



THE ARTISTIC-AESTHETIC EXPRESSION OF ORIENTALIST PERSPECTIVES IN JASMIN DARZNIK'S NOVEL “SONG OF A CAPTIVE BIRD”

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ABSTRACT

This article analyzes the artistic-aesthetic expression of orientalist perspectives in Jasmin Darznik's novel “Song of a Captive Bird,” drawing on Edward Said's theory of Orientalism. The study reveals, through the novel's landscape and ceremonial imagery, the depiction of a figure of authority, and the chronotope of the city, how the East is artistically constructed as a discursive formation “created” through the Western gaze. The article examines orientalist mechanisms such as exoticization, the stereotype of despotism, and evaluation from a position of “lack,” based on examples drawn from the text.

In Jasmin Darznik's novel “Song of a Captive Bird,” orientalism does not appear as a single, uniform phenomenon; rather, it manifests in different forms across various artistic layers of the text — in the depiction of landscape and ceremony, in the figure of the representative of power, and in the depiction of the city. According to the central thesis advanced by Edward Said in “Orientalism,” the East does not exist in Western thought as an independent reality, but is interpreted as a discursive construction “created” through the Western gaze, language, and system of knowledge. This article systematically examines the artistic forms this mechanism takes in the novel: first, the outwardly visible techniques of exoticization, and then the deeper discursive strategies embedded in the very structure of the text.

From the very first pages of the novel, orientalist imagery is shaped through the coronation ceremony of Reza Khan. The author constructs this event not as plain historical information, but as a visual spectacle: “One day in 1926, nine years before I was born, a former peasant and illiterate soldier named Reza Khan drew a blue pearl-trimmed cloak over his military uniform, marched into the great mirrored hall of Golestan Palace, and crowned himself king of Iran. The spectacle was the latest in an already extraordinary sequence of events... as the Qajar monarchs married Oriental opulence to European splendor...”¹

Three orientalist markers operate simultaneously in this passage. First, the choice of the word “spectacle” elevates the event to the level of a scene staged for the observing gaze, which corresponds directly to the technique Said identifies as “turning the East into a panorama

¹Darznik J. Song of a Captive Bird. New York: Ballantine Books, 2018. – P. 3.

organized for viewing.” Second, details such as “a blue pearl-trimmed cloak” and the “mirrored hall” shift attention from political substance toward decorative imagery. Third, the phrase “Oriental opulence” itself is a means of evaluating Eastern splendor not by its own internal criteria, but through Western aesthetic standards (as it is fused with “European splendor”). As a result, the Eastern ceremony of enthronement is perceived not as an independent historical institution possessing meaning in itself, but as a spectacular, almost theatricalized event.

Moreover, this passage also openly expresses the theme of colonialism: “He watched as they handed the British, the French, and other Europeans Iran’s land, artifacts, minerals, and, most ruinously, the nation’s lifeblood, its oil.” This sentence, alongside orientalist exoticization, also exposes the real political-economic situation — that is, the text does not confine itself to constructing an image of a “mysterious East,” but also reveals the real distribution of power and wealth behind that image. This serves as an artistic confirmation of Said’s thesis on the link between “knowledge and power”: the right to “represent” the East frequently goes hand in hand with the process of bringing it under political and economic control.

The personal portrait of Reza Shah is constructed in the novel according to the classic orientalist mold of the “Eastern despot.” The author places his two contradictory traits — his simple habits and his ruthless resolve — side by side:

“...even as he seized the country’s most sumptuous palaces and fertile lands for himself, the shah hadn’t given up his habit of unrolling a mat on the floor each night and sleeping on the ground like a peasant... no one doubted Reza Shah’s temper or the brutality with which he expressed it.”²

Two distinct orientalist elements converge in this passage. On one hand, the detail of “sleeping on the ground on a mat” elevates the figure to an almost exotic degree of “strangeness,” presented as unexpected, “different” behavior for the Western reader. On the other hand, the words “temper” and “brutality” link the image of power to fear and uncontrolled violence. The combination of these two traits has shaped the classic orientalist image of the Eastern ruler — a figure who is at once “primitive” and “dangerous.” As Said noted, it is precisely through such a doubled portrayal that Eastern authority is depicted as a system opposed to, incomprehensible to, and “irrational” in relation to Western political institutions. Orientalist imagery also manifests in the chronotope of the city. In the depiction of Tehran, orientalism appears in a different, more subtle form. The author specifically emphasizes that the city does not conform to the classic standard of “Oriental beauty”:

“By 1935, the year I was born, Tehran had long since been rid of the mud walls and shallow moat that once encircled it, but it was still an old-fashioned city of dirt roads, narrow passageways, and flat-roofed family compounds. It had nothing of the beauty of Isfahan or Shiraz, with their shimmering mosques and sumptuous palaces...”³

What is notable in this passage is that the author compares Tehran to cities such as Isfahan and Shiraz, which embody the “classic Oriental beauty,” and emphasizes that it does not fit that standard. This is a technique that exposes the very existence of an orientalist

²Darznik J. *Song of a Captive Bird*. New York: Ballantine Books, 2018. – P. 4.

³Darznik J. *Song of a Captive Bird*. New York: Ballantine Books, 2018. – P. 12.

expectation: the text appeals to a preconceived reader notion of “what an Oriental city should be like,” and then partly negates that notion. Tehran emerges as a place characterized by “dirt roads, narrow passageways, flat-roofed compounds,” devoid of splendor, poor, and “old-fashioned.” At the same time, natural details such as “tall mountains encircled the city... the scent of snow” lend the city a melancholic, cold, and elegiac tone of lost memory. Thus, here orientalism no longer operates through splendor and grandeur, but functions as the image of an “impoverished, forgotten East” — this too is a variant of the orientalist discourse Said identifies, since in this case as well the East is evaluated not according to its own internal logic, but from a position of “lack” relative to the Western standard.

In conclusion, in Jasmin Darznik's “Song of a Captive Bird,” orientalism manifests through exoticization in the depiction of landscape and ceremony, through the stereotype of despotism in the figure of the representative of power, and through evaluation from a position of “lack” in the chronotope of the city. All of these artistic forms operate in close connection with the “knowledge and power” mechanism advanced by Edward Said: the process of representing the East proceeds hand in hand with the process of bringing it under control through the Western gaze and its standards. At the same time, the novel's open expression of colonialism and the real political-economic situation distinguishes the text from purely exotic depiction and orients it toward critical understanding.

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