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Research Article

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The figure of the "Other" in function of the reading approach: From authorship to interpretation

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Abstract

This study examines the transformation of self-image and hetero-image in literature and its intermedia adaptations, analyzing the impact that historical context, ideological objectives, and approach to reading have on the imagining of the "Other." Drawing on the theoretical contributions of Jean-Marie Carré, Hugo Dyserinck, and Joep Leerssen, as well as methods of comparative and intermedia analysis, the study investigates how these imaginings change over time and space, particularly in the context of Ismail Kadare's works and their adaptations for stage and screen.

The hypothesis of this paper is that the conception of the "Other" in three dimensions – as a construct of the author, the characters, and the reader/adapter – is a non-linear process, shaped by historical realities, ideological discourse, and interpretive approach (be it author-centered, text-centered, or reader-centered).

The research question guiding this analysis is: How do conceptions of the "Other" differ at the levels of the author, characters, and reader/adapter, depending on historical and cultural contexts, and how is this dynamic reflected in the construction of identity and alterity in literary discourse and its adapted variants?

In conclusion, the study concludes that the image of the "Other" is not an immutable construct, but a transformable category that changes depending on historical contexts, ideological objectives and the reading approach that is given to the original text during the process of interpretation or adaptation. The analysis of stage and film adaptations of literary works supports this hypothesis, showing that the figure of the "Other" is reconfigured not simply because of the medium, but in accordance with the goals and vision of the adaptor. Imagology, in this sense, serves as a valuable theoretical framework to investigate the permanent changes in the perception of the "Other" in different cultural and discursive contexts.

Keywords: Imagology, Self-image, Hetero-image, Other, Stereotype.

1. Introduction

Imagology, as an interdisciplinary discipline, is concerned with the study of international perceptions and mutual images between nations, as they appear in literary discourse. This field of research investigates the way in which the "Other" – the foreigner or the one representing another culture – is described and understood in literary narrative, often in contrast to the self-image that the author's own culture constructs. Perception as a cognitive process is a fundamental human capacity, but when translated into cultural and literary representations, it takes on a complex function: it shapes and strengthens collective identities through the construction of images of the "Other".

In the literary context, these images are created through language, cultural symbols, ethnic stereotypes, and socio-political distinctions established between characters of different nationalities. Consequently, imagology examines not only the depiction of the "Other" but also the function this depiction serves in relation to personal and collective identity. This introduction aims to lay the groundwork for a more in-depth analysis of how self-image and hetero-image interact dynamically and transformative within literary works and throughout the process of their adaptation.

2. Theoretical Framework

The fundamental concepts of imageology include the auto-image (self-image) and the hetero-image (other-image), which are constructed through mechanisms of cultural, literary, and ideological discourse. These concepts are not stable or essential, but are continuously constructed and transformed depending on the temporal and cultural context: "Rather than being fixed or essential, national stereotypes — including auto-images and hetero-images — are culturally codified representations that shift depending on historical and ideological contexts" (Leerssen, 2007).

Jean-Marie Carré, one of the early figures of imagology, analyzed how images of other nations are constructed and disseminated through literature. He emphasized that representations of the "Other" reflect the ideas and emotions of the observer, rather than offering an objective portrayal of reality. Hugo Dyserinck (2003), meanwhile, underscores transnational images as complex discursive constructs that often arise from specific ideological and historical contexts. According to him, "ethnotypes — images of other peoples and nations — are not mirror-reflections of objective reality but are shaped by ideological interests and historical conditions". In this sense, peoples and nations are presented as conceptual constructs rather than as fixed or unchanging entities.

Joep Leerssen (2007) further developed imagological theory by emphasizing the need for historical and critical contextualization of cultural essentialism. According to him, "stereotypes should not be seen as stable, essentialist expressions of cultural identity, but as historically and discursively contingent constructs that reflect the ideological context in which they are produced". In this context, literature appears as a privileged

terrain for the analysis of stereotypes and cultural imagery.
In addition to these authors, important concepts of the "foreigner" and the "different" have also been developed by theorists such as Edward Said (1978) with "Orientalism", who analyzed the way in which the West has constructed an inferior image of the East as part of a dominant colonial project; Simone de Beauvoir (1949), who conceived of women as the "other" in relation to men in a patriarchal society; and Frantz Fanon (1952), who explored the psychological dimension of the construction of the identity of the colonized.
Likewise, Jacques Derrida, with the concept of "différance" (1967), and Julia Kristeva, with the notion of the "abject" (1982), have contributed to the deconstruction of the self/Other division and to the examination of how the "Other" appears in the text as excluded or excludable. According to Kristeva, "the abject is something rejected from which one does not part, from which one does not protect oneself as from an object" (Kristeva, 1982), thereby destabilizing the boundary between subject and Other. Gayatri Spivak (1988), in Can the Subaltern Speak? highlights how the voices of the marginalized are silenced by the very structures that claim to represent them.
All these authors contribute to the understanding that the construction of the "other" is an ideological and literary act that has concrete consequences for the way personal and collective identity is shaped. Imagology, therefore, offers not only a tool of analysis, but also a way to understand the power relations that lie behind literary representations.

3. Research Methodology

This study follows a combined methodological approach, combining comparative, semiotic and discursive analysis to examine the imagery of the "Other" in literary texts and their intermedia adaptations, such as theatre and cinema. The analysis focuses on three levels of imagery: that of the author, that of the characters and that of the reader/adapter.
Specifically, the study uses three approaches to textual interpretation as analytical lenses to investigate how the figure of the "Other" changes:

- Author-centered approach: emphasizes ideological goals and the context of the work's creation.
- Text-centered approach: focuses on the internal structure and the image produced by the text itself.
- Reader-centered / adapter-centered approach: considers how the reader or adapter reconfigures the "Other" in relation to the horizon of expectation and contemporary reality.

These approaches are necessary to understand how the image of the "Other" does not stem solely from the text, but from the way it is read, interpreted, and re-acquired in different cultural and historical contexts.
The method of comparative analysis is applied in examining how a literary work changes through adoption, and how the image of the "Other" is transformed in these

versions. Semiotic analysis helps in decoding the symbols and signs that are used to represent the other, while discursive analysis helps in examining the ideological and cultural positions that support these representations.

The literary corpus primarily includes the works of Albanian writer Ismail Kadare, due to his consistent focus on the construction of national identity and the confrontation with the "Other." The novel The General of the Dead Army has been selected for its rich exploration of ethnic, historical, and cultural imagery. Kadare's works are also among the most frequently adapted for stage and screen, not only by Albanian directors but also by foreign directors and adapters. This underscores their intermedial potential and offers fertile ground for analyzing transformations in the imagery of the "Other" in relation to interpretive approaches and cultural contexts of adaptation.

In addition to the literary text, adaptations in film and theater format have also been analyzed, such as the stage adaptation at the People's Theater by director Piro Mani (1977), the television adaptation by director Vladimir Prifti (1975), the film The General of the Dead Army by Dhimitër Anagnosti (1989), as well as the international versions of the same work by Luchino Visconti (Il Generale dell'armata morta, 1983) and Bertrand Tavernier (La Vie et rien d'autre, 1989). The aim is to identify the ways in which representations of the "Other" change depending on the cultural context and the interpretative approach of the author of the adaptation.

The selection criteria for the works analyzed are: the clear presence of an image of the "Other," the existence of more than one adaptation of the work, and the cultural and discursive relevance of its content. In this way, the applied methodology provides a broad and in-depth view of the dynamic transformations that the representation of the "Other" undergoes through the various interpretive readings of the adapter.

4. Analysis: Imagining the "Other" according to reading approaches

The following analysis is based on three distinct approaches to interpreting a literary work during the adaptation process: one that remains faithful to the author's vision; one that treats the work as a closed, self-contained text; and one that draws on the personal interpretation of the adaptor, who reconfigures the work according to their own cultural and ideological horizon. These approaches to reading are not merely abstract theories; they directly shape how the "Other" is imagined in adaptations for stage and screen.

Each of these approaches includes concrete cases of adaptations of Kadare's work The General of the Dead Army, ranging from stage and television adaptations with an emphasis on the author, to freer and more personal cinematic realizations that rewrite the vision of the "Other" in accordance with the adaptor's own interpretive horizon.

4.1 The Figure of the "Other" in Readings That Preserve the Author as Interpretive Authority

In the context of Albanian literature of the second half of the 20th century, especially during the communist regime, the function of literature always exceeded aesthetic limits, becoming an important tool for the transmission of state ideology. In this climate, the reading of a literary work by the adapter had to be oriented in accordance with the political message of the author and the system, more than with aesthetic exploration or free interpretation of the content. Attention to the ideological message of the author has conditioned the reading according to the author-centered approach in most adaptations. This reading approach sees the author as the central interpretive instance, where any meaning must be based on his or her presumed intention.

In the case of Ismail Kadare, a figure of undisputed authority in Albanian literary culture, this tendency becomes particularly evident. The depiction of the "Other" in his works often aligns with the ideological stereotypes of the time, wherein the "foreigner" is portrayed as an enemy—an outsider who does not belong to the national body and who serves as a necessary contrast to affirm the moral, cultural, and emotional superiority of the Albanian self. In the novel *The General of the Dead Army* (Kadare, 1963), descriptions of the foreign environment and characters emphasize a sense of strangeness, coldness, and even hostility: "Over the foreign land rain mixed with snow fell." From this opening sentence, the reader is positioned within a clear dichotomy between "us" and "the Other"—a division that is further reinforced throughout the text.

The Italian General is depicted as a mechanical, empty figure, incapable of understanding the essence of the country he is visiting. He identifies and emphasizes the cultural, climatic, geographical, and even anthropological differences between himself and the Albanians. His vocabulary includes expressions such as "hostile appearance" or descriptions such as "regular heads, sloping foreheads, narrow jaws", thus, attempting to produce a typology of the physical anthropology of the Albanian. These descriptions do not serve simple and purely artistic purposes, but function to construct a clear and strong contrast between the general and the priest on the one hand and the Albanians on the other.

This ideological construct is further reinforced in the theatrical and television adaptation by maintaining the author as the central source of meaning. In his adaptation for the People's Theatre (1977), screenwriter and director Piro Mani not only remains faithful to the novel's narrative and chronology but also amplifies its epic tone and the elements that highlight the moral superiority of the Albanians. The wedding scene and the famous monologue of the old woman Nicë (portrayed by Violeta Manushi) are concrete examples of this approach: here, the "Other" becomes the object of irony and collective hostility, indirectly contributing to the intensification of national pride.

Furthermore, the film adaptation by director Vladimir Prifti, based not only on the literary work but also on the stage adaptation by Piro Mani, continues this interpretative line. Prifti, remains faithful not only to the text, the narrative structure

and the ideological message but also chooses to have almost the same cast of actors where the general is played by Sander Prosi and the priest by Pjetër Gjoka. In this way, the representation of the "Other" maintains its previous function by articulating a strong, resistant Albanian self-image with moral superiority towards the foreign Other.

In this reading approach, which grants absolute authority to the author, every element of the narrative—including the "Other"—is interpreted through the lens of authorial intention. This approach is characterized by fidelity and strict adherence to the ideological line conveyed by the author, where the adaptor functions more as a transmitter of the author's voice than as a creator of new meanings. The figure of the "Other," in this context, reinforces a collective identity that confronts the foreign presence and emerges strengthened from the encounter.

4.2 The Figure of the "Other" in readings that see the work as a self-sustaining source of meaning

In the text-centered approach, the meaning of the work no longer derives directly from the author's intention, but from the very structure of the text. The adapter treats the work as an autonomous system of meaning and offers the public a new readability, independent of the authorial authority. This approach allows the reader (in our case the adapter) to distance himself from the author and to focus on the very way in which the discourse within the work is structured.

The film "Return of the Dead Army", directed by Dhimitër Anagnosti, aligns with this interpretive trajectory while offering a differentiated reading from earlier adaptations. This shift is first signaled in the title itself: "Return of the Dead Army". The general is no longer the sole or central figure representing the "Other." Instead, the film introduces the administration of an entire foreign state, thereby presenting a broader and more complex image of the "Other." This conceptual expansion marks a transition from an interpersonal conflict to a collective, historical, cultural, and ideological confrontation. The narrative no longer centers on a single character entering a foreign land, but on an institution—the Ministry of War—that seeks to restore national honor by repatriating the remains of fallen soldiers.

This transformation is reinforced by changes in narrative structure. Anagnosti does not begin the story at the moment of the general's arrival on Albanian soil, but begins it in the general's place of origin, with his preparations for the departure of this mission. This directorial choice – fully supported by details and information originating from Brenda the novel – places the protocol and emotional dimension of the mission to return the remains at the center of the film. The pathetic speech of the Minister of War (Andon Qesari), the meeting in Colonel Z's family with Beti (Rajmonda Bulku), the mother and aristocratic family of the colonel lost in Albania during the war, as well as the description of the entire state infrastructure, before the general and the priest land in Albania, contextualize the general as part of a larger Other than the individual Other that we encounter in previous adaptations.

Only after this introduction does Anagnosti focus "The Other" on the characters of

the general and the priest. A significant moment in the film is the confrontation with the gravedigger (Vasillaq Godo), where the tension between them does not have a direct ideological character, but appears as an emotional and cultural conflict: "Why does that man look at me like that? He hates me! I only despise him" (Anagnosti).
The General (Bujar Lako) in Anagnoti's film is a complex figure. In his attempt to keep the institutional, historical and cultural representation of his country under control, the General experiences personal clashes with Albanian reality, sliding from scene to scene towards an identity crisis. Albanians are also not presented as carriers of an ideology, but as complex and diverse individuals, creating a more multiple and less ideological relationship with the "Other".
Positioned even further from the author's intent is Luchino Visconti's interpretation in the film "*Il Generale dell'armata morta"* (1983). Unlike Mani, Prifti, and Anagnosti, Visconti does not emphasize the ideological, cultural, or historical tensions portrayed by Kadare. For Visconti, the "Other" is no longer the general—nor are the Albanians. Instead, he reconceptualizes the figure of the "Other" within the complex relationship between the general and the priest, signaling a shift from ethnic or national confrontation to an individual conflict, bordering on the absurd and the grotesque. This new focus moves the essence of the conflict away from a "us-versus-them" dynamic and toward an internal, interpersonal struggle between two characters who share the same mission but not the same interests.
The Albanians in Visconti's version are not presented as a heroic or mysterious people in terms of tradition and cultural customs. In Visconti's film, the Albanians are almost in the background, almost irrelevant to the dramaturgical development of the film. This reading shift is clearly emphasized in the wedding scene, a climactic moment of confrontation in Kadare's novel and in other adaptations. In Visconti, the figure of the old woman Nicë no longer has the tragic or epic weight of the Albanian interpretations; she is even presented with a comic tone, emphasized by the grotesque detail of her teeth. This element clearly shows Visconti's disinterest in ideological messages or cultural differences, shifting the conflict to an existential and symbolic dimension of man facing the past and sentimental images between Beti (Colonel Z's wife), the general and the priest.
Both of these adaptations – Anagnosti's and Visconti's – show that when the approach to the work is text-centered, the figure of the "Other" is no longer a fixed ideological production, but a construct that is reconfigured through the narrative itself, the structure of the work, and the artistic interests of the adaptor. In this way, the adaptor treats the elements of the work as entry points for new reflections, not as immutable formulas for the transmission of a predetermined message.

4.3 The figure of the "Other" in readings that center on the personal perspective of the adaptor

Unlike author-centered and text-centered approaches, the reader-centered approach emphasizes the subjective interpretation that an individual or institution makes of a text, transforming it according to their own cultural, aesthetic, and ideological

horizons. In this context, the "reader" – in the case of our study, the adaptor – is no longer a passive interpreter or transmitter of fixed meanings, but a co-author of new imaginings, including the way in which the "Other" is presented and conceived.
In this approach, the relationship with the "Other" is no longer defined by the author's intention or the internal structure of the work, but by the goals and expectations of the reader or adapter, as well as those of the audience. The adapter no longer adheres faithfully to the source text, but interprets it in light of new historical, cultural, political, or personal circumstances that shape the act of reading and adaptation.
A meaningful illustration of this approach is the French film "La vie et rien d'autre" (1989) directed by Bertrand Tavernier, which, although not a direct adaptation of Kadare's novel The General of the Dead Army, is inspired by it. In this case, the "Other" is no longer associated with the Albanians or with the general as a representative figure of an occupying state, but is transformed into a philosophical and existential concept: the clash between life and death.
Commander Dellaplane (Philippe Noiret), the film's protagonist, is assigned a mission similar to that of Kadare's general: to search for and identify the remains of soldiers killed in World War I. Unlike the novel, which centers on the cultural and ideological confrontation between the "foreigner" and the native, Tavernier shifts the focus away from ideological, ethnic, or national conflict and toward a profound moral and metaphysical confrontation with memory, loss, and the absurdity of war.
In this interpretation, the "Other" is not a concrete subject, but an existential state – death itself, oblivion, or the irreconcilable past. It becomes an abstract concept that permeates the entire narrative and gives the event a universal dimension. As such, the film does not seek to reproduce or challenge Kadare's vision, but to construct a new understanding of narrative origins, in keeping with the post-World War I French context and the director's humanist sensibility.
This reading is in line with Roland Barthes' idea of the "death of the author" and the birth of the reader as the productive center of the text's meaning. In this perspective, literary works no longer have a "truth" to be discovered, but a series of possible truths that are shaped by the way they are interpreted in different times and spaces.
Therefore, the reader-centered approach is not a distortion or deviation from the text, but rather a creative act that generates new meanings and grants the work the status of an "open work," in line with Eco's concept. This approach also accounts for the fact that the same literary work can yield different—even contradictory—interpretations across cultures and historical periods. The figure of the "Other," in this sense, is always in flux, subject to continual reinterpretation depending on the reading approach, the intended purpose, and the horizon of expectations brought by the reader.

5. Discussion/Interpretation

The findings of the analysis confirm that the figure of the "Other" in literature and its adaptations for stage and screen is not a static construct, but a deeply dynamic concept that transforms depending on the reading approach followed by the adaptor.

This dynamic is conditioned not only by the content of the literary text, but especially by the relationship that the reader (or adaptor) creates with the author, the text and its interpretive context.

In the author-centered approach, the adaptor engages with the work as a code to be deciphered, aiming to reconstruct the message and vision of the original author. The figure of the "Other" in such readings—exemplified by Piro Mani's theatrical adaptation and Vladimir Prifti's television adaptation—retains the ideological and national dimensions constructed by Kadare. The "Other" is portrayed as an invader, an external enemy whose presence reinforces the heroic and unwavering self-image of the Albanian. In this approach, reading becomes an act of faithful reproduction, where the primary objective is to respect the author's intentionality and preserve the ideological spirit of the original text.

In the text-centered approach, as in the film adaptation of Anagnosti or in Visconti's variant, there is a shift of the center of meaning from the author to the text itself. These adaptations explore the structures, symbols, and internal tensions of the work, constructing new figures for the "Other." In the case of Anagnosti, the "Other" is no longer simply the individual (the general), but the foreign state itself as an institution facing the history of a nation. In the case of Visconti, the relationship with the "Other" shifts from ideological and cultural confrontation to an introspective dialogue between the characters, where the "Other" appears as a projection of the internal tensions of the general and the priest, completely overshadowing the local characters.

In the reader-centered approach—as exemplified by the film *La vie et rien d'autre* by French director Bertrand Tavernier—the adaptation becomes an act of personal interpretation, detached from the original Albanian context. Here, the "Other" is no longer a concrete subject, but a universal and philosophical category, representing the boundary between war and peace, life and death, memory and oblivion. The aim of this reading is not to interpret or challenge the original author, but to redefine the meaning of the work in accordance with the cultural and ideological needs of the adaptor and the audience of the film. This approach testifies to the infinite potential of the text for reinterpretation and reconfiguration.

These three approaches show that the image of the "Other" is a construct that changes depending on the role given to the author, the text itself, and the reader in the interpretive act.

The findings from the analysis clearly support the hypothesis of this study: the image of the "Other" is not a linear or uniform process, but is shaped and reformulated depending on the three points of interpretive interaction – the author, the characters, and the reader/adapter – as well as under the influence of historical context, ideological discourse, and reading approach.

In the author-centered approach, the "Other" functions as a mechanism to affirm self-image and reinforce collective identity, often serving the ideological imperatives of the time. In text-centered approaches, the meaning of the "Other" emerges from the structure and internal logic of the narrative, reflecting a more nuanced and autonomous confrontation between cultures or identities. In the reader-centered or

adaptive approach, however, the meaning of the "Other" is flexible and open, shaped by the horizon of expectation of the adaptor and the intended audience.
This variety of readings and interpretive positions confirms that the image of the "Other" is a construct influenced by external (historical, cultural) and internal realities (aesthetic intentions, ideological positions, narrative needs).

6. Conclusion

This study explored how representations of the "Other" are constructed, transformed, and interpreted in relation to self-image within literary texts and their intermedial adaptations. The analysis was framed around three reading approaches—author-centered, text-centered, and reader-centered—to demonstrate that the figure of the "Other" is not a fixed entity but a discursive construct that shifts according to cultural, historical, and ideological contexts, as well as the reader's position within the interpretive act.
Through the analysis of Ismail Kadare's work "The General of the Dead Army" and its adaptations for theater and film, it was demonstrated that interventions in the narrative structure, directorial choices, and changes in ideological focus are not only artistic acts, but also acts of reconfiguration of cultural identity and positioning towards the "Other".
In this sense, the image of the "Other" is not a fixed construct but a continuous process of semanticization, where ideological, emotional, and aesthetic perspectives are interwoven. This process affirms Joep Leerssen's observation that "images of the other are less reflections of reality, and more projections of fears, desires and ideas of the self" (Leerssen, 2007).
The value of this paper lies in the fact that it offers a contextualized and multiple reading of the auto/hetero-image relationship in Albanian literature and its adaptations, bringing a contribution to the field of imageology and intermedia cultural identity studies. In a field where literature in the Albanian language is still limited, this study represents a step towards the internationalization of research practices through the use of contemporary theoretical frameworks.

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