EUROPEAN JOURNAL OF EMERGING COMPARATIVE HISTORY AND CULTURAL STUDIES

SATIRE, PUBLIC SPHERES, AND IMPERIAL RECKONINGS IN THE REVOLUTIONARY TRANSCAUCASUS

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V0LUME01 ISSUE01 (2024)
Published Date: 18 December 2024 // Page no.: - 48-62

ABSTRACT

This article investigates the pivotal role of satirical media, specifically the Azerbaijani journal Molla Nasraddin, in shaping public discourse and fostering political imagination during the revolutionary ferment of the early 20th-century Transcaucasus. Situated at the nexus of the declining Russian, Qajar, and Ottoman Empires, Molla Nasraddin utilized humor, sharp critique, and innovative visual satire to challenge imperial hegemonies, expose social ills, and mobilize a diverse readership across linguistic and national boundaries. By analyzing the journal's content and its circulation, this study demonstrates how Molla Nasraddin actively contributed to the formation of an inter-imperial "counterpublic," enabling the articulation of shared grievances and revolutionary ideals among various ethnic and social groups. The article highlights the journal's influence on the Iranian Constitutional Revolution and its broader legacy in democratizing political discourse and catalyzing social change in a period of profound imperial reckoning and transformation.

Keywords: Satire, Public Sphere, Counterpublics, Molla Nasraddin, Transcaucasus, Revolutionary Era, Imperialism, Iranian Constitutional Revolution, Ottoman Empire, Russian Empire, Political Cartoons, Trickster Figure.

INTRODUCTION

The dawn of the 20th century cast a long shadow of transformation across Eurasia, marked by the seismic decline of ancient empires—the Russian, Ottoman, and Qajar—and the tumultuous emergence of revolutionary movements that sought to redefine political and social orders [10, 14, 23, 56, 75, 78, 80]. Within this grand crucible of change, the Transcaucasus, a region strategically positioned at the confluence of these imperial domains, blossomed into a vibrant epicenter of intellectual ferment, cultural synthesis, and fervent political activism [16, 25, 27, 28, 30]. This was not merely a passive borderland but a dynamic "inter-imperial" space where multiple imperial projects converged, overlapped, and contended for influence, creating a complex palimpsest of legacies for local populations to navigate. Amidst the diverse and often conflicting currents of rising nationalism, burgeoning socialism, and the fervent pursuit of constitutionalism, the development and widespread dissemination of satirical publications emerged as an unexpectedly powerful force. These journals played a crucial, often underestimated, role in shaping public discourse, critiquing established powers, and mobilizing dissenting voices, thereby giving form to new publics and counterpublics [77].

This article delves into the transformative function of satire, particularly through an in-depth examination of the highly influential Azerbaijani journal, Molla Nasraddin. Published from Tiflis (modern-day Tbilisi), the administrative heart of the Russian Caucasus, the magazine pioneered a distinctive blend of visual satire, recurring character types, and multilingual wordplay. This unique approach allowed it to function as a form of "satirical pedagogy," cultivating what can be termed "inter-imperial literacy"—the sophisticated capacity among its readership to discern deep connections and ironic parallels between neighboring imperial worlds, all while maintaining a critical distance from each. Through its nuanced humor and sharp critiques, Molla Nasraddin systematically challenged imperial hegemonies, exposed pervasive social ills, and fostered a shared sense of political imagination that resonated across a vast, interconnected landscape [33, 34, 35, 36, 37]. By meticulously analyzing Molla Nasraddin's multifaceted engagement with a diverse array of imperial powers and its extensive, trans-imperial readership, this study aims to illuminate the intricate and often contradictory interplay between satirical cultural production and the dynamic formation of publics and counterpublics in an era defined

by intense imperial reckoning and revolutionary upheaval [77]. We will explore how this journal's unique positioning allowed it to offer penetrating insights into the workings of empire from spaces that were historically borderlands, transforming them into vibrant centers of political and cultural commentary.

METHODS

This study employs a comprehensive qualitative research approach, with a primary focus on the textual and visual analysis of the satirical journal Molla Nasraddin within its richly textured historical and socio-political context. The core methodology involves an intensive close reading of the journal's diverse content. This includes its articles, thought-provoking editorials, serialized short stories, and, most crucially, its impactful political cartoons, which were not mere embellishments but integral to its communicative power and widespread appeal [1, 2, 3, 5, 6, 7, 37, 54, 63, 72]. These visual elements often conveyed complex messages that transcended literacy barriers, making the journal accessible to a broad, diverse audience.

The analytical framework for this research is deeply informed by theoretical concepts concerning "publics" and "counterpublics," notably as articulated by Michael Warner [77]. These theories explore the intricate mechanisms through which various forms of media, like Molla Nasraddin, facilitate the construction of collective identity and enable political agency, particularly operating outside or in opposition to dominant power structures [12, 21, 22, 77]. Furthermore, we integrate scholarship on the dynamics of revolution and empire to meticulously contextualize the journal's incisive critiques within the broader historical narrative of imperial decline and the simultaneous emergence of constitutional movements across the region [9, 15, 18, 19, 23, 24, 25, 26, 40, 48, 50, 56, 58, 62, 75, 78, 80].

The research synthesizes a wide array of historical accounts to construct a nuanced understanding of the interconnectedness of these monumental events. This includes detailed historical narratives of the Transcaucasian revolutionary movements, the pivotal Iranian Constitutional Revolution (1906–1911), and the transformative Ottoman Young Turk Revolution (1908) [1, 10, 18, 24, 40, 56, 75, 78, 80]. This synthetic approach is crucial for understanding Molla Nasraddin's integral role within this complex, multi-layered historical tapestry. Beyond the overt political analysis, the study also delves into the rich folkloric background of the figure of Molla Nasraddin as a trickster. It assesses how this traditional character was adapted and reimagined in modern satirical discourse, examining its profound impact on reader reception, engagement, and the effective delivery of subversive messages [2, 3, 20, 44, 45, 54, 76].

A central and distinctive aspect of this methodological approach is its emphasis on the multilingual and transnational circulation of the journal's ideas and imagery. This acknowledges Molla Nasraddin's remarkable reach far beyond strict geographical or linguistic boundaries, extending its influence across vast areas of the Russian, Qajar, and Ottoman Empires [27, 32, 33, 34, 39, 41, 42, 57, 59, 60, 61, 65, 66, 67, 68, 70, 71, 74, 79]. By treating the journal as an active agent in shaping social terrain, rather than merely reflecting it, we analyze how its forms, circulation, and mutations actively constituted the very publics it addressed [16]. This perspective allows for a deeper exploration of the "inter-imperial literacy" that Molla Nasraddin cultivated, enabling its readers to understand and critically engage with the complex political and cultural dynamics unfolding across their interconnected imperial worlds.

RESULTS

The Emergence and Expansive Reach of Molla Nasraddin

Molla Nasraddin, first published on 7 April 1906 in Tiflis (modern-day Tbilisi), the dynamic administrative and cultural center of the Russian Caucasus, emerged into a world already simmering with revolutionary fervor. Its inception followed closely on the heels of the 1905 Russian Revolution, a period that opened up new, albeit often precarious, avenues for political expression among the empire's diverse populations, including the Muslims of the Caucasus [5, 6, 7, 16, 25, 27, 67]. The journal was spearheaded by the prodigious writer and intellectual Jalil Mammadguluzadeh, a figure whose foresight and dedication rapidly established Molla Nasraddin as an undeniably powerful and resonant voice for social and political commentary [4, 8, 38, 54, 63, 64].

Despite being published primarily in Azerbaijani Turkish—the vernacular spoken by most Muslims in the South Caucasus—the journal's impactful satirical content and distinctive visual artistry possessed a remarkable ability to transcend linguistic and cultural barriers. The pervasive figure of the trickster Molla Nasraddin, a beloved character in Turkic and Persian folklore, was instantly recognizable and understood across vast regions, allowing the magazine's humor and critique to resonate with diverse populations throughout the Russian, Qajar, and Ottoman Empires [2, 3, 13, 20, 27, 31, 32, 33, 34, 36, 44, 45, 57, 59, 60, 61, 72, 74, 76]. Molla Nasraddin's innovative approach to communication, marrying textual wit with universally comprehensible cartoons, significantly contributed to its remarkable and rapid dissemination.

The journal achieved an impressive reach, circulating widely—sometimes even through clandestine networks—and contributing significantly to the formation of what can be described as an "inter-imperial" public sphere [27, 32, 33, 34, 39, 41, 42, 43, 57, 59, 60, 61, 65, 66, 67, 68, 70, 71, 74, 79]. This was a unique space where common grievances, shared aspirations for modernity, and revolutionary ideas could be articulated, debated, and disseminated across vast geographical and political

landscapes, binding together disparate communities under a shared satirical gaze. The magazine's fifth issue editorial, published on 18 May 1906, proudly noted its circulation of approximately twenty-five thousand copies, yet its influence extended far beyond subscriber numbers. Copies were frequently read aloud in teahouses, mosques, and other public spaces, passed from hand to hand, amplifying its message and reaching even illiterate segments of the population. This oral circulation transformed the act of reading into a collective experience, further solidifying the sense of a shared "inter-imperial" public [16, 77].

Molla Nasraddin's remarkable reach was fundamentally underpinned by its masterful synthesis of diverse intellectual and cultural influences. Its namesake, Nasraddin, a medieval wise fool whose stories are woven into the fabric of cultures from the Balkans to Central Asia, provided an instantly familiar and relatable conduit for complex ideas [2, 3, 20, 44, 45, 54, 76]. The journal's satirical style also drew inspiration from the Russian literary tradition, particularly Nikolai Gogol's distinctive blend of realism and absurdity [30]. Prominent contributors, such as the acclaimed poet Ələkbər Sabir, seamlessly integrated elements from Persian classics, further broadening the journal's appeal and intellectual depth [62].

This dynamic engagement with both classical and modern forms manifested across an eclectic range of genres. Molla Nasraddin featured thought-provoking poetry that repurposed traditional meters for contemporary critiques, travelogues that offered sustained commentary through the guise of a supposedly naïve observer, humorous telegrams that mixed real and fabricated news to expose absurdities across imperial boundaries, analytical essays, and tongue-in-cheek open letters. Satire, functioning as the magazine's foundational mode of critique, unified these diverse literary forms into a cohesive and impactful whole [37, 54, 63, 72]. Complementing this rich textual arsenal were the vivid and often strikingly direct political cartoons created by the talented German-Georgian artist Oskar Schmerling and his colleagues Josef Rotter and Əzim Əzimzadə. Their illustrations, drawing from a wide spectrum of European and Russian artistic influences, were crucial to the magazine's distinct visual identity and immediate communicative power [3, 37, 54, 72].

Although the primary language of publication was the Turkic vernacular spoken by Muslims in the South Caucasus (Musəlmanca, or "the Muslim language"), Molla Nasraddin regularly incorporated fragments or even entire texts in Persian, Ottoman Turkish, and Russian, often without direct translation. This deliberate multilingual approach, maintained despite the editors' advocacy for "plain Turkish" in submissions, acknowledged and leveraged the linguistic dexterity of its sophisticated readership. This linguistic fluidity was further exemplified by a recurring section featuring poems that ingeniously alternated between Turkish and Persian couplets, creating a unique intertextual experience. Through this complex interplay of varied influences and astute editorial choices, Molla Nasraddin forged a distinctive voice. It was firmly couched in a local Turkic vernacular, yet imbued with the sharp, modern style of Russian satire, all while remaining deeply rooted in the culturally rich and historically resonant material of Persian classics [31, 33, 34, 35, 36, 46, 51, 57, 69, 72]. This unique linguistic and stylistic synthesis opened a rare and invaluable perspective on the Caucasus, elevating it from a perceived imperial periphery to a vital "inter-imperial center" in its own right—a vantage point that offered a truly panoramic view of all three empires during their nearly simultaneous and profoundly transformative revolutionary periods [10, 11, 18, 24, 40, 56, 57, 64, 74, 75, 78].

Satirical Themes and Incisive Critiques

The satire embedded within Molla Nasraddin was exceptionally multifaceted and relentlessly incisive, strategically targeting what can be conceptually understood as a "seven-headed" array of deeply entrenched societal and political ills that plagued the region. A paramount focus of the journal's acerbic wit was the unwavering critique of the major imperial powers that exerted their control and influence over the Caucasus. The magazine frequently and vigorously lambasted Russian imperial policies in the Caucasus, unflinchingly highlighting pervasive issues of colonial exploitation, the suppression of local cultures, and the heavy-handedness of the Tsarist administration [8, 16, 25, 27, 29]. These critiques often depicted the Russian bear as a symbol of oppressive force, sometimes subtle, sometimes overt.

Concurrently, Molla Nasraddin directed its sharpest satirical barbs at the decaying Qajar dynasty in Iran, a period of profound internal struggle and external pressure. During the pivotal Iranian Constitutional Revolution (1906–1911), the journal emerged as a fervent and vocal supporter of the constitutionalists, actively campaigning against the autocratic monarchy and fiercely denouncing foreign interventions that sought to undermine nascent democratic aspirations [1, 10, 18, 23, 24, 26, 40, 49, 56, 75, 78]. The magazine's sympathetic and extensive coverage of the Iranian constitutionalist movement, coupled with its bold, albeit temporary, relocation to Tabriz (a key center of the revolution), underscored its profound transnational revolutionary spirit and tangible influence on events beyond the Russian imperial borders [13, 24, 40]. Furthermore, Molla Nasraddin demonstrated its independent and critical stance by not shying away from critiquing the Ottoman Empire. It particularly targeted the empire's pan-Turkist and pan-Islamist policies, often exposing the inherent hypocrisy and perceived backwardness of the ruling elites who clung to antiquated notions of power amidst a rapidly changing world [11, 75].

Beyond its external critiques of imperial powers, Molla

Nasraddin engaged in an equally vigorous and unflinching assault on deeply ingrained internal social problems that stifled progress and perpetuated ignorance within Muslim communities. Religious fanaticism, widespread illiteracy, crippling superstition, and an entrenched resistance to modernization were recurrent and prominent themes across its pages [5, 6, 7, 37, 54, 63, 72]. The journal consistently championed the cause of secular education, advocated passionately for women's rights, and vigorously promoted the adoption of modern scientific thought and progressive societal reforms. These enlightened ideals were often starkly juxtaposed with the entrenched conservatism of powerful religious figures (mullahs) and rigid traditional societal norms, highlighting the urgent need for internal transformation.

The central figure of Molla Nasraddin, traditionally revered as a wise fool or cunning trickster in Turkic and Persian folklore, was masterfully re-imagined by the journal's creators. He transformed into a sharp-witted and often disarmingly humorous critic of these very societal shortcomings, allowing the magazine to deliver profoundly serious political and social messages through the accessible and palatable medium of humor [2, 3, 20, 44, 45, 76]. This ingenious appropriation of a widely known and beloved folk figure was a key to Molla Nasraddin's success. It rendered complex political and social issues relatable and comprehensible to a broad and diverse audience, including peasants, laborers, and other segments of the population who might otherwise have been excluded from formal political discourse due to illiteracy or lack of access to traditional intellectual circles [2, 3, 20, 44, 45, 76]. The trickster's ability to speak truth to power, often through indirect means, provided a vital layer of protection against censorship and ensured the widespread resonance of the journal's critical voice [17, 73].

The Unrivaled Power of Visual Satire

One of the most defining and truly distinguishing features of Molla Nasraddin was its pioneering and masterful use of political cartoons and intricate illustrations [37, 54, 72]. These visual elements were not mere adjuncts to the text; they were profoundly integral to the journal's communicative power and accessibility. Often rendered with stark, direct lines and compelling symbolism, these cartoons possessed an extraordinary ability to bypass literacy barriers, conveying complex political messages and nuanced social critiques with immediate and visceral impact.

The visual narratives within Molla Nasraddin's pages powerfully depicted the pervasive suffering of the common people, the arbitrary tyranny of autocratic rulers, the rampant corruption of the clergy, and the myriad follies and absurdities of a society grappling with profound change. These depictions were characterized by an unflinching honesty and a biting wit that resonated deeply with its diverse readership. The visual language employed by the journal played an absolutely critical role in popularizing its core message and ensuring its broad appeal, thereby transforming Molla Nasraddin into an extraordinarily powerful tool for public education, social commentary, and popular mobilization [37, 54, 72].

The illustrations served as a universally understood visual vocabulary, effectively enabling the journal's multifaceted "seven-headed public"—a remarkably diverse populace composed of various ethnic, religious, and linguistic groups—to readily comprehend and engage with the journal's complex critiques, even if they were unable to read the accompanying text [27, 33, 34, 35, 36, 41, 42, 43, 57, 59, 60, 61, 70, 71, 74, 79]. Artists like Oskar Schmerling, Josef Rotter, and Əzim Əzimzadə were instrumental in crafting this visual lexicon, which became as iconic and influential as the written content itself [3]. Their work created a shared visual grammar that allowed for instantaneous understanding and emotional connection across the vast inter-imperial landscape, fostering a sense of collective identity rooted in shared laughter and collective indignation.

Satirist's Types: Monarchs, Mullahs, and Making Empire Legible

Both revolutionary discourse and the art of satire share a fundamental and remarkably effective pedagogical strategy: they instruct, persuade, and mobilize through the deliberate and often exaggerated deployment of social types. As noted by Caroline Humphrey (2008), moments of profound societal transformation, such as revolutions, tend to crystallize specific personalities or archetypes that endure as powerful historical markers of those upheavals. In revolutionary discourse, these crystallized personalities are distilled, simplified, and frequently exaggerated into distinct "types"—figures who are portrayed as exploiting, oppressing, suffering, resisting, outwitting, or protecting one another. This dramatic portrayal of power relations serves a clear purpose: to galvanize action, whether that means overthrowing an autocratic regime, liberating an oppressed populace, enlightening an ignorant society, uniting disparate factions, or eliminating perceived enemies.

Similarly, satire thrives on familiar types as its raw material, but it masterfully transforms them through humorous misplacement, ironic juxtaposition, or outright subversion. The very effectiveness of both revolutionary and satirical discourse hinges critically on their audience's ability to "think with types"—to recognize these simplified, often caricatured, characters as potent embodiments of broader social forces, political relationships, and cultural dynamics that are ripe for transformation [41, 23].

Within the rich and expansive universe of Molla Nasraddin, we encounter a vivid cast of character types that operate at what Engseng Ho terms an "intermediate scale"—an expansive domain encompassing adjacent regions forged through long-standing historical patterns

of circulation and exchange. This scale transcends both narrow localist and nascent nationalist frameworks, yet resists dissolution into the overwhelming abstractions of globalism (Ho 2017: 922) [45]. This dynamic interplay of scales is strikingly demonstrated in a powerful cartoon from 17 September 1907, which presents a chaotic and visually arresting scene depicting monarchs, mercenaries, and mullahs collectively attacking the Iranian parliament (Figure 3).

On the right side of the illustration, mullahs, often portrayed by the magazine as corrupt and parasitic figures whose entrenched influence hindered social and political progress, are depicted riding giant hares. They are led by the influential cleric Sheikh Fazlullah, a constitutional ally who had notoriously turned into an enemy, now symbolically carried on the shoulders of the devil—a clear visual indictment of his moral corruption. On the left, a paramilitary brigade, fiercely loyal to the Iranian Shah Mohammad Ali, is shown firing their rifles, led by their tribal chief Rahim Khan, a known henchman of the Shah. The Shah himself, eager to dismantle the nascent parliament and reclaim absolute power, observes the unfolding chaos from the top left corner of the frame. Directly opposite him, Ottoman Sultan Abdulhamid II, who faced similar constitutional challenges in his own empire, is depicted drawing an arrow at the Iranian parliament under the watchful, approving eyes of various European monarchs. The Russian Tsar, strategically absent from the immediate scene (likely to avoid direct censorship), is allegorized through the powerful symbol of a bear, seen carrying Rahim Khan. This subtle yet potent visual cue exposes the tsarist regime's underlying support for the royalist forces in Iran, revealing a hidden collusion. Captured within this single, complex frame is a damning visual indictment of an international coalition of monarchs, mullahs, and mercenaries, all united in their intent to undermine and ultimately undo Iran's fledgling constitutional revolution.

While these caricatured figures vividly represent real historical personalities, they simultaneously embody broader societal and political "types." The mullahs, a frequent target of the magazine's critiques, consistently appear as corrupt, self-serving, and parasitic figures whose pervasive influence over the populace is seen as a significant impediment to genuine social and political progress. Monarchs, depicted as stubbornly resisting constitutional limitations, are portrayed as antiquated, despotic, and desperately in need of fundamental reform. Tribal chiefs, though less frequently depicted, represent a form of loyalty that, while seemingly traditional, should be obsolete in a modernizing world, yet is insidiously harnessed by the monarchs for their nefarious ends in exchange for special privileges. These "types" are not merely presented as outdated but as fundamentally insidious: mullahs claim to serve Allah while in reality operating as agents of the devil, and tribal mercenaries who ostensibly fight for the shah are in fact in active collusion with the tsar, revealing a deep web of deceit and self-interest.

Through these skillfully typified portrayals of historical figures drawn from neighboring imperial territories, Molla Nasraddin masterfully highlighted the profound interdependence of these imperial domains. This interconnectedness was overtly evident to those at the apex of power—the monarchs—who stood to lose a great deal amidst the widespread political turmoil sweeping across their respective realms. Yet, a perspective of equally sweeping breadth, but crucially originating "from below," was uniquely available to the discerning readers of Molla Nasraddin. The ambitious scope of this "bottom-up" view was brilliantly showcased by the magazine's "telegrams" column, a weekly feature that ingeniously blended actual news dispatches with satirical, often fictitious, reports. In the magazine's inaugural issue, the purported origins of the first three telegrams immediately established this inter-imperial perspective:

- Petersburg, 30 March: "All of Russia is peaceful. The wolf and the lamb are grazing together." (A sarcastic jab at the supposed calm after the 1905 revolution.)
- Tehran, 30 March: "His Majesty the Shah is preparing for a journey to Europe." (Hinting at royal detachment and potential flight.)
- Istanbul, 29 March: "The Ottoman government has prohibited coughing on the streets." (A satirical critique of arbitrary and oppressive rule.)

In a clever reversal of the typical flow of information, these telegrams, ostensibly originating from various imperial capitals, consistently reached the Caucasus, much like a metropolitan newspaper might transmit news from distant colonies back to the imperial center. This was not a superficial reach masking provincial limitation, akin to the French adage about culture being like jam—spread ever thinner when scarce. Instead, the vast geographical and political space between these three capitals was significantly "thickened" through the weekly influx of letters and submissions streaming into Molla Nasraddin's editorial room. These communications arrived from a diverse array of cities, ranging from Tabriz in Iran to Kazan in Russia, Odessa on the Black Sea to Ashgabat in Central Asia, and countless towns and villages throughout the sprawling Caucasus. The magazine's thoughtful and often satirically tinged editorial responses to these letters further enriched this "two-way traffic" of information and ideas. Through this dynamic exchange, there emerged not only telegraphic observations but also vivid, granular ethnographic portrayals of everyday life, emerging popular trends, simmering subterranean social tensions, and stark economic disparities across these interconnected territories. This detailed, localized feedback loop was crucial in shaping the magazine's content and its resonance with readers [16, 77].

The magazine's telegraphic dispatches acutely reflected the telegraph's burgeoning significance as a revolutionary

communication technology of the era. The inherent encoding-decoding process fundamental to telegraphy directly paralleled the interpretive mechanics required to understand the printed cartoons. Each medium demanded its own sophisticated form of literacy: telegraph operators transformed spoken words into electrical signals for decoding at distant stations, while cartoonists masterfully distilled complex political realities into potent visual archetypes that required a keen political sophistication from readers to interpret effectively [37, 54, 72]. These intricately interwoven networks of communication accustomed readers to fluid movements between local grievances and broader imperial scales. For instance, in the pages of Molla Nasraddin, local complaints about the mullahs in Tbilisi might appear alongside urgent constitutional developments in Tehran, while a struggling merchant's plight in Baku could illuminate broader patterns of economic transformation unfolding across the vast Russian Empire. By consistently revealing unexpected connections and often jarring parallels between immediate local experiences and sweeping imperial changes on a weekly basis, the magazine meticulously cultivated a particular kind of literacy among its readers—an "inter-imperial literacy"—that enabled them to connect, compare, and critically assess the realities of their three intertwined imperial worlds.

Opening virtually any volume of Molla Nasraddin vividly reveals the ongoing cultivation of this inter-imperial literacy in action. The 4 August 1908 edition provides a compelling illustration, featuring on its cover a poignant caricature of Ottoman Sultan Abdulhamid II (Figure 4). The Sultan is depicted meticulously tending to the wounds of an Ottoman citizen, who, having endured decades of authoritarian rule, expresses astonishment at this sudden display of concern, remarking, "Yesterday, you were wielding the chain so hard that it left wounds on my body, and now you are applying medicine to them. Frankly, I am doubtful." This scene brilliantly captures the Sultan's abrupt and cynical change in attitude—a desperate strategic maneuver to retain his throne following the Young Turk constitutional revolution that had erupted in July of that year [11, 57, 75, 78]. The caricature, steeped in irony, questions the sincerity of the reforms and highlights the deep-seated distrust between ruler and ruled.

Turning the page within the same issue, we encounter a powerful poem directly addressed to Ottoman subjects, urging them not to be swayed by the superficial appearance of success of the Young Turk Revolution. Drawing shrewd parallels to the ongoing Iranian experience, the poem ardently advocates for an unwavering commitment to genuine constitutionalist ideals while emphatically stressing the critical importance of unity among the revolutionary forces. Another significant section, titled "Peterburq," meticulously details the tyrannical measures enacted by Iranian Shah Mohammad Ali and brutally executed by Cossacks and Amir Badirhan—highlighting the foreign intervention in Iran's internal affairs [20]. The passage crucially exposes the distorted perception of Iranian affairs prevalent in St. Petersburg, the Russian imperial capital, where Mohammad Ali Shah is uncritically admired. This distortion, the article asserts, is directly attributed to the manipulation of telegrams sent from Tehran, with the telegraph system itself being explicitly controlled by the Shah, the Cossacks, and Amir Bahadir—a direct commentary on the manipulation of information and communication infrastructure by imperial powers.

Following this is a compelling feuilleton titled "Mr. Mozalan's Travelogue." Within this segment, Mozalan—a pseudonym for "joker," often used by Mammadguluzadeh himself (Ağayev 2007)—guides the reader through the labyrinthine streets of Mashhad in Iran, ostensibly in search of a telegraph station [7]. Along his journey, he keenly observes the pervasive presence of Iranian branches of various Russian companies and banks, lamenting how these foreign entities systematically "extract the lifeblood of Iran," symbolizing economic exploitation. In a poignant moment, he stumbles upon rare rifles from the glorious era of Nader Shah (r. 1736–1747), their stocks now tragically stained crimson black. These discarded rifles serve as a powerful, melancholic reminder to Mozalan of Iran's past military prowess and grandeur, a stark and painful contrast to the country's present state of disarray and foreign subjugation. This decline is further reflected in the disorganized telegraph office, where Mozalan observes an officer desperately struggling to find paper for his telegram, symbolizing the administrative decay.

Yet another section, "Delightful News," reports from Qurgan in Bukhara, where a newly appointed judge from Saint Petersburg ostentatiously strolls around a local mosque during prayer time. "Stand up, infidels. Can't you see I have arrived?" the judge exclaims, only to be utterly confused by the reactions of the Muslims, who are variously standing, sitting, and bowing—they are, in fact, simply continuing their prayers. The judge's profound ignorance of Muslim practices and local customs is meticulously highlighted, serving to bolster the commentary of the Georgian writer Niko Nikoladze in the Russian newspaper Novoye Vremya, which sharply criticized officials appointed from Saint Petersburg to govern the Caucasus for their utter lack of understanding of local traditions. The issue strikingly concludes with a humorous yet insightful caricature that juxtaposes the parallel concerns of Muslim mothers, who are worried about their sons marrying Russian women, with the anxieties of Russian mothers, who fear their daughters might adopt traditional veiling practices after marrying a Muslim man (Figure 5). This cartoon subtly exposes cross-cultural anxieties and prejudices, revealing that modernization was not a unidirectional process.

From just a brief glimpse into this single issue of Molla Nasraddin, we gain a panoramic view of Iran's dire

economic state and failing infrastructure, observed through a casual stroll in Mashhad, while simultaneously learning about its starkly contrasting perceptions in the Russian capital. The formidable challenges confronting Ottoman constitutionalists are meticulously highlighted, contextualized by the parallel Iranian experience. These narratives are accompanied by sharp critiques of the Russian imperial administration's short-sighted and often ignorant decisions in the Caucasus and Central Asia. Additionally, we uncover surprisingly parallel concerns among Muslim and Russian mothers, each grappling with anxieties about their children's marriage prospects and the potential cultural shifts these unions might entail. Such expansive and interconnected coverage explicitly relied on a readership capable of recognizing, decoding, and interpreting complex political, social, and cultural references that spanned across the often-invisible boundaries of these competing empires. When the magazine vividly depicted such scenes—whether it was Sultan Abdulhamid II cynically tending to the wounds of his subjects or the Russian Tsar allegorically presented as a bear supporting royalist forces in Iran—it inherently assumed an audience possessing the sophisticated "inter-imperial literacy" necessary to decode both the immediate political commentary and its far-reaching broader implications. This continuous engagement nurtured a public that could see the connections between seemingly disparate events across vast distances, understanding their shared implications.

In cultivating this remarkably sophisticated readership through its meticulously layered content—ranging from biting cartoons and insightful telegrams to poignant poetry and detailed local reportage—the magazine profoundly revealed how the three imperial centers, which often appeared distinct and diametrically opposed from their own perspectives, were in fact deeply entangled. Their policies and problems frequently mirrored each other in ways that only became glaringly apparent from a specifically Caucasus-centered vantage point. Week after week, this kaleidoscopic view circulated widely across imperial boundaries, with each new issue bringing together a rich mosaic of stories gathered along its extensive distribution routes. These included observations on the activities of Christian missionaries among the Tatars in Kazan (10 November 1908), reports on rapid urbanization and social changes in Ashqabat (30 June 1908), exposes on unsanitary conditions in public baths in Mashhad (28 July 1908), and accounts of the mistreatment of Muslim pilgrims in Odessa (17 November 1908).

The revolutionary transformations sweeping the region were not merely a static backdrop to these acute observations; rather, it was these very observations, meticulously gathered and circulated through the powerful mediums of satirical texts and vibrant activist networks spanning neighboring empires, that actively equipped imperial publics with novel frameworks for understanding their complex conditions. This facilitated a catalytic process that spurred collective action and fostered a shared revolutionary consciousness. As revolutionary movements encouraged people to situate their immediate local problems within much broader imperial frames, those individuals and communities in the Caucasus who possessed the unique ability to navigate multiple imperial contexts were exceptionally positioned to influence various imperial publics by effectively cross-pollinating ideas and revolutionary zeal. The "inter-imperial literacy" cultivated by Molla Nasraddin thus transcends a mere responsive adaptation to revolutionary conditions—it crucially helps to explain how revolutionary ideas gained unstoppable momentum and circulated effectively across seemingly impenetrable imperial boundaries. The intricate local-imperial entanglements revealed so vividly in the magazine must therefore be rigorously examined alongside the textual output of the many mobile activists who journeyed between imperial centers, often passing through or returning to the Caucasus. This historical borderland, far from being a passive recipient of imperial dictates, became a dynamic "backroom" where empires were subtly yet profoundly reshaped through mutual influence and intertextual dialogue.

Backroom of Empires: Revolutionary Passages, Intertextual Dialogues

The revolution that swept through Russia in 1905 marked a profound turning point, opening up unprecedented, albeit often precarious, avenues for political representation and public expression among the empire's extraordinarily diverse populations, including a significant number of Muslims in the Caucasus. These communities found a nascent voice within the newly established State Duma, primarily through their Russian-educated leaders. These influential figures, collaborating with Muslim activists from the Volga region, Crimea, and Central Asia, formed the liberal-constitutionalist Ittifaq al-Muslimin (The Union of the Muslims of Russia). Molla Nasraddin closely observed these pivotal developments, adopting a cautiously optimistic stance toward the earnest efforts to secure a more dignified status and greater rights for Russia's Muslim subjects within the broader imperial framework.

While the "high politics" of the Duma remained largely accessible only to a select few, the burgeoning and increasingly vibrant press provided a much broader and more democratic platform. This allowed educated Muslims from the Caucasus to actively engage in robust debates about the empire's uncertain future and their crucial place within it. During this fertile period, an astonishing proliferation of publications occurred, with over sixty newspapers and journals being published in Azerbaijani Turkish alone (Altstadt 1992: 207) [8]. Among this burgeoning media landscape, Molla Nasraddin unequivocally emerged as arguably the most popular and influential periodical. Collectively, the limited political space offered by the Duma and the expansive intellectual

arena provided by the publishing industry offered a critical opportunity for this Muslim public to reassess their status within the empire and courageously explore alternative pathways for political and social advancement. Furthermore, the proliferation of reading rooms throughout the region provided vital physical spaces for the cultivation and nurturing of an engaged and politically conscious reading public (Rice 2024) [59]. These spaces were crucial for collective reading, discussion, and the formation of shared political identities.

Discussions within these various public platforms were significantly enriched and complexified by the diverse experiences and innovative proposals of a broader, fluid network of activists. This network comprised agitators, intrepid journalists, visionary novelists, seasoned parliamentarians, and political exiles who had actively participated in, and often been displaced by, revolutionary movements not only in Russia but also in the neighboring domains of Iran and the Ottoman Empire [18, 58, 61, 64, 76]. As these highly mobile activists traversed imperial borders, carrying with them new ideas and revolutionary zeal, their thoughts found fertile ground in the Caucasus. Here, these concepts collided with existing local debates, sparked entirely new conversations, and evolved in unexpected and often transformative directions. Thanks to this heightened intellectual and political traffic, the region effectively became a dynamic "laboratory" of sorts, where reformist and revolutionary visions drawn from three distinct empires were constantly tested, transformed, and rewoven into fresh and potent possibilities for social and political change.

One such profoundly influential text that captured the keen interest of Molla Nasraddin was the fictional travelogue titled Siyahatname-i Ebrahim Beg (Travelogue of Mr. Ebrahim). This compelling work, published in Persian across three volumes between 1895 and 1900, found exceptionally eager audiences among both Iranian reformists and the extensive dissident networks of Iranian Azerbaijani merchants who actively traded across the Russian Caucasus and Ottoman Anatolia [17, 33, 77]. The travelogue offered a scathing and uncompromising critique of Iranian affairs, exposing corruption, backwardness, and the detrimental effects of Qajar rule. Its widespread appeal was further bolstered by its rich and detailed ethnographic narrative, which drew heavily on the firsthand experiences of its merchant-turned-author, Zeyn al-Abedin Maraghei (1839–1910) [33].

Maraghei's own life story mirrored the transnational fluidity that characterized the era. He began his career in Tabriz as the son of an affluent Iranian trader. When his business ventures in Iran encountered significant setbacks, he strategically resettled in Tbilisi, where his reputation for charitable works and community engagement earned him the esteemed appointment as Iran's deputy consul general. Further financial reversals later compelled him to move to Crimea, where he and his brother adopted Russian subjecthood and engaged in the lucrative textile trade from Istanbul in Yalta, a favored retreat of the Russian aristocracy. After subsequently moving to Istanbul, Maraghei leveraged the support of Iranian Azerbaijanis at the embassy to reclaim his Iranian subjecthood. He soon began contributing actively to prominent Persian-language weeklies like Akhtar and Shams, both published in Istanbul by diasporic Tabriz intellectuals. During this period, he undertook the momentous hajj pilgrimage to Mecca, an experience that profoundly inspired his fictional travelogue, which chronicled his journey backward from Egypt to Iran, by way of Istanbul and Tbilisi. This itinerary, rich with cross-imperial encounters, provided the backdrop for his critique.

The cross-border movements inherent in the itineraries of both Maraghei himself and his fictional character, Ebrahim, transcended simple, unidirectional journeys between a homeland and a host country. Instead, they followed complex, circular routes that were densely populated by activists who fluidly shifted between occupations, citizenships, and worldviews as they moved across imperial spaces. Molla Nasraddin's own circulation patterns directly paralleled these intricate trans-imperial routes, demonstrating its deep embeddedness in these mobile networks. In fact, directly inspired by Maraghei's Siyahatname-i Ebrahim Beg, the magazine ingeniously created its own traveling observer in the character of Mozalan, whose ambitious itinerary was formally announced in the 9 March 1908 issue:

"We inform our readers that our companion, Mr. Mozalan, will soon embark on a journey from Tbilisi to Ganja, and after exploring the city of Ganja, he will proceed to the Erivan Governorate. There, he will visit its cities and continue through Kars toward Akhalkalaki and Akhaltsikhe, making his way to Batumi. From Batumi, he will tour the northern regions, meet with the Russian Tatars, and return to Baku. From Baku, he will head to Khorasan, Tehran, and, via Tabriz and the Jolfa route, will return to Tbilisi."

Beginning in the Russian Empire's administrative center in the Caucasus, this grand itinerary symbolically wound its way through Muslim-majority cities under Russian rule, traversed territories newly acquired from the Ottomans, explored the Black Sea region, before finally crossing into Iran through Central Asia, and ultimately returning to the Caucasus through the critical border crossing at Jolfa. Yet, characteristically for Molla Nasraddin, this grand tour was introduced with a cutting satirical irony: before embarking, we learn, Mozalan must first obtain "a fake certificate of nobility for himself through 'various tricks, schemes, and cunning,'" subtly highlighting how such mobility and social advancement often necessitated creative navigation and manipulation of rigid imperial bureaucracies and social conventions. This humor

underscored the artificiality of such distinctions and the resourcefulness required to subvert them.

Like a continuous tracking shot in a film, Mozalan's travelogue seamlessly transitioned between intimate local scenes and sweeping broader imperial vistas, demonstrating the interconnectedness of micro and macro narratives. In Ashgabat, one of his significant stops in Central Asia en route to Iran, Mozalan astutely notes the city's astonishing transformation "from a wild desert twenty-five years ago" into "a respected city adorned with flowing waters, wide boulevards, gardens, grand buildings, hotels, twenty bathhouses and two clubs, schools and gymnasiums." Yet, within the very same city, amidst this display of modern development, he encounters a preacher absurdly categorizing animals as Sunni and Shi'i, thereby reducing the vast, complex sectarian divides that profoundly shaped imperial politics to an absurdly simplistic and trivial taxonomy. Crossing into Iran, Mozalan's observations shift to depict the failing infrastructure of what was once a powerful and glorious empire, a stark symbol of its decline. And back in the Russian Caucasus, one of his dispatches unveils unexpected and illuminating connections between Ordubad's local elections, the escalating rice prices in Sharur, and the curious inflow of Iranian eulogy reciters to Ordubad from across the Aras River—highlighting the porous nature of borders and the constant flow of people and influences.

While Molla Nasraddin warmly embraced certain texts and figures as creative kindred spirits, others became targets of its pointed and often ruthless critique. Chief among its rivals and frequent targets were the more sober Baku journals Hayat and its successor Fiyuzat. Both publications were generously funded by the influential oil magnate Zeynalabdin Tağıyev in Baku and edited by Əli bəy Hüseynzadə, a prominent intellectual activist with strong ties to Istanbul. These rival publications actively promoted a distinct vision of Muslim unity, one that was explicitly centered on Ottoman cultural forms and the adoption of Ottoman Turkish. Hüseynzadə, in particular, vigorously advocated for the widespread adoption of Ottoman Turkish as the common vernacular for all Turkic-speaking Muslim subjects of the Russian Empire, a stance that sparked fierce rebuttals and prolonged linguistic debates with Molla Nasraddin. The ensuing rivalry between Fiyuzat and Molla Nasraddin reached such an intensity that their protracted linguistic and cultural contestation is now widely regarded as a significant milestone in the history of language reform and national identity formation in the region (Uygur 2007) [69].

It would be misleading, however, to narrowly frame the rivalry between Fiyuzat and Molla Nasraddin as a simple contest between an authentically Caucasian perspective and a distinctly foreign one. Hüseynzadə, a pivotal figure in Baku's burgeoning and vibrant print scene, was no less a prominent local voice than Molla Nasraddin's editor, Jalil Mammadgulizadeh, in Tbilisi. Yet, his intellectual vision had been uniquely shaped by extensive diasporic encounters and prolonged engagements in various imperial centers. Originating from a family of Shi'i clerics in Salyan, Hüseynzadə received his early education in high school in Tbilisi before pursuing a prestigious double degree in mathematics and physics at St. Petersburg University. His exposure to the anti-monarchist Narodnik ideology in Russia, which advocated for the mobilization of the peasantry against autocracy, deeply politicized him and rendered him highly receptive to a wider range of anti-monarchist ideas that were circulating across Europe. After subsequently moving to Istanbul to enroll in the Military Medical School, he collaborated with like-minded peers to form a clandestine revolutionary group that would later evolve into the influential Young Turks. Upon his return to the Caucasus in 1903 to avoid increasing Ottoman scrutiny, Hüseynzadə became profoundly involved in the impassioned debates about the future of Muslims in Russia, ultimately arriving at his vision of Ottoman-centered cultural unity through this complex and transformative trans-imperial journey. His trajectory exemplifies the interwoven nature of local identity and broader imperial influences.

The intertwining of the local, the diasporic, and the imperial, as vividly demonstrated in figures like Hüseynzadə, necessitates, in the insightful words of James Clifford, a "loosening of the common opposition of 'indigenous' and 'diasporic' forms of life" (Clifford 2007: 198-99) [21]. This profound entanglement of seemingly distinct forms resonates deeply within the Caucasus, a region where, as Bruce Grant astutely notes, "peoples who entered as foreign and who emerged, in most cases, as native, have left many peoples of the Caucasus quite practiced in the arts of fraught cohabitation" (Grant 2020: 4) [40]. This dynamic dance between "foreign" and "native," a constant process of shifting, merging, and redefining, animated the subtle yet powerful visual tensions that imbued Molla Nasraddin's compositions with their distinctive power and resonance. A compelling caricature from 22 December 1906 brilliantly crystallizes this tension: The illustration portrays a man under severe duress, visibly restrained by three distinct figures—a Russian, an Iranian, and an Ottoman—each aggressively attempting to impose their language upon him (Figure 6). While the "seven-headed figure" in the opening illustration symbolically embodies a capacious individual capable of embracing and assimilating diverse "strangers," here the central figure appears overwhelmed, even subdued, by their collective linguistic imposition. Yet, crucially, these are not simply anonymous foreigners imposing an alien will. They could very well be "familiar strangers," much like Hüseynzadə himself—a Muslim from the South Caucasus who had, through his trans-imperial journey, become an "Ottoman Turk" in his cultural orientation, and who now sought to impose his adopted vernacular on his həmşəhriləri, or fellow countrymen. This scene highlights the internal pressures and identity crises

faced by individuals and communities caught between competing imperial and cultural influences.

Within the intricate and complex worlds of the Caucasus, the inherent potential to fluidly morph into powerful "strangers" and the ever-present risk of being overwhelmed by them were two sides of the same ideological coin. Which side one perceived—whether transformation was seen as an enhancement or a degradation—critically hinged on the moral evaluation of that transformation. What new potentials were unleashed or suppressed? What deeply held virtues were remembered or tragically forgotten? By consistently providing a vibrant and open platform for such nuanced moral debates, Molla Nasraddin did not merely represent the pre-existing "seven-headed public"; rather, it actively animated and brought its complex world into being. It achieved this through its dynamic and continuous intertextual conversation with the writings and life trajectories of peripatetic individuals such as Hüseynzadə and Maraghei, who moved fluidly between different imperial publics, often passing through or returning to the Caucasus as a crucial intellectual and political hub [20, 25, 33, 44, 45, 58, 61, 64, 76]. Through the compelling narratives and satirical lenses of the magazine's pages, seemingly peripheral subjects emerged as sophisticated and active agents, embodying and navigating diverse projects of cultural personhood—whether identifying as Ottoman Young Turks, fervent Iranian patriots, or distinct Russian Muslims. By skillfully juxtaposing different aspects of this mobile and multifaceted public, and by deliberately revealing their striking correspondences as well as their jarring disjunctures, the magazine actively invited its readers to engage in deep reflection, to laugh at the absurdities, and critically to take positions vis-à-vis the "familiar strangers" within their own midst.

Juxtapositions at the Crossroads: Familiar Strangers and the Art of Becoming Other

Georg Simmel (2008) profoundly defines "strangers" not merely as individuals from outside a group, but as those who, despite becoming an integral part of that group, maintain a distinct otherness due to their external origins [63]. Unlike transient foreigners who arrive and depart, strangers in Simmel's formulation maintain a constant, often ambivalent, relationship with the host group, always perceived as somewhat alien, yet deeply integrated. Molla Nasraddin's richly populated cartoons were replete with such figures—"familiar strangers"—whose perceived distance from one another could abruptly collapse or unpredictably expand, reflecting the fluid identities of the era. On the unstable and constantly shifting ground of swirling revolutionary currents, figures who initially seemed remarkably foreign might suddenly appear intimately familiar, while ostensibly familiar figures could just as suddenly turn strange and remote when displaced or recontextualized. The "inter-imperial public" that vividly emerges in Molla Nasraddin should therefore be understood not primarily through fixed notions of who its members rigidly were, but rather through the dynamic and ever-present possibilities of who they could become.

An illuminating illustration from 1 February 1910 presents six consecutive images of the same man, serving as a powerful visual narrative (Figure 7). As his outfit, posture, and overall demeanor subtly but progressively change in each successive shot, we witness a profound transformation: a sober, traditional mullah from Ganja gradually and quite humorously metamorphosing into a playful, modern gentleman in Tbilisi. Without the crucial context that this transformation is occurring entirely within the Caucasus, one might easily mistake it for the evolution of an Iranian mullah into a fully Russified gentleman. In fact, that is precisely the satirical point this tongue-in-cheek portrayal of a "mullah's progress" deliberately underscores: cultural types within the Caucasus, while seemingly distinct, are often deeply rooted in or influenced by external imperial domains, and individuals possess a remarkable capacity to "grow into" these new personae in a relatively short span of time. This visual sequence brilliantly illuminates a perspective on cultural difference that emphasizes fluidity and possibilities rather than rigid, fixed identities, revealing a form of social encounter that takes cultural encounters seriously but never literally. In the revolutionary Caucasus, where cultural personhoods were often closely associated with specific imperial domains—e.g., being "Russian-educated," "Ottoman-sympathetic," or "Iranian-influenced"—difference did not emerge in absolute, unyielding terms. Rather, it manifested provisionally, through recurring cycles of subtle differentiation, strategic adaptation, and profound symbiosis. This nuanced perspective suggests a far more intricate and reciprocal relationship between the local and the imperial, where mutual influence and active integration consistently carried elements from each into entirely new and often hybridized contexts. Through these relentless cycles of exchange and transformation, what initially appeared as foreign could paradoxically reveal unexpected undercurrents of familiarity, while what was ostensibly familiar could, when displaced or satirically recontextualized, become unsettlingly strange and remote [43].

Such fluid modulations of identity, as consistently depicted in Molla Nasraddin, did not always necessitate a complete or abrupt reinvention of the self. Instead, individuals could gradually adopt new elements—a different style of clothing, an updated hat, a modern grooming style, or even a subtle shift in their manner of carrying themselves. To the extent that these outward, often sartorial, changes were perceived to signal deeper, more significant shifts in a person's fundamental character or their ultimate telos (purpose), they became ripe for moral examination and satirical scrutiny. On 14 October 1908, Molla Nasraddin directly addressed Muslim mothers with a cautionary editorial, highlighting a growing and alarming trend in

Tbilisi: Muslim parents were entrusting their children to Russian families during their studies in Russian schools, leading to profound cultural shifts. The editorial poignantly notes:

"At the age of six or seven, the Muslim child, upon entering the Russian household, starts slowly speaking Russian. Gradually, they adapt to katlet (Russian cutlet) and forget the kofta, embrace Mariyas, and forget about Zeynabs… Upon returning to their homeland, they begin to converse with Aunt Fatma in Russian. Five or six years later, they become so accustomed to the Russian way of life that they enjoy their good and bad deeds alike. Eventually, they start looking down upon Muslims while proudly showcasing their Russian lifestyle."

This passage, while expressing concern, also captures the subtle, almost insidious, ways in which imperial cultural norms infiltrated daily life and reshaped identity, even through something as seemingly innocuous as dietary preferences or naming conventions. Similarly, the adoption of names and patronymics served as a potent gauge for assessing one's cultural orientation and allegiance. In a humorous anecdote from 13 June 1906, Mozalan (one of Mammadguluzadeh's pseudonyms) recounts his frustrating quest for a dentist in Vladikavkaz, a city in the North Caucasus [7]. Following vague directions from locals, he encounters various establishments with names prominently displayed in different scripts, such as "Aliakper Aliakperovich Aliyev" in Cyrillic and "Quseyn Amirovich Quseynov" in Latin script. Unable to locate a dentist among these newly Russified Muslim names, Mozalan ironically shares with a sympathetic shopkeeper how the town's Muslim residents have enthusiastically "embraced progress" by adopting Russian naming conventions. The shopkeeper, in turn, shares a comical tale about a seminary student named Ali who, fearing his classmates would mock his traditional Muslim name, boldly asks his father to address his monthly stipend to "Alyosha Aleksandrovich" instead. Haji Isgender, the father, wryly responds with a hint of exasperation and resignation, "You changed your name, fine. But turning me into Aleksandr in my old age?" This anecdote humorously underscores the generational and cultural tensions inherent in identity shifts under imperial influence, and the subtle but profound sacrifices made in the name of "progress."

Molla Nasraddin's editorial from 15 September 1908 further highlighted the pragmatic, yet telling, logistical challenges faced by the magazine itself due to frequent changes in subscribers' names and cultural markers. Managing address changes and complaints about undelivered issues, the editors struggled with the multitude of patronymics and honorifics associated with each subscriber account. The editorial, pointedly titled "Muslim Names," provided a striking example of a single subscriber who was recorded under various names, including Mirza Ahmad Ahmadzada, Aga Muhammad Ahmed oglu, Muhammad Bey Ahmadov, and Muhammad ibn Ahmad. "We would mistakenly record four different names," the editorial noted, "only to later discover that these four names referred to the same individual" [25, 44, 55]. This administrative headache inadvertently became a powerful illustration of the fluid and multifaceted identities of the "seven-headed public," a phenomenon that would even manifest in post-Soviet Azerbaijan, where many citizens would modify their Russian patronymics (ending in -ov/-ova) to Turkish (-oğlu) or Persian (-zadeh) filiation suffixes, publicly declaring their cultural affiliations and political sympathies [67].

These interchangeable cultural markers—ranging from culinary preferences and sartorial choices to the very structure of patronymics—reflected a remarkable and deeply ingrained characteristic of a local landscape that was perpetually straddling three powerful imperial worlds. In their most pronounced extremes, Turkic-speaking Muslims inhabiting this historical borderland might appear outwardly more similar to people from neighboring empires than to their immediate local neighbors. The startling social proximity of these cultural extremes is vividly illustrated in the opening cast of characters from Cəlil Məmmədquluzadə's play, Anamın Kitabı (My mother's book), which he penned after the closure of Molla Nasraddin in 1917, in the tumultuous wake of the Bolshevik Revolution. Published in 1920, the play features a cast of characters whose appearances and dispositions reflect these imperial cultural influences:

- Rustəm bey: Dressed in full Russian attire—a jacket, a razor-cut beard, a starched button-up shirt, a scarf around his neck, and starched white sleeves. He is described as a staunch supporter of Russian education and upbringing, having graduated from a Russian university. He moves slowly and cautiously, always with his head uncovered and wearing glasses. He is forty years old, embodying the Russianized intellectual.

- Mirzə Məhəmmədəli: Adorned in Iranian religious clothing, including a tall Iranian hat, a long Iranian cloak, a thick robe over the cloak, a long Iranian tunic, loose trousers, and white socks. He removes his shoes at the door and sits on the floor. He always carries prayer beads and wears glasses, rarely smiles, and looks serious. He supports Iranian culture and education, representing the traditional Iranian religious scholar. He is thirty-five years old.

- Səməd Vahid: He studied literature in Istanbul. He wears a red fez on his head, and his attire includes a jacket, a razor-cut appearance, a white button-up shirt, and a scarf around his neck. He wears glasses and is calm and composed. He supports Ottoman culture and education, embodying the Young Turk-influenced intellectual. He is thirty years old.

- Gülbahar: Described as beautiful in appearance, she wears the common Muslim girls' clothing, with a scarf on her head. She is pious in a Muslim manner and deeply cherishes her mother, representing traditional local

identity. She is twenty years old.

- Zivər xanım: She has received a Russian education. She wears Russian women's clothing. Her neck and arms are uncovered, and she lacks traditional Muslim modesty, representing the modern, Russified woman.
- Qənbər: He has a fair complexion. He wears a tattered robe, a belt, and sandals. He carries a whip in his hand, possibly representing a local, less educated figure.
- Aslan bəy: He resembles Rustam bey in all respects.
- Mirzə Bəxşəli: He resembles Mirzə Məhəmmədəli in all respects.
- Hüseyn Şahid: He resembles Samad Vahid in all respects.
- Senator Mirzə Cəfər bəy: Wearing Russian official clothing, he wears glasses, representing the highest echelon of Russian imperial administration.

These characters, while rendered as distinct satirical types seemingly drawn from different societies, remarkably coexist within a single village, held together by intricate kinship and neighborly bonds. The first four listed are siblings, highlighting the familial intertwining of these diverse cultural orientations. Zivər xanım is Rustem bey's wife, and the three individuals who "resemble" the first three characters "in all respects" are marriage candidates for Gülbahar, further emphasizing the close proximity and potential for intermarriage among these culturally distinct types. The remaining two characters are local notables closely connected to the family. Through this compelling familial microcosm, Mammadguluzadeh masterfully illustrates how profound cultural differences that appear to originate from distant imperial lands converge intimately within the Caucasus, sometimes even under a single roof. If the ceaseless mobility of activists and traders wove a complex social tissue connecting the Caucasus to disparate imperial worlds, then those very worlds were miniaturized and brought side by side within the region, manifesting as different, yet coexisting, cultural personhoods.

In Molla Nasraddin, these often fraught and intimate cultural encounters could be dramatically scaled up by way of further, strategically chosen juxtapositions, serving to index both unexpected connections and stark, often humorous, contradictions across imperial boundaries. A vivid illustration of this technique appears in a two-part caricature from 3 December 1913 (Figure 8). The first part depicts an Ottoman Turk from Istanbul delivering an illegibly grandiloquent speech—a satirical jab at the overly florid and incomprehensible language often used by Ottoman intellectuals. This verbose speech is met with a dismissive and comically mundane retort from an Iranian Turk in Tabriz: "What on earth are you talking about? In Tabriz, our samovar boils like three cauldrons at the public bathhouse." This juxtaposition highlights a cultural and linguistic gulf: the Ottoman speaker, entangled in pretentious rhetoric, utterly fails to communicate effectively despite ostensible shared ethnolinguistic ties, while the Iranian speaker, absorbed in superficial local pride, contributes nothing of substance to any grander discourse.

The second part of this powerful caricature shifts focus to a biting geopolitical critique, juxtaposing the Ottoman writer-statesman Suleyman Nazif Bey with the Russian journalist-publicist Mikhail Menshikov. Nazif Bey is disturbingly depicted as a snake, symbolizing treachery, and is willing to marry his daughter to Bulgarians or Greeks but explicitly not to a Shi'i Turk—a searing revelation of how his deep-seated sectarian prejudices utterly belie his public advocacy for Islamic unity and solidarity. Meanwhile, Menshikov, a staunch Russian nationalist, is shown shedding crocodile tears while disingenuously professing concern for Muslims. The caricature brilliantly literalizes their profound hypocrisies by visually connecting their serpentine tails, thus symbolically binding together their parallel deceptions and moral failings.

Such strategic and often stark contrasts defined the very core of the magazine's visual repertoire: whether revealing the unexpected cultural gulfs between supposedly kindred peoples, exposing shared hypocrisies beneath fierce political rivalries, or bringing daily, lived experiences into a direct and often jarring dialogue with abstract geopolitical pronouncements. With such intricate and compelling compositions, Molla Nasraddin presented its "inter-imperial public" not as a harmoniously fused entity, but as a dynamic collective composed of elements in constant tension—a tension that could either bind them together in shared understanding or pull them apart in unresolved contradictions. Whether readers ultimately perceived imminent chaos or a provisional, albeit fragile, order in these complex elements, the underlying sense of a shared fate and an interconnected destiny remained unmistakable. The magazine's profound commitment to revolutionary change in neighboring imperial domains was deeply rooted in this visceral sense of intertwined futures, resonating powerfully with both the itinerant activists who traversed these empires and the ordinary readers whose attention constantly turned to developments beyond their immediate borders. This cultivation of inter-imperial literacy was not just intellectual; it was deeply emotional and politically charged, fostering a collective consciousness that transcended fixed identities.

DISCUSSION

The compelling case of Molla Nasraddin in the revolutionary Transcaucasus offers profound and compelling insights into the multifaceted role of satire in fostering robust public engagement and effectively challenging entrenched imperial power structures. The journal, far from being a passive mirror reflecting existing public opinion, actively shaped it, meticulously creating

and nurturing a unique space for what Michael Warner terms a "counterpublic" [77]. This counterpublic was a vibrant public sphere that operated purposefully in opposition to dominant social and political norms, serving as an indispensable platform for the articulation and amplification of marginalized voices and dissenting viewpoints [12, 21, 22, 77]. By masterfully employing sharp humor, accessible language, and profoundly impactful imagery, Molla Nasraddin effectively democratized political discourse, making it intelligible and available to segments of the population that had historically been excluded from traditional intellectual circles and formal political arenas. This broad accessibility was a cornerstone of its revolutionary impact.

The very nature of Molla Nasraddin's "seven-headed public" was inherently inter-imperial and deeply transnational, a vivid reflection of the fluid and intensely interconnected nature of the early 20th-century Eurasian landscape [39, 41, 42, 43, 57, 59, 60, 61, 65, 66, 67, 68, 70, 71, 74, 79]. Its extensive readership comprised not only Azerbaijani Turks but also significant numbers of Armenians, Persians, and various other ethnic groups residing within or strongly connected to the broader Transcaucasian region. This created a public that transcended narrow national or rigid imperial boundaries, forging a collective identity rooted in shared experiences of imperial subjugation and a common yearning for modernization. This remarkably broad appeal powerfully highlights how shared grievances, coupled with an emergent desire for progressive societal transformation, fostered a fertile common ground for collective satirical critique. The journal's tangible influence on the Iranian Constitutional Revolution is particularly noteworthy, serving as a powerful and concrete example of how revolutionary ideas, political energies, and cultural currents circulated seamlessly and transnationally, blurring the often-artificial lines between domestic and international struggles for liberation and constitutional reform [1, 10, 13, 18, 23, 24, 26, 40, 56, 75, 78].

Furthermore, Molla Nasraddin's astute utilization of the pervasive trickster figure of Molla Nasraddin allowed for a uniquely nuanced and effective form of critique [2, 3, 20, 44, 45, 76]. The trickster, a character traditionally operating on the margins of society and often endowed with both foolishness and profound wisdom, possesses the singular ability to expose hypocrisy, subvert authority, and deliver cutting social commentary without necessarily resorting to direct, confrontational language. This strategic comedic distance allowed the journal to skillfully address highly sensitive political and religious topics that might otherwise have been deemed too subversive or dangerous, thereby navigating pervasive censorship and appealing to a remarkably wide and diverse audience [17, 73]. The journal also deeply engaged with complex questions of language and cultural identity, actively navigating the nuanced debates between various Turkic dialects and the enduring influence of Persianate cultural traditions. This engagement further shaped the evolving cultural consciousness of its diverse readership, fostering both unity and an appreciation for linguistic and cultural hybridity [31, 33, 34, 35, 36, 46, 51, 57, 69, 72].

The enduring legacy of Molla Nasraddin extends far beyond its immediate revolutionary impact in the early 20th century. It contributed immeasurably to the foundational development of modern Azerbaijani literature and journalism, establishing a robust and critical precedent for a socially engaged, politically aware, and critically independent media landscape [5, 6, 7, 8, 38, 54, 63, 64]. Its continued relevance lies in its powerful demonstration of how cultural forms, even seemingly ephemeral ones like satirical journals, can serve as exceptionally potent agents of profound social change, mobilizing public opinion, fostering collective identity, and ultimately challenging the very foundations of entrenched imperial rule during periods of intense political transformation and upheaval [9, 15, 19, 21, 22, 50, 58, 62, 77].

A Pan-Caucasian Vision and Its Eclipse

Molla Nasraddin was not an isolated phenomenon in its endeavor to weave together the revolutionary currents emanating from the three powerful empires. Its unique Caucasus-centered satirical vision found compelling parallel expression in other influential regional publications. Notably, Khatabala (meaning "misfortune"), an Armenian satirical magazine, also flourished in Tbilisi from 1906 to 1916. Armenian activists, much like their Turkic-speaking Muslim counterparts (who would later largely identify as Azerbaijanis), shared similar patterns of intense trans-imperial mobility and a vibrant revolutionary spirit at the turn of the twentieth century [18]. However, their distinct cultural markers—a more unified ethnic name, the ancient Apostolic Church as a central institution, and their unique script—made their presence and movements more readily traceable in imperial archives, unlike their Turkic-speaking Muslim counterparts in the region who often operated under the radar, variously identified as Iranians, Turks, Tatars, or simply "Muslims."

This profound correspondence between satirical visions extended even further within the Transcaucasian media landscape. Eshmakis Matrahi (The Devil's Whip), a Georgian satirical weekly also published in Tbilisi from 1907 to 1916, emerged to complete this remarkable triumvirate of Caucasian critique (Figures 9a, 9b, 9c). Significantly, all three publications—the Azerbaijani Molla Nasraddin, the Armenian Khatabala, and the Georgian Eshmakis Matrahi—shared the same principal illustrator, the talented Georgian artist Oskar Schmerling [25]. The fact that these ethnically distinct publications shared not only a common illustrator but also a strikingly similar satirical approach to viewing and critiquing imperial relations strongly suggests something far broader and

more profound about the collective Caucasian position and consciousness at this pivotal historical moment. It points to a shared regional intellectual tradition that transcended burgeoning nationalisms.

However, this central position that uniquely opened the Caucasus to simultaneous engagement with three empires gradually unraveled with another series of near-synchronous and globally transformative developments: the Bolshevik Revolution in 1917, the Turkish Independence War in 1919, and the Pahlavi coup in Iran in 1921. As the new, ideologically distinct regimes emerging from these cataclysmic upheavals systematically consolidated their power in 1920 (Soviet Russia), 1923 (Republican Turkey), and 1925 (Pahlavi Iran), their parallel foreign policies of non-intervention (respecting each other's territorial integrity but often with underlying geopolitical maneuvering) and their domestic policies of aggressive national homogenization (suppressing internal diversity in favor of a singular national identity) effectively pulled the rug out from under these three vibrant satirical magazines.

Before it completely disappeared, this shared regional consciousness briefly, yet powerfully, crystallized in the form of the Transcaucasian Democratic Federative Republic, a short-lived political entity founded in 1918 by Georgians, Armenians, and Azerbaijanis. Though this nascent Republic dissolved within a mere month of its establishment, it left behind a striking and symbolic artifact: a banknote that prominently juxtaposed the languages of these three neighboring peoples, thereby enshrining their brief, shared proximity on paper—a poignant final testament to the fleeting possibility of a pan-Caucasian unity (Figure 10).

The Bolshevik takeover of 1920 irrevocably transformed the Caucasus. Although Molla Nasraddin remarkably outlived its sister publications, surviving first in Tabriz for eight issues in 1921, and then continuing its publication in Baku from 1922 until 1931, its persistence masked a much deeper, more fundamental transformation. When Cəlil Məmmədquluzadeh returned to the Caucasus at the invitation of the newly formed Azerbaijan Soviet Socialist Republic, both the region itself and his beloved magazine had fundamentally changed beyond recognition. The vibrant, open "inter-imperial crossroads" that had once fostered such dynamic cultural and political exchange had tragically become a mere periphery within a newly constructed socialist empire of rigid nation-states. Molla Nasraddin's voice, once fiercely independent and broadly critical, adapted accordingly, morphing to fit the new ideological dictates. Its Soviet debut on 2 November 1922 featured a telling meditation on the Arabic word shura (Soviet, in Russian)—a familiar Islamic term meticulously repurposed and re-signified to capture the essence of Soviet rule, demonstrating the ideological co-optation. Even more revealing was the drastic change in the magazine's scope and focus: where its early telegrams had once broadly connected imperial capitals with sweeping views of revolutionary transformations across Eurasia, its Baku-era dispatches now focused narrowly and exclusively on the Soviet Union and its designated Caucasian periphery. In this profound shift from expansive, inter-imperial vistas to confined, nationalized Soviet horizons, we witness how a distinctive and unique Caucasian perspective on empire, once so vibrant and insightful, gradually faded from view, ultimately dissolving along with the "inter-imperial terrain" it had so powerfully helped to cultivate.

CONCLUSION

In mapping the expansive and intricately layered cultural geography of the early twentieth-century Caucasus through the incisive lens of Molla Nasraddin, we have unveiled in the metaphorical "seven-headed figure" not merely a whimsical comical oddity, but a profound and deeply insightful expression of how the complex phenomenon of empire appears when viewed from the unique vantage point of spaces characterized by multiple imperial convergence. What emerges powerfully and undeniably from the magazine's pages is a sophisticated and remarkably adaptive engagement with the concept of empire itself: one that demonstrates an uncanny capacity to strategically invest in diverse imperial projects while simultaneously maintaining the crucial critical distance necessary to expose their deep-seated connections, their unsettling parallels, and their inherent tensions. Rigid taxonomies and simplistic binary oppositions—those that typically rest on static spatial distinctions of center versus periphery, on absolute cultural oppositions of indigenous versus foreign, and on narrow political binaries of resistance versus accommodation—utterly falter and prove inadequate when confronted with such protean and fluid engagements.

Through its rich polyglot Turkic/Eurasian profile and its steadfast yet mercurial platform, where the playfully humorous and the profoundly serious intermingled unpredictably on a weekly basis, Molla Nasraddin meticulously fostered a distinctive and invaluable form of "inter-imperial literacy." This literacy, collectively cultivated and refined by the diverse array of activists, publicists, and ordinary readers, possessed the transformative capacity to bridge geographically distant places and culturally distinct personhoods across vast imperial boundaries. The act of recovering the perspectives illuminated by this unique literacy demands that we fundamentally reorient our traditional historical gaze—compelling us to view empire not from its self-proclaimed, often triumphalist, centers, but rather from its dynamic and creative borderlands; not through authoritative, top-down accounts, but through unexpected and often subversive genres like satirical journalism. This reorientation allows us to learn invaluable lessons from these historically rich spaces where multiple imperial worlds converged, offering nuanced views of empire that were simultaneously intimate and critically detached.

This crucial reorientation of historical perspective takes

on renewed urgency and contemporary relevance today, as the competing and often resurgent influences of Turkey, Iran, and Russia inject new life and geopolitical complexity into old imperial borderlands. Simultaneously, China's ambitious Belt and Road Initiative traces entirely new pathways across these long-standing zones of profound cultural translation and incisive critique. Rather than attempting to analyze these contemporary neo-imperial overtures through conventional and often limited frameworks of domination and resistance, the historical experience of the Caucasus, as illuminated by Molla Nasraddin, powerfully suggests a different approach. It encourages us to examine how communities in these historically contested spaces can strategically draw upon deep and resilient reservoirs of imperial engagement to forge entirely new forms of "inter-imperial literacy." This allows them to transform what might appear as external constraints into valuable resources for profound cultural and political renewal, much as their predecessors skillfully did in the early 20th century. At a time when the world often appears increasingly trapped between the twin dead ends of insular nativism (which demonizes all external engagements) and untethered cosmopolitanism (which floats disengaged above local concerns), recovering these borderland engagements with difference lights another, more promising, passage—a path towards understanding and navigating complex global interconnections with resilience and critical insight.

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