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Abstract

Review of Carl Niekerk and Cori Crane, ed. *Approaches to Kurban Said's Ali and Nino: Love, Identity, and Intercultural Conflict*. Camden House, 2017. ix + 277 pp.

Keywords

Kurban Said, Ali and Nino

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By focusing on Kurban Said's *Ali and Nino* (1937), a text which the editors of this volume identify as “not the kind of text to which one typically finds references in books on literary history” (1), the contributors in *Approaches to Kurban Said's Ali and Nino: Love, Identity, and Intercultural Conflict* productively upset the notion of a traditional literary canon, which still lingers in the discipline of German Studies. An introduction and twelve chapters expound the richness of *Ali and Nino*, which was presumably written by an Azeri Jew who converted to Islam. Lev Nussimbaum, the presumed figure behind the pseudonym Kurban Said, wrote the novel initially in German and published it in Vienna. *Ali and Nino*, despite the book's publication origin, is set in Azerbaijan and Persia in the 1910s and 20s. As the novel is primarily a love story about a couple divided by national and religious differences, the volume editors and contributors outline the ways in which *Ali and Nino* can serve as a productive tool in German Studies and Humanities classrooms. Primarily, the volume's chapters are conceived as tools for scholars and students of German Studies, who can use ideas outlined in the volume as a springboard to examine national, cultural, religious, and other divides at a time when, as editors Carl Niekerk and Cori Crane state in their acknowledgement section to the volume, the world sees an increase in political tensions which “[test] the limits of democratic society” (vii).

In their introduction, Niekerk and Crane outline the novel's peculiar and productive place in cultural history, drawing primarily on scholarship in world literature. The editors argue that “looking at Kurban Said's *Ali and Nino* as world literature can help us make the case for the relevance of similar texts whose themes embody tensions between the global and the local” (8). The following twelve chapters are not thematically or otherwise grouped in subsections. Instead, the volume celebrates unique approaches to Said's text in each chapter. In chapter 1, Azade Seyhan argues that the novel not only presents the exchange among figures from different cultural backgrounds but that, in so doing, it embodies cultural mediation and cultural translation. Lisabeth Hock and Soraya Saatchi claim in chapter 2 that *Ali and Nino*, because it defies easy interpretation as a result of its characters' complex multicultural and multiethnic backgrounds, can serve as an ideal text to help students acquire strong interpretive skills. Hock and Saatchi provide an exquisite unit plan with assignments ready to be deployed in a course in their appendix to the chapter. In chapter 3, Christine Rapp Dombrowski considers the special role poetic intertextuality serves as a mode to effectively present and interrogate the Caucasus for a European audience. Sara Abdoullah-Zadeh reads the formation of gendered stereotypes in *Ali and Nino* in chapter 4, outlining the ways

in which stereotypes about female characters in interfaith contexts remain as a result of troubled intercultural interaction.

Chapters 5 and 6, written by Anja Haensch and Elizabeth Weber Edwards, respectively, expand Abdoullah-Zadeh's interest in the novel's treatment of gender. Haensch argues that the novel indeed depends on Orientalist stereotypes about femininity and race in order to demystify "the Orient" for the European gaze. Weber Edwards, in turn, considers how a focus on honor and shame as normalizing mechanisms in the narrative can serve to unveil the novel's complex intercultural exchanges. In chapter 7, Daniel Schreiner offers an excellent overview of Azerbaijani literary history and outlines why it is important to remember that *Ali and Nino* does not want to be positioned among this literary history and instead caters to the European gaze, which eroticizes the very area poeticized in its pages. In a similar light, Kamaal Haque's critique of the construction of space in *Ali and Nino* in chapter 8 of the volume outlines how the novel progressively insists on depicting the gradual Europeanization of Baku. In chapter 9, Chase Dimock persuasively outlines the ways in which the dichotomies in which the novel invests, structured around the Orient/Occident divide, essentially surmount to a modernist affect captured in the novel, which seems to articulate an anxiety about staying oneself in light of encountering the other. Elke Pfitzinger considers in chapter 10 the novel's recourse to symbolic language, which serves an essential function of veiling cultural knowledge and controlling what the Western gaze can reach. In chapter 11, Ruchama Johnston-Bloom reads the modernist discourses cited throughout *Ali and Nino* and the novel's construction of Islamic traditions and the West's encounter with them as quintessentially related to Jewish modernity. Finally, Carl Niekerk in chapter 12 argues that the notion of a "clash of civilizations" can be useful to examine how identities form in a context of divergent and multifarious cultural contact zones.

An intriguing aspect of this volume is the approach to the readings and the way these readings were framed in each chapter: namely, as springboards for further analysis and debate. If one were to be pressed for a critique, I guess one could lament the fact that only Hock and Saatchi's chapter offers an explicit plan for how to include *Ali and Nino* in a classroom. The remainder of the chapters still maintain their intellectual and pedagogical value. The volume will be a great resource for German Studies professionals and students alike.

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