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Molla Nasreddin: The Making of a Modern Trickster (1906-1911),

Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2022, ISBN (Paperback):

9781474499507.

The trickster figure is a common cultural feature globally. A not-so-pious Muslim cleric, with foolish deeds and clever sayings, Nasreddin (Nasreddin Hoca in Turkish, Molla Nasreddin in Farsi, and Joha in Arabic) has been the most popular folk character and trickster figure in the Middle East for centuries. *Molla Nasreddin: The Making of a Modern Trickster (1906-1911)* investigates how a cartoon journal in South Caucasus, *Molla Nasreddin*, reproduced the trickster figure as a medium of social criticism, and how it reimagined “both the name and the persona of the trickster for modern political satire” to “disseminate a progressive discourse on power, religion, class, and gender” (p. 1-2). The book emphasizes the capacity of tricksters to turn the hierarchical order upside down. It identifies that the folk character Nasreddin challenged conventional social hierarchies through 1) attacks against the corruption and greed of the elite; 2) critique of orthodoxy and orthopraxy; 3) tales of gender subversion; and 4) stories of sexual transgression. The modern periodical duplicated the tropes of Nasreddin for its own time by 1) pointing to the suffering of the impoverished workers and migrants; 2) pleading for the reform of Muslim rituals and clerics; 3) criticizing more traditional women who turned to charms and incantations to achieve their goals; and 4) attacking pervasive practices of sexual abuse of boys and girls (p. 15). The book demonstrates that the modern periodical did not simply appropriate the trickster Nasreddin’s name. “Rather, in addition to reproducing some original Nasreddinia,

the editors skillfully recreated the trickster trope for their time and place” (p. 187). Autors show how *Molla Nasreddin* became a patchwork of progressive ideologies, critical of landowners, bureaucracy, religious institutions, and imperialism, and supportive of liberal political and social rights.

The book is organized in three parts. Part I, consisting of Chapters 1- 3, looks at the history of South Caucasus and the milieu in which *Molla Nasreddin* was born. Part I draws attention to four major social and political events in the 1900s, namely the constitutional revolutions in Russia, Iran, and Turkey, and the Muslim-Armenian War of 1905-1907. This part further investigates Russian colonialism in the region, the transnational artistic community in Tiflis, the oil boom in Baku, and Azerbaijan’s cultural renaissance. The key focus is on the Shi’i Muslim community, which also was *Molla Nasreddin*’s main audience. Intellectuals from Shi’i origins made most of the journal’s writers, but Jewish, Christian, and Sunni intellectuals also contributed (p. 64). The book identifies four new ideologies and intellectual currents among South Caucasian Muslims, which are Pan-Islamism, liberalism, socialism, and Jadidism, or New Method- an educational reform movement-. While *Molla Nasreddin* was not affiliated any political party, its contributors generally had associations with social democratic parties. This part also offers biographies of major contributors such as Mirza Jalil, Omar Faeq Nemanzadeh, Hamideh Khanum, Ali-Akbar Saber, Abdul Rahim Bey Haqverdiyev, Azim Azimzadeh, Oskar Ivanovic Schmerling, and Joseph Rotter.

Part II consists of Chapters 4- 6, and it explores the literary contribution of the journal by analyzing the ways in which it attempted to reproduce the classic trickster trope. The Part also investigates how the Journal introduced a new discourse on women’s rights. Autors show how tricksters degrade and humiliate positions of power and authority. For the trickster, “nothing is sacred, and everything can be mocked” (p. 179); and the contributors reproduce Nasreddin’s “grotesque realism” to debase powerful sources of authority and to envision an alternative order (p. 172). *Molla Nasreddin* became the unbridled champion for women and children’s rights, problematizing controversial issues such as domestic violence, polygamy, temporary marriage, divorce, pedophilia, and veiling. While celebrating these achievements, the authors also critically investigate the Journal’s gender narrative regarding 1) normative expectations for the new educated Muslim women that drew clear boundaries between acceptable and unacceptable behaviors for women, and 2) equating consensual same-sex relations with pedophilia and mocking the ancient rite of brotherhood and sisterhood vows, which

contributed to the demonization of homosexuality as a Western innovation, alien to the Middle East.

Part III, which consists of Chapters 7 and 8, studies the Journal's artistic contributions and the influences of European and Russian graphic art and political cartoon traditions on *Molla Nasreddin*. The visual art of the Journal is an important focus throughout the book, which contains around three hundred images from *Molla Nasreddin*. These images make the work enjoyable for any enthusiasts of political cartoons and satire, while they also enrich the book by bringing the primary source material to the reader's close attention. Authors draw attention to the influence of two European visual artists, Francisco Goya and Honore Daumier, political cartoon journals like *Punch* from the Great Britain and *Simplicissimus* from Germany, and the Russian revolutionary periodicals. Moreover, this part problematizes *Molla Nasreddin's* engagement with the Enlightenment discourses. Political caricature, authors stress, was constructed on the two distinct tendencies within the Enlightenment: the promotion of progressive and universalistic values, on the one hand, and the pseudoscientific racial discourses and hierarchies, on the other. Still, the authors note that even though *Molla Nasreddin* occasionally reproduced racialized Enlightenment tropes including references to African cannibalism, the Journal also offered a counter-discourse against racial and colonial hierarchies and challenged European imperialist discourses in its defense of persecuted Muslim populations, (p. 339-340). Generally, authors add, *Molla Nasreddin* applied physiognomy, (a form of caricature that blended arts, anatomical sciences, human and animal psychology, and racism) not along racial lines but ideological (p. 12).

Finally, in the Epilogue, the authors discuss the demise of the Journal in the 1920s and its intellectual influence. The Journal faced novel political pressures from the Pahlavi regime in Tehran and the Soviet regime in Moscow. In the Tsarist Russia, *Molla Nasreddin* criticized clerics and rituals without coming across as atheists. This "careful straddling" appealed to a wide audience which was "torn between reconciling its deep religious values with the requirements of modernity" (p. 365). The Soviet authorities forced the Journal's cadre to adopt a firm anti-religion position, to join the League of Atheists, and to change the Journal's name to *Allahsiz* (Godless). These actions cut off the readers completely from the Journal. Despite its eventual demise, however, the authors consider *Molla Nasreddin* a major intellectual breakthrough and, in today's discourse, a diasporic publication. They emphasize several factors such as 1) exposing imperialist policies of

the Great Powers and produced counter-discourses; 2) calling for greater dialogue and friendship between rival ethnic and religious communities, especially between Muslims and Armenians; 3) defying the Muslim religious establishments and argued for a more progressive interpretation of Islam; 4) chastising the landowning elite and became a mouthpiece for the impoverished rural and urban classes; 5) deriding the political establishments in the Ottoman Empire and Iran and supported the constitutional revolutions in these countries; 6) encouraging the establishment of satirical journals in Iran; and 7) initiating a radical discourse on gender reform and becoming a champion of women's rights in the Muslim world (368).

This work is accessible both for academic and general readers with no prior expertise on the history of Caucasus. The book is well-written and thoroughly researched. The authors utilize numerous sources from a wide range of academic literatures. The book offers major contributions to the studies on the trickster figures, pioneered by Carl Jung, Michel Foucault, Mikhail Bakhtin, and Lewis Hyde. It further situates the satirical journal and the history of South Caucasian Muslims within the academic fields on migration, ethnicity, religion, culture, intellectual history, and diaspora. The book does not offer a complete study of the periodical *Molla Nasreddin*, for the authors plan to discuss its political narratives that covered the Iranian Constitutional Revolution of 1906-1911 in a future volume (p. 359). Ultimately, the authors' research shows how the "collusion of cultures, including religious precepts, and the contestations of traditional modes of thought and also modernity" led to a "refreshingly innovative, complex and progressive perspectives and practices, a form of cross-fertilization that does not fully replicate the binary of East and West," instead of generating defensively intolerant reactions (p. 8). By shedding light upon this groundbreaking journal, the authors bring the many accomplishments of *Molla Nasreddin* to our attention.

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