ISLAMIC EAST IN THE INTERPRETATION OF RUSSIAN WRITERS: A COMPARATIVE REVIEW OF FANTASTIC AND REALIST TEXTS

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Abstract. This review article examines how Russian writers have imagined, described, and ideologically framed the "Islamic East" across two broad literary modes - fantastic (romantic "Eastern tales," demonological narratives, fairy-tale orientalism, and exoticized adventure plots) and realist (travel writing, historical prose, and psychologically detailed war narratives). Treating "Islamic East" not as a stable geographic unit but as a culturally coded literary construct, the article surveys the key representational patterns through which Muslim societies of the Caucasus, Crimea, the Volga–Ural region, and Central Asia are incorporated into Russian literary worldmaking. Drawing on scholarship on Russian Orientalism, imperial knowledge, and the aesthetics of otherness, the study argues that fantastic and realist texts often share the same symbolic repertoire (despotism/liberty, sensuality/asceticism, fanaticism/piety, wild nature/civilization), while diverging in narrative authority: fantastic works amplify alterity as spectacle and allegory, whereas realist works tend to negotiate ethical proximity, historical contingency, and the limits of imperial perception. The comparative lens highlights how genre mediates political meaning: the fantastic can displace imperial conflict into mythic scripts; realism can either reinforce imperial epistemologies or open spaces for moral critique by foregrounding violence, translation failures, and intercultural asymmetries.

Keywords: Russian orientalism, *Islamic East*, Caucasus, Central Asia, realism, fantastic literature.

Introduction. *The East* has long functioned in Russian literature as both a proximate frontier and a symbolic elsewhere. Unlike the colonial geographies of distant overseas empires, Russia's imperial expansion and cultural imagination often unfolded across contiguous spaces: Crimea, the Caucasus, and Central Asia. Literary texts emerged alongside administrative, ethnographic, and military projects, producing overlapping vocabularies for describing Muslim populations and Islamic lifeworlds. Yet the literary "East" is not reducible to a map; it is a narrative device that organizes questions of identity, power, morality, and historical destiny.

This article reviews research relevant to a comparative question: how do fantastic and realist Russian works differ in their construction of the Islamic East, and what remains shared across genres? The premise is that genre is not a neutral container; it structures perception. In fantastic texts, the East frequently becomes a stage for intensified otherness - enchantment, danger, eroticized exoticism, demonic temptation, or allegorical conflict. In realist texts, the East is more often approached through documentary claims (travel, memoiristic observation, historical reconstruction) and through ethically charged encounters (war, captivity, negotiation, conversion, loyalty). In both cases, representation is shaped by asymmetries of language, sovereignty, and cultural authority.

The review concentrates on scholarly discussions that illuminate (1) Russian Orientalism as an intellectual and imperial framework; (2) 19th-century literary orientalization in travel writing and romantic poetics; and (3) later reconfigurations in realist and modern imaginaries of Central Asia. The goal is not to offer an exhaustive canon but to synthesize interpretive "constants" and genre-specific "variables" that recur across writers and periods.

Literature Review. Research on Russian representations of the East has increasingly stressed that Russian Orientalism cannot be treated as a simple replica of Western European models [10; 11; 12]. Rather, it is entangled with Russia's ambiguous self-positioning between Europe and Asia and with the practical work of empire-building. A major line of inquiry examines the relationship between Orientalist knowledge and imperial governance, focusing on figures, institutions,

and discourses that produced "expert" descriptions of Eastern peoples. Knight's study of V.V.Grigor'ev in Orenburg demonstrates how scholarly Orientalism could be mobilized "in the service of empire," while also generating tensions between knowledge, administration, and ideology [8]. This scholarship helps explain why literary texts often blend fascination with the East and claims of authoritative classification.

A second line of research examines literary orientalization as a cultural transfer that operates through narrative conventions: exotic settings, typified figures (khan, captive, warrior, dervish, beauty in the harem), and recurring semantic oppositions (freedom/despotism, nature/culture). Studies of Pushkin's travelogue and "Eastern" poetics have been particularly influential for understanding the early nineteenth-century formation of Russian literary Orientalism. Alekseev's work on "Journey to Arzrum" frames orientalization through colonial discourse and narratorial positioning, clarifying how observation is structured by power and by the traveler's self-fashioning [1].

A third strand focuses on how realist masterpieces narrate the Islamic East not merely as scenery but as a moral and political problem. Here, Tolstoy's "Hadji Murat" becomes a central case because it places a Muslim protagonist at the heart of a realist narrative about war, loyalty, and imperial violence. Ani's analysis emphasizes the novella's ideological "muting" and its engagement with holy war, Sufism, and spiritual path-making, showing how realism can complicate the easy moral binaries of imperial discourse. Related dissertations deepen this perspective by tracing the evolving imperial context and the interpretive stakes of Tolstoy's Caucasus writing [2].

Finally, scholarship on Central Asia highlights the persistence - and transformation. Holt's dissertation maps representations of *Eastern* film and literature, demonstrating how its difference is reorganized under new ideological regimes of modernization and indigenization [7]. Günther's article extends this diachronic lens by analyzing "deterritorialization" and the imaginative status of Turkmenistan across the late nineteenth to late 20th centuries, offering conceptual

tools for discussing how "the East" can be rendered as alien, remote, or internally displaced even when it is part of the same state formation [6].

Together, these studies support a genre-sensitive reading: the Islamic East is produced at the intersection of imperial knowledge, literary form, and ethical stance.

Methodology. This is a review and synthesis article grounded in comparative genre analysis. The method proceeds in four steps:

1. Conceptual framing: "Islamic East" is treated as a discursive object rather than a purely geographic referent - an assemblage of motifs, narrative roles, and epistemic claims shaped by imperial contact zones.

2. Genre differentiation: "Fantastic" is used inclusively to cover romantic "Eastern tales," demonological plots, folkloric fairy-tale orientalism, and exotic adventure narratives where alterity is heightened and reality is stylized. "Realist" covers travelogues, historical prose, and psychologically and socially detailed narratives with documentary aspiration.

3. Motif mapping: The review identifies recurrent representational clusters (religion, violence, gender/sexuality, landscape, authority, temporality) and compares how each cluster functions in fantastic vs realist modes.

4. Ideology and narrative authority: The analysis tracks who speaks, from what position, with what evidentiary claims, and with what moral framing. This draws on scholarship linking Orientalism to imperial power/knowledge formations.

Results.

1) Shared representational repertoire across fantastic and realist modes

Across genres, Russian texts frequently rely on a relatively stable repertoire of signs to mark the Islamic East:

- Political imaginaries: "Eastern despotism," court intrigue, arbitrary violence, or charismatic warrior leadership.

- Religious coding: Islam as visible ritual, communal law, and "other" sacredness - alternatively exoticized, feared, or admired.

- Landscape semiotics: mountains, steppe, desert, and ruined fortresses as moralized environments - spaces of ordeal, freedom, or threat.

- Gendered exoticism: the harem, captive woman, dangerous beauty, and the eroticization of difference.

- Boundary situations: captivity, conversion, negotiation, raiding, and frontier hospitality.

- The result is a cross-genre continuity: fantastic and realist texts often draw from the same symbolic inventory, even as they deploy it differently.

2) Divergence in narrative authority and epistemic posture. The more decisive difference is not what motifs appear but how they are authorized: Fantastic texts typically present the East through spectacle, allegory, and stylized conflict. The narrator's authority is aesthetic rather than documentary; the East is a semantic intensifier. Realist texts often stage a crisis of knowledge: misunderstandings, translation gaps, unreliable observation, and the moral ambiguity of imperial encounters. Travel writing can still be Orientalist, but it tends to foreground the mechanics of seeing and naming.

3) Shifts from romantic orientalization to ethical problematization. A historical pattern emerges in which romantic/fantastic orientalization (early 19th century) often stabilizes oppositions, whereas later realist texts (late nineteenth to early twentieth century) can destabilize them by emphasizing violence and moral compromise. Tolstoy's "Hadji Murat" is exemplary in scholarship precisely because it complicates ideological scripts through a restrained authorial voice and a focus on spiritual-political entanglement.

4) Re-territorialization and "alienness" in Central Asian imaginaries. In 20th-century contexts, "the East" can be represented as simultaneously internal and alien - part of a shared political space yet narrated as remote, deterritorialized, or radically other. Studies of Turkestan/Turkmenistan show how modernization narratives reshape, rather than erase, Orientalist difference.

Discussion. In fantastic and romantic "Eastern" narratives, the Islamic East frequently becomes a mythic theater. The genre's basic affordance is distance: by rendering the East as tale-space (with khans, demons, enchanted palaces, or archetypal warriors), the text can stage conflicts that appear universal - desire vs

duty, freedom vs tyranny, faith vs temptation - while keeping historical specificity thin. This distance facilitates two ideological moves.

First, it enables political displacement. Imperial conflict can be rewritten as timeless struggle. The violence of conquest becomes an adventure plot or an allegory of civilizational contest. Second, it supports aesthetic extraction: fragments of Islamic culture (architecture, costume, ritual) are lifted as ornaments to intensify atmosphere, not to represent lived complexity. The East becomes a "strong style," a set of high-contrast markers.

This does not mean fantastic texts are politically uniform. A romantic "Eastern tale" can encode critique of tyranny (including, by implication, critique of domestic autocracy). But the critique often travels through generalized symbols rather than through concrete political causality. The Islamic East functions as a semiotic amplifier.

Realism alters the economy of representation by tightening the link between description and responsibility. Travelogues and war narratives cannot entirely escape Orientalist framing, but they often expose the labor and limits of knowing. Alekseev's analysis of Journey to Arzrum highlights how orientalization is produced through the subject–object relationship: who observes, by what categories, and with what colonial assumptions. In this sense, realism can make Orientalism visible as a procedure rather than a naturalized truth.

Tolstoy's "Hadji Murat" sharpens this pressure because it refuses easy polarization. Scholarship emphasizes the novella's muted authorial voice and its attention to spiritual and political complexity - holy war, Sufism, and moral ambiguity. Here, the Islamic East is not simply "other"; it is an ethical mirror that reveals the brutality and hypocrisy of imperial power. The Muslim protagonist is neither a pure noble savage nor a simple enemy; he becomes a node where competing sovereignties and moral codes collide.

At the same time, realism does not guarantee anti-Orientalism. Realist texts can intensify surveillance, typology, and "expert" description - effects that align with the imperial knowledge regimes that Knight traces in institutional Orientalism. The key

point is that realism intensifies the stakes: the East is no longer only a backdrop but a problem of justice, violence, and interpretive fairness.

Genre as a mediator of "problem" and "message". If we translate the comparison into the language of theme–problem–message:

- Theme: Both modes often share themes of frontier contact, honor, captivity, and the negotiation of faith and power.

- Problem: The fantastic tends to pose the problem as metaphysical or allegorical (temptation, fate, tyranny as archetype). Realism tends to pose it as historical and ethical (war, administration, betrayal, the costs of empire).

- Message: The fantastic often resolves tension through symbolic closure (punishment, enchantment, tragic inevitability). Realism more often cultivates unresolved moral remainder - an insistence that no narrative closure can redeem violence or fully translate the other.

Modern and old representations complicate the binary further. Studies of *Islamic East* show that it can become "internal" - subject to modernization and ideological integration - yet remain narratively distant, a space of projected otherness. Holt demonstrates how early cultural production reworks through new representational programs. Günther's account of deterritorialization clarifies how Turkmenistan can be imagined as alien across long historical arcs, suggesting that "the East" persists as a movable category rather than a resolved geography [6].

This matters for comparative genre analysis because it implies that "fantastic vs realist" is not only a 19th-century issue; modern narratives can reintroduce "alien East" effects via estrangement techniques, while still claiming documentary authority.

Conclusion. The Islamic East in Russian literature is best understood as a genre-sensitive construct shaped by imperial contact zones and by the narrative technologies used to render otherness. Fantastic and realist texts share a common representational repertoire - political despotism scripts, religious coding, landscape semiotics, and boundary scenarios - yet diverge in how they authorize knowledge and distribute ethical responsibility. The fantastic often amplifies alterity through

spectacle and allegory, enabling political displacement and aesthetic extraction. Realism, while capable of reproducing Orientalist typologies, more frequently places Orientalism under interpretive pressure by foregrounding the mechanics of observation, the violence of empire, and the moral ambiguity of cross-cultural encounter. Across the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, the "Islamic East" remains a flexible narrative category: sometimes a romantic stage, sometimes an ethical indictment, sometimes an internal yet deterritorialized space of imaginative alienness. Future research would benefit from closer micro-comparisons of specific paired texts (e.g., "Eastern tale" vs war novella; fairy-tale orientalism vs travelogue) and from greater attention to multilingual mediation and Muslim voices within Russophone literary systems.

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