TRANSLATION A CHANCE FOR BALKAN LITERATURE [1]

Abstract: *The Balkan literature represents a relatively new concept among other European literatures. It's a literature having in common a rich heritage and a similar development frame, aspects which leaded to a similar profile. Based on the ancient heritage, developed due to the rich tradition of the Byzantine Empire and reshaped by Western influence (mainly French) in the 19 century, the Balkan literature is still quite unknown, not only the western world, but also among other countries in South east European aria. This aspect is determined by the fact that the languages in which it is written do not have much visibility and to the strong prejudice that western culture is superior to other form of culture, especially to those developed in the eastern part. For literatures written in less used languages, as those in the Balkans, translation is the only path to become famous. The chance of the Balkan literature has been the fact that this is a multicultural region, where people speak a lot of languages and some of them started to write in French (Julia Kristeva and Tzvetan Todorov – Bulgaria; Ismail Kadare – Albania), English (Orhan Pamuk – Turkey; Mircea Eliade, Petru Popescu – Romania). This paper main research questions concern the influence of translation in developing Balkan literature and in establishing its position among other European cultures.*

Key words: *Blakan literature, translation, literary theory*

1. General Frame

When the old Roman Empire was split into two parts, nobody was aware of the fact that Europe was split into two parts with a different destiny. The south-east became a major part of the Byzantine Empire, the heart of the civilized would during the first millennium and was later included in the Othman Empire, influenced by Turkish and Arabian culture. A large region set on what became later known as the Balkan Peninsula sheering a common background, result of three melted cultural strata: Byzantine, Turkish and folklore (Muthu, 2002, 109). The beautiful city of Constantinople, glamorous capital of the Byzantine Empire, was conquered by the Turks and entered into legend, becoming a mythical martyr city, centre of eastern Christianity. With similar historical heritage and common cultural background, the Orthodox religion has maintained the unity of the analysed region.

Old religious books and popular legends oral circulated throughout the whole territory of the Balkan Peninsula, leading to similar characters (Nastratin Hogea, the outlaws, different yet similar versions of Price Charming, are the best examples) and a similar way of telling stories, a way which has its origins in old oriental tales. When old Slavic and Greek were languages spoken by a lot of people there was no need for extensive and aqua rate translations, any way oral literature is not so demanding concerning fidelity and truth. Later, at the beginning of the 19th. century, when national literature started to built their profile, translation became a necessity and a a vehicle for connecting the two *Europes*.

Since the beginning of the 20th. century the Balkans have become the place of a witch trial to which many people of the region submitted and the literary climate has become part of. Each country, consequently each national literature tried to imagine that they are different compared to their neighbours, as Vesna Golthorthy wrote, for people in the region, the Balkans are far away, on the east side. For I.D. Sarbu, as for many Romanian writers it is something to be ashamed of, "the province of the province, "edge to edge". Luckily there are some writers such as Julia Kristeva, Tvetan Todorov, Mircea

[1] Maria Alexe, UTCB/UNAB, Bucharest, amaria1_2_3@yahoo.com

BDD-A6128 © 2012 Universitatea din Pitești
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.42 (2026-11-15 20:43:54 UTC)

Eliade, Ismail Kadare, Orhan Pamuk defended the image of the Balkan culture and have started to write a type of literature in which the tradition of the old oriental story-tellers and the shape of west European literary patterns melted in an original way of writing, a new type of literature that should be called Balkan literature.

During the postmodern time, writers and scholars as Lucian Boia, Neagu Djuvara, Sorin Alexandrescu, Mircea Muthu, (inside the Romanian literature) as well as Milan Kundera, Tzvetan Todorov, Maria Todorova or Julia Kristeva, who wrote in English and French published studies that enlighten the value of the literature written in the region. Those studies, analysing culture in general, underline the influence of the Balkan background on the development of local literatures. In Romania, the concept of Balkan literature appeared during the '30 and was developed and anylised in cultural studies written by Nicolae Iorga, Eugen Lovinescu and George Călinescu. Well known writers, running for important literary awards, as the Romanian Mircea Cărtarescu or the Albanian Ismail Kadare speak about themselves as representatives of Balkan literature. Mircea Cătrărescu expressed in a poetical way his deep connection with the Balkans: „For me the Balkan Peninsula is a space where everyday reality has been always overwhelmed by a gigantic, multilayered and labyrinthine imaginary"(Cărtărescu 2003, 157)

Unlike the relationship East – West, generally perceived as an antagonistic one, the Balkans and East are not in opposition (Cioflâncă, 2002, 22), yet different. When the known world became that with which we are familiar today, the Balkans started to be perceived as a space of cultural transition in which political disputes still plays an important role and are far from over. This is the starting point of reconsidering the Balkans and of many scientific researches aiming to establish the cultural identity of the region.

2. Research Questions

Translation played a major role in the development of Balkan literature from its very beginning. It is well known that the first Bible printed with Arabic letters for Christian population in Syria, a book published in 1711, was printed and translated by Constantin Brancoveanu generosity.(Djuvara, 2008, 157). This is just an example that illustrates the protective attitude of kings from both Principalities, an attitude showing that they had the intention to continue the tradition of Byzantine emperors as Christianity protectors. Translation of Gospels and other holly texts was an act of culture and contributed to the development of national languages. [1]

Speaking about Balkan writers, a reasonable question which has to be asked is *Is there a Balkan literature?* In other words shall we consider all the literary works written in the Balkans as a whole? Are there the narratives written by Balkan writers different if they are compared to other types of writing, should they be considered different if compared to national literature or other groups, such as The South American novel or Literature written in English? The question is still waiting for an answer and has become the starting point of a debate. On the other hand it is quite obvious that the author of the article accepted the idea that there is a literature common for the Balkans.

[1] Many Romanian scholars thought that they needed to explain the process of translation, mainly the difficulties in finding equivalances in Romanian for Slavic and Greek texts. It was Simion Ştefan who started a long debated about when and how a translator should adapt some words from the source language to the target language.

BDD-A6128 © 2012 Universitatea din Piteşti
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.42 (2026-11-15 20:43:54 UTC)

Therefore this question is not going to be considered as a research question for this analyse.

When in the 19th century the countries from the European part of the Ottoman empire started to fight for their cultural and political independence and turned to western culture, they started to translate as much as possible from those literatures, mainly the French one. All those aspects lead to the main research question: Is translation a chance or a handicap for Balkan literature? Did they contribute to its development, or on the other hand offering good models they underlined the weak points?

Considering the hypothesis that translations determined the development of Balkan literature and put into light its originality some sub-research questions have to be asked:

1. Which is the role of translation in defining the status of Balkan literature versus Western one?
2. Have translation contributed to make Balkan writers like Pamuk, Kadare, Julia Kristeva famous and through their work a large part of Balkan literature?

3. Translation and Localization

Localization is a relatively new concept, referring to different aspects. One is referring to language studies (Language localisation, the process of translating a product into different languages or adapting a product for a specific country or region), others to computer science (the adaptation of computer software for non-native environments, especially other nations and cultures) or entertainment (Game localization, refers to the preparation of video games for other locales or Dub localization, the adaptation of a movie or television series for another audience)[1]. Considering the role of translation in developing Balkan literature during the 19th. century the notion of localization can be enlarge. After translating the most important novels of French and English literature, some Romanian authors started to write novels following the western model (structure, main characters, type of conflict) adapting the plot to local realities, *localizing* characters or conflicts. Almost fagotten today, authors like Alexandru Pelimon, Constantin C. Aricescu, George Baronzi, Ioan. M. Bujoreanu and the most talented of all Nicolae Filimon wrote about Bucharest and its mysterious life, adapting famous novels by Victor Hugo or Balzac. *Ciocoii vechi şi noi* the first novel in modern Romanian literature having a certain value was written by Nicolae Filimon considering the French mystery novels as models.

When the French novels started to be translated, the authors working on those texts were quite careless considering the translation linguistic correctness. To say nothing about the fact that most of the English novels were translated from French versions. So not only the so called original novels, but also those which were translated can be consided, from postmodern perspective as adaptations. Elias Canetti often refers to the multicultural and multilingual aspects of the Balkans, analysing in his theology *The Story of my life,* the way in which certain common patterns of fairytales are localised by different countries. He considers that this is an aspect which played a major role in shaping his personality as a writer.

[1] These are dictionaries', general definitions, quoted in order to explain which the semantic field of the word localization is today.

BDD-A6128 © 2012 Universitatea din Pitești
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.42 (2026-11-15 20:43:54 UTC)

The question which should be asked from this research point of view is if that cultural practice contributed to the development of national literatures, new literary forms in particular, leading to the cultural development in Balkan countries? According to some writers of the time (like Ion Eliade Rădulescu) translation is a good writing exercise; therefore it was a good practice for a literature which was searching for its profile and young writers should translate in order to learn how to write. Others, like Mihail Kogalniceanu and Titu Maiorescu, some years later, considered that it had a bad influence, a mark of laziness and a non professional attitude. Reconsidering the problem today one may see that just translations do not make a literature, but translating develops writing skills.

4. The Global Literary World and the Balkan Literature

.When, in the 19th. century, Romanians started to translate western literature, the whole European culture was dominated by France and French was the language of culture. In postmodern time the place was taken by English. If someone wants to become famous he has to translate his work in English. English is a vehicle for multi and trans-cultural phenomena and in strange way offers a chance for the so called ”minor cultures”. All over the world many famous books are translated and turned into movies. Let try to make an exercise of imagination which would be the impact of Japanese literature if it was not turned into famous movies. We like it or not, but it was Zorba the Greek who turned people’s attention towards the Neo-Greek literature and Kazantzakis, to Balkan literature in general.

Modern translations are more and more challenging and people involved in the process of translating have to face increasingly complex tasks, aspect which leads to a complex interdisciplinary and intercultural background required for a good translator. More and more translators become aware of the fact that just correct translation from the linguistics point of view is not sufficient for translating literature and understanding the message. The concept is not as new as it looks. In the 17th. century, John Dryden (1631–1700) describes translation as the judicious blending of these meta-phrase (literal translation) and paraphrase, when selecting, in the target language, "counterparts," or equivalents for the expressions used in the source language. A translation should be evaluated according several aspects such as: cultural and historical context, linguistic value and intercultural meanings (linguistic and extra linguistic factors). Translation is not just adaptation of a text, sometimes the text has to adapt to local cultural environment. [Badea, *The theory of cultural items – Teoria culturemelor,* 2004

It is obvious that understanding the cultural background is essential in understanding the translated text. Therefore the translators have to explain some concept from the source culture (language) to the readers (target language and culture). Translating Orhan Pamuk’ s novel *My Name is Red,* the first of this famous Turkish writer work translated in Romanian, Luminița Munteanu, considered necessary to add a glossary, notes and a map of the Ottoman Empire at the end of the novel. As she explains at the beginning of the novel, the world about which Pamuk wrote is an unknown universe for most of the Romanian readers. Turkey adopted the Latin alphabet in 1928, but some sounds are different compared to Romanian language, therefore she considered that it is better to preserve the Turkish form and to provide notes for the readers in order to facilitate understanding. Due to the great success of Pamuk’s novel, she continued to translate him, but she considered that the glossary was no more

BDD-A6128 © 2012 Universitatea din Pitești
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.42 (2026-11-15 20:43:54 UTC)

necessary, so she just made some notes in order to help the Romanian reader to understand the socio-cultural reality of the Ottoman Empire and contemporary Istanbul[1] The case of Ismail Kadare's novels is quite simlar if analysing the way in which the writer was translated and understanding by the Romanian writer. His case is a little bit more complicated if one anlyses the translation of the titles of his novels. One of his famous novels has the title *Kështjella***,** (Albanian**).** Later on Kadare published a French version, uder the more metaphorical title *Les Tambours de la pluie***.** The English version translates the original Albanin title *The Castle* or *The Siege***.** The Romanian translator Marius Dobrescu, although ttransalted the novel from Albanian, preferred the author French version for the title, so his translation has as a title *Mesagerii ploii.* The metaphor used for the French version is appealing for the Romanian readres, because in his popular culture, water has the same major significances.

Some Balkan authors wrote in French and English, among them Julia Kristeva, Tvetan Todorov, Mircea Eliade, Ismail Kadare, so one may think that translation was no mare necessary. The major advantage consists in the fact that due to their work written in languages largely Known and used they made Balkan literature visible. Their own work was translated and due to their studies they create a window for many other Balkan writers. All the above mentioned authors participated to the cultural life of the world, wrting in many international magazines, took part in interantinal conferences and used all oportunities to promote Balkan literature.

5. Conclusions

Quite unknown, as a literature with its own profiler, the Balkan literature has become quite visible during the last half of the 20th. century, due to the fact that the most important author were translated. The main research question refers to the role of translations, which may be considered a chance or a handicap for Balkan literature. According to the analysis done on several cultural periods, translation helped the literature of the region to develop and to evolve.

It is obvious that translation contributed to design the profile of Balkan literature. More over it has a major role in defining the status of Balkan literature versus Western one. Balkan writers like Pamuk, Kadare, Julia Kristeva famous due to the book written in the language of their country of adoption contributed by their work to make a large part of Balkan literature well known

As a final conclusion it can be said that translation made Balkan writers vocal in the world litetature chorus and in defining its profile.

References

Albu Mihaela – *Sud-estul european (sau Peninsula Balcanică) regiune cu destin specific şi bogat patrimoniu cultural* în Carmina Balcanica, anul I, nr. 1, Craiova 2008
Boia, Lucian – *Occidentul o interpretare istorică* – editura Humanitas, Bucureşti, 2007
Cărtărescu, Mircea – *Pururi tânăr înfăşurat în pixeli* – editura Humanitas, Bucureşti, 2003
Canetti, Elias – *Limba salvata-Istoria unei tinereţi* – editura Dacia, Cluj-Napoca, 1984
Cioflâncă, Adrian – *Cunoaşterea Alterităţii ca formă de putere. Despre Orientalism şi Balcanism* – revista Xenopoliana, X, 2002
Djuvara, Neagu – *Între Orient si Occident. Ţările române la inceputul epocii moderne* – editura Humanitas, 2008
Eliade, Pompiliu – *Influenţa fraceză asupra spiritului public în România.* – Originile, Editura

[1] Unlike *My name is Red,* or *White Fortress, Istanbul* refers to contemporary Turkey, being more a kind of Journal or Memoires (but the author is not old enough to write memoirs).

BDD-A6128 © 2012 Universitatea din Piteşti
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.42 (2026-11-15 20:43:54 UTC)

Univers, Bucureşti 1982
Goldsworthy, Vesna – *Inventarea Ruritaniei. Imperialismul imaginației* – editura Curtea Veche, Bucureşti, 2002
Guenon, Rene – *Criza lumii moderne* – editura Humanitas, Bucureşti, 2008
Lungu –Badea Georgiana – *Teoria culturemelor, teoria traducerii,* Editura Universității de Vest, Timişoara, 2004
Muthu, Mircea – *Balcanologie* – editura Dacia Cluj-Napoca, 2002
Muthu, Mircea – *Balcanismul literar românesc* – editura Dacia Cluj-Napoca, 2002
Negrici, Eugen – *Iluziile literaturii române* – editura Cartea românească,Bucureşti, 2008
Simion, Eugen – 2000, *A fi european în volumul Comparatismul azi; Le compartisme aujourd'hui; The comparatism today* – culegere de articole cordonată, editura Victor, Bucureşti
Theodorescu, Răzvan – *Cultură şi civilizație europeană* - edi editura fundației România de Mâine, Bucureşti, 2005
Todorov, Tzvetan – *Noi şi ceilalți* – Istitutul european, Iaşi 1999
Todorova, Maria – *Balcanii şi balcanismul* – editura Humanitas, Bucureşti, 2000

BDD-A6128 © 2012 Universitatea din Pitești
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.42 (2026-11-15 20:43:54 UTC)