she is called a “virgin” throughout the narrative) could not be farther from the Oriental sensual femininity as imagined by French painters such as Eugène Delacroix, Jean-Léon Gérôme, and Jean-Auguste-Dominique Ingres.

#### CONCLUSION: THE ANCIENT EGYPTIAN CIVILIZATION IN *RENÉ*

Bajza’s detailed descriptions of the Ancient Egyptian civilization in the novel prove that not all distant cultures were perceived as inferior to Christian Europe. The Ancient Egyptian civilization, which is remote enough not to be perceived as a threat to Europe, is described highly positively. The narrator follows René in his touristic explorations of the “miraculous” (37) city of Memphis, the water tank built by “pharaoh Meris” (39) and the “Palace of the Twelve Pharaohs” (probably the Great Temple of Ptah, 39), and takes keen historical, archaeological and scientific interest in aspects of the Ancient Egyptian culture such as mummification, the irrigation system, the Memphis necropolis, and so on (37–40). The narrator shows no abhorrence for alien practices such as mummification. The Ancient Egyptian civilization is portrayed as by far superior to the contemporary Muslim Egypt, and is admired and emulated:

This city was once very famous [...] but time almost completely destroyed it. Even so parts of it resisted destruction [...]. Underneath Memphis lies another city, like we have crypts under churches. If someone wants to see it, they will lower him on a rope through a narrow opening; inside one can see the vaulting built with beautiful white stone, many pillars [...] Near Memphis is a water tank built by the Pharaoh Meris and the locals still benefit from it. [...] We must therefore highly estimate the intellect, ingeniousness and wisdom of the Ancient Egyptians (38–39).

By making this value-judgment, the narrator confirms himself as someone who is in a position to make such a statement precisely because he is a modern, educated European knowledgeable about the past who takes a scientific interest in Memphis. His protagonist and alter-ego René is a Western traveller to the East, an archaeologist and a historian, that is, a true orientalist scholar who, as Edward Said writes, is

authorized to describe and make statements about the Orient because the Orient is unable to represent itself (21). His orientalism is however less “a Western style for dominating, restructuring, and having authority over the Orient” (1978, 3) and more a discourse intended to construct and preserve one’s own cultural identity. Through René’s touristic peregrinations among the ruins of the Ancient Egypt and the knowledgeable narrative voice that assumes the Slovak reader takes interest in these sights and appreciates them in the same way, Bajza confirms the Slovak people’s identity as a modern Western nation firmly belonging to Christian enlightened Europe. In Part II, Bajza goes on to describe the Slovak nation as distinctively separate from the Hungarians, the Czechs and the Jews. In this way, the novel simultaneously seeks to consolidate Slovak identity as European and to strengthen its identification as a national community – albeit only a community of men.

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> All translations from Slovak are by the present author.

<sup>2</sup> In Part II, Bajza expresses his opinions through the character of the Guide (Sprievodca) who joins René and Van Stiphout in Upper Hungary.

## LITERATURE

- Bajza, Jozef Ignác. (1783–1785) 1970. *Príhody a skúsenosti mladíka Reného*. Ed. by Jozef Nižnanský. Bratislava: Tatran.
- Bednárová, Katarína. 2015. *Rukoväť dejín prekladu na Slovensku (18. a 19. storočie)*. Bratislava: Univerzita Komenského v Bratislave.
- Boehmer, Elleke. 2005. *Stories of Women: Gender and Narrative in the Postcolonial Nation*. Manchester: Manchester University Press.
- Brtáňová, Erika. 2009. “Originálny rozprávač.” In *Jozef Ignác Bajza: Dielo*, ed. by Erika Brtáňová, 571–581. Bratislava: Kalligram – Ústav slovenskej literatúry SAV.
- Brtáňová, Erika. 2016. “Inovativnosť Bajzovej umeleckej metódy.” In *Jozef Ignác Bajza v kultúrnom a literárnom kontexte*, 2nd edition, ed. by Katarína Žeňuchová, 97–110. Bratislava: Slavistický ústav Jána Stanislava SAV – Slovenský komitét slavistov – Obec Dolné Dubové.
- DelPlato, Joan. 2002. *Multiple Wives, Multiple Pleasures: Representing the Harem, 1800–1875*. Madison: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press.
- Drucker, Peter. 2012. “Byron and Ottoman Love: Orientalism, Europeanization and same-sex sexualities in the early nineteenth-century Levant.” *Journal of European Studies* 42, 2: 140–157.
- Gingrich, André. 1998. “Frontier Myths of Orientalism.” In *Mediterranean Ethnological Summer School*, vol. II, ed. by Bojan Baskar – Borut Brumen, 99–127. Ljubljana: Inštitut za multikulturne raziskave.
- Gingrich, André. 2015. “The Nearby Frontier: Structural Analyses of Myths of Orientalism.” *Diogenes* 60, 2: 60–66.
- Istvánová Anna. 2016. “Analýza ženských postáv v románe René mládenca príhody a skúsenosti.” In *Jozef Ignác Bajza v kultúrnom a literárnom kontexte*, 2nd ed., ed. by Katarína Žeňuchová, 111–123. Bratislava: Slavistický ústav Jána Stanislava SAV – Slovenský komitét slavistov – Obec Dolné Dubové.
- Kabbani, Rana. 1986. *Europe’s Myths of Orient: Devise and Rule*. London: MacMillan.
- Marčok, Viliam. 1968. *Počiatky slovenskej novodobej prózy/Próza klasicistická a preromantická*. Bratislava: SAV.
- Mészáros, Ignác. 1790 (1772). *Při dobytí Budínského zámku do zajetí křesťanského padlé, Kartygam*

- řečené (potom Krystýna nazvané) turecké slečny, kišasoňky, řídké a památné případnosti. Trans. by Michael Semian. Prešporok.
- Mráz, Andrej. 1948. *Dejiny slovenskej literatúry*. Bratislava: SAVU.
- Sabatos, Charles. 2014. *Mit ve Tarih Arasında: Orta Avrupa Edebiyat Tarihinde Türk İmgesi*. Istanbul: Bilge Kültür Sanat.
- Sabatos, Charles. 2015. "The Ottoman Captivity Narrative as a Transnational Genre in Central European Literature." *Archív Orientální* 83, 2: 233–254.
- Sabatos, Charles. 2018. "The Nation's Timeless Mission: Frontier Orientalism in Central European Historical Fiction." *World Literature Studies* 10, 1: 3–14.
- Snader, Richard Joseph. 1998. *Caught Between Worlds: British Captivity Narratives in Fact and Fiction*. Vol. 1. Lexington: University Press of Kentucky.
- Staud, Géza. 1999. *Orientalizmus a Magyar romantikaban*. Budapest: Terebess Kiadó.
- Števcěk, Ján. 1989. *Dejiny slovenského románu*. Bratislava: Tatran.
- Tatius, Achilles. 1984. *The Adventures of Leucippe and Clitophon*. Trans. by S. Gaselee. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.

### Travels among "backward heathens": J. I. Bajza's "The Adventures and Experiences of the Young Man René" as a frontier orientalist fantasy

---

Jozef Ignác Bajza. André Gingrich. Frontier orientalism. The novel of education. Slovak nationalism. Slovak Enlightenment.

This article analyzes the Slovak novel *René mládenca príhody a skúsenosti* (1783–1785) by Jozef Ignác Bajza as a frontier orientalist fantasy. Unlike in Western European orientalist texts, where images of alien Muslim cultures served as a justification for imperialism, here they are used to fashion a Slovak modernity, confirming the Slovak people's Christian, European and Slavic identity at a time when it was politically just starting to come into being as a nation. It is further argued that the novel departs from the typical Western orientalist fantasy, figured as a heterosexual heroic romance, towards the narrative of homo-social nationalist self-fashioning.

---

Dr. Dobrota Pucherová, D.Phil.  
Institute of World Literature  
Slovak Academy of Sciences  
Dúbravská cesta 9  
841 04 Bratislava  
Slovak Republic  
dobrota.pucherova@savba.sk