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FROM MORAL PANIC TO MODERNITY: HOW SATIRE CONSTRUCTS THE ONTOLOGICAL TRAP OF THE SOUTH CAUCASIAN SUBJECT

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Abstract: This article analyzes Armenian and Azerbaijani satirical journals published in Tiflis in the early twentieth century as active instruments of social regulation rather than as reflective cultural texts. Drawing on archival materials, a systematically coded analytical database of *Khatabala* (1906–1926), and close readings of *Molla Nasreddin* and *Mshak*, the study examines how satire shaped subject formation under Russian imperial rule. Using Michel Foucault's concepts of governmentality, power/knowledge, and biopolitics, combined with Homi K. Bhabha's notion of hybridity, the article demonstrates how caricatures and satirical narratives produced regimes of truth concerning gender, religion, violence, and civic responsibility. The findings show that satire functioned as a technology of governance by normalizing certain behaviors, stigmatizing others, and visually encoding moral and political hierarchies. Particular attention is paid to recurring social types, representations of philanthropy and poverty, epidemic imagery, and the regulation of family and religious authority. The article argues that these journals simultaneously reinforced modernizing norms and exposed their contradictions, creating ambivalent spaces in which imperial, national, and social imaginaries overlapped. By situating South Caucasian satire within broader debates on colonial modernity, the study concludes that satirical media played a central role in structuring public discourse, managing moral panic, and articulating contested visions of coexistence in a multiethnic imperial society.

Keywords: philosophy of power, governmentality, biopolitics, power/knowledge, discourse analysis, subject formation, colonial modernity, hybridity, moral regulation, critical theory.

Introduction

The late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries were a period of rapid transformation in the South Caucasus, as Armenians, Azerbaijanis, and Georgians navigated Russian imperial rule alongside Ottoman and Iranian influences, industrial capitalism, urbanization, and revolutionary upheaval. In this context, new institutions of knowledge, schools, museums, courts, and above all newspapers and satirical journals, played a decisive role in reconfiguring how communities understood themselves and others. Journals such as the Azerbaijani-language *Molla Nasreddin* and the Armenian-language *Khatabala*, printed largely in Tiflis, did not simply "reflect" social realities; they actively produced meanings, disciplined subjects, and organized collective identities.

Michel Foucault's theories of power, discourse, and knowledge offer a powerful analytical framework for understanding these processes. His account of power as relational, capillary, and productive, together with the concept of power/knowledge and his analyses of modern forms of governmentality and biopolitics, enable an examination of how power circulated through imperial bureaucracy, colonial law, modernizing elites, and the multilingual press of the South Caucasus (Foucault, 1978, 1991).

This article is based on four types of sources: (1) archival materials and press holdings in Armenia and Georgia; (2) a consolidated analytical database of *Khatabala* compiled by the author; (3) close readings of *Molla Nasreddin* and *Mshak*; and (4) regional historiography. The analytical database was constructed by coding each issue for recurring themes (e.g., philanthropy, education, epidemics, religion, gender, state violence), for repeated social types (such as "the philanthropist," "the cleric," "the ignorant," and "the modern intellectual"), and for the visual–textual devices through which satire produces judgment, including captioning, allegory, bodily distortion, and comparative scenes. This approach does not reduce satire to statistics; rather, it renders the archive legible as a field of regularities that can be compared across time, genres, and communities.

Based on archival materials, consolidated analytical tables for *Khatabala*, close readings of *Molla Nasreddin* and *Mshak*, and regional historiography, this article examines how colonial, nationalist, and "civilizing" projects shaped subjectivities and collective identities among Armenians and Azerbaijanis. It argues that these sources functioned as non-state "technologies" of power in Foucauldian terms, producing regimes of truth and normalcy, particularly at the intersection of gender, religion, and ideology (Foucault, 1978). The analysis is framed within broader theoretical debates through the work of Homi K. Bhabha, whose concepts of hybridity and the "Third Space" help conceptualize Tiflis and Baku as colonial contact zones characterized by competing rationalities rather than as peripheral extensions of European modernity (Bhabha, 1994).

I argue that *Molla Nasreddin* and *Khatabala* did not merely comment on imperial and national politics but actively governed conduct by producing regimes of truth about gender, religion, and violence, and by staging alternative possibilities of coexistence. Importantly, the satirical press did not operate in abstraction from material life. The analytical database of *Khatabala* demonstrates that themes of wealth, philanthropy, hunger, epidemics, and infrastructure recur with striking regularity alongside political satire. This coexistence signals what Foucault would describe as the imbrication of political power with the management of life itself. Satire here functions as a register through which questions of survival, health, and economic inequality are rendered visible, narratable, and morally charged, transforming everyday precarity into a matter of public discourse rather than private misfortune.

Foucault's work invites a departure from state-centered or purely juridical models of power. In *Discipline and Punish* and in his Collège de France lectures, he insists that power is not a commodity possessed by a sovereign, but "the name given to a complex strategic relation" circulating through institutions, practices, and discourses (Foucault, 1977, 1980). He proposes analyzing power "from below," focusing on the multiplicity of force relations in everyday life rather than on the legal edifice of sovereignty. In *Society Must Be Defended*, Foucault defines "government" in a broad sense as "the conduct of conduct": power operates by shaping the pos-

sible actions of free subjects through norms, incentives, and knowledge, rather than through direct coercion alone (Foucault, 2003, p. 34). He later conceptualizes "governmentality" as the ensemble of institutions, calculations, and tactics that make it possible to govern a population by linking political rule to economic knowledge and apparatuses of security (Foucault, 1991). This shift is crucial for reading the South Caucasus. Instead of treating the Russian state or later national governments as monolithic actors, we can examine how schools, newspapers, satirical journals, and associations governed Armenians and Azerbaijanis by defining what counted as education, religion, civility, and backwardness, categories that must themselves be read as modernizing judgments rather than neutral descriptions.

Figures such as Haji Zeynalabdin Taghiyev and Alexander Mantashev appear repeatedly in both *Khatabala* and *Molla Nasreddin*, not merely as wealthy individuals but as moral and political symbols. Their philanthropic activities, funding schools, theaters, newspapers, and charitable societies, positioned them within what Foucault would describe as a non-state technology of government. Wealth here does not simply accumulate; it circulates as a disciplinary force, producing expectations of civic responsibility, national duty, and moral legitimacy. The rich subject is rendered governable not through law but through public visibility, satire, and ethical judgment. In this sense, capital itself becomes a mechanism of "conducting conduct," binding elites to national projects while simultaneously exposing them to critique when philanthropy masks domination or self-interest.

In *The Archaeology of Knowledge*, Foucault criticizes historical approaches that search for continuous "mentalities" or unitary "spirits" of an age. Instead, he argues that historical analysis must focus on "discursive formations": systems of rules that determine which statements can be made, by whom, in which institutions, and under what conditions (Foucault, 1972). Discourse, in this sense, is not a transparent medium for expressing a preexisting consciousness but a material practice with its own archives, rules of conservation, and procedures of exclusion. He insists that historical analysis attend to discontinuities and transformations rather than to origins or traditions. As he writes, the task is no longer to trace a continuous line of tradition but to identify thresholds, ruptures, and mutations that give rise to new fields of knowledge (Foucault, 1972, pp. 203–211).

Foucault defines the *episteme* of a period as "the total set of relations that unite, at a given period, the discursive practices that give rise to epistemological figures, sciences, and possibly formalized systems" (Foucault, 1972, p. 211). The episteme is not a hidden essence but a field of regularities and differences among scientific, popular, and institutional discourses.

The South Caucasian press, including *Mshak*, *Molla Nasreddin*, *Khatabala*, *Sharqi-Rus*, and Georgian newspapers, can be treated as such a discursive field. Rather than serving merely as channels for opinion, these publications constituted regimes of truth in which certain statements about "nation," "progress," "fanaticism," "women," or "the people" became possible and authoritative, while others were marginalized or silenced (Foucault, 1980).

In another work, Foucault rejects the view that modern power operates primarily through repression or silence. Instead, he argues that from the seventeenth century onward power increasingly functioned through the multiplication of discourses concerned with the body, morality, family life, and social conduct.

Medical, pedagogical, legal, and religious knowledges did not merely regulate behavior; they actively produced norms, classifications, and regimes of truth through which individuals and populations came to be governed. As Foucault famously observes, these processes form "a historical construct… a great surface network in which the stimulation of bodies, the intensification of pleasures, the incitement to discourse, the formation of special knowledges, [and] the strengthening of controls and resistances are linked to one another" (Foucault, 1978, pp. 105–106).

Foucault identifies several strategic mechanisms within this modern deployment of power, including the medicalization of women's bodies, the regulation of childhood behavior, the management of family and reproductive norms, and the pathologization of nonconforming conduct. Through these mechanisms, modern societies produce distinctions between "normal" and "abnormal" subjects, making family and gendered roles central to the biopolitical administration of populations (Foucault, 1978, p. 104). This ana-

lytic framework can be translated into the South Caucasian context, where satirical and reformist journals repeatedly addressed women's seclusion, child marriage, clerical authority over family life, and practices labeled as "backward" or "superstitious." Their caricatures and editorials participated in a broader biopolitical project that sought to regulate bodies, households, and moral behavior in the name of national progress and social reform.

Homi K. Bhabha's *The Location of Culture* provides a complementary postcolonial perspective, deeply indebted to Foucault but focused on the colonial encounter. Bhabha argues that colonial identities, of both colonizer and colonized, are inherently hybrid and formed in a "zone of occult instability" where mimicry, ambivalence, and resistance undermine any claim to cultural purity (Bhabha, 1994, pp. 22–24). He criticizes Enlightenment discourses for claiming universal reason while masking their ideological investment in power, a move reminiscent of Foucault's suspicion of seemingly neutral regimes of knowledge. Bhabha introduces the concept of the "Third Space," an in-between site where new cultural meanings are negotiated and where colonial discourse is subverted through partial adoption and ironic imitation (Bhabha, 1994, p. 24). For post-imperial Tiflis and Baku, multiethnic cities where Armenian, Azerbaijani, Georgian, Russian, Persian, and Ottoman discourses intersected, this concept is especially apt. Journals such as *Molla Nasreddin* and *Khatabala* occupy precisely this "Third Space": they write from within imperial modernity yet turn its languages of civilization and progress against both empire and local elites. Hybridity here is not a celebration of mixing but a description of how power forces people to speak in languages not entirely their own, and how satire makes those languages stumble.

The South Caucasus, annexed by the Russian Empire in the early nineteenth century, underwent profound political, cultural, and social transformation. The Aras River became a new imperial border, yet family ties, trade, and cultural exchange continued across Ottoman, Iranian, and Russian domains (Bournoutian, 2021). Tiflis, the capital of the Caucasus Viceroyalty, emerged as the principal center of imperial governance and a "laboratory of modernity," hosting government offices, philanthropic foundations,

scholarly societies, and an expanding infrastructure of schools, libraries, and printing presses. Together, these institutions constituted what may be described as an "urban intellectual culture" (Suny, 1994, p. 115).

Within this space, Armenians, Georgians, Russians, and Azerbaijanis pursued their own projects of national awakening, often in competition but also in dialogue. The Armenian community built a particularly dense print infrastructure. By the 1890s–1910s, Tiflis had overtaken Constantinople as the leading center of Armenian printing; thousands of books and numerous newspapers were produced by presses such as the Nersisian School press and Nvard Aghanyants's pioneering female-led press (Celebrating the Legacy of Five Centuries of Armenian-Language Book Printing, 2012). This print boom not only preserved culture but transformed it, creating a secular, literate intelligentsia and a vibrant Armenian public sphere (author's archival research).

Georgians similarly invested in national education, while Muslim reformers (Jadids) established bilingual schools and new-method *maktabs* to raise literacy among Azerbaijani Turks. Educational efforts were closely linked to the press: newspapers in Armenian (*Mshak, Nor Dar*), Georgian (*Iveria*), and Azerbaijani Turkish (*Sharqi-Rus, Hayat*) became key platforms for debates on language, secularization, and political rights.

Under Russian rule, both Armenians and Azerbaijanis developed modern intelligentsias who championed enlightenment, cultural revival, and political awareness as tools to "awaken" the nation. Armenian intellectuals, often educated in seminaries and Russian universities, reformed language, produced vernacular literature, and founded political parties that fused nationalism with liberal or socialist ideals (Nalbandian, 1963). Figures such as Khachatur Abovian and Mikayel Nalbandian mobilized language and print as weapons against clerical obscurantism and imperial domination (Hovhannisian, 1997).

For Azerbaijani Muslims, whose elite culture had long been oriented toward Persian, the nineteenth century witnessed a gradual shift toward Azeri Turkish as a literary and journalistic language. Mirza Fatali Akhundzade played a central role by writing vernacular comedies that satirized religious fanaticism and corrupt khans and by

calling for secular education and alphabet reform. Russian observers dubbed him the "Tatar Molière" (Swietochowski, 1985, pp. 25–26). Early newspapers such as *Akinchi* (1875–1878) and *Keshkul* (1882–1891) promoted enlightenment but faced intense censorship and financial hardship; by the 1890s, most Azerbaijani publishing in Tiflis had been eliminated by Russification policies (Kerimov, 2011; Swietochowski, 1995). Despite these asymmetries, both Armenian and Azerbaijani intelligentsias confronted parallel challenges: overcoming religious hierarchies and conservative notables, navigating imperial reforms and repression, and articulating national projects in rapidly changing urban settings.

Despite these asymmetries, both Armenian and Azerbaijani intelligentsias confronted parallel challenges: overcoming religious hierarchies and conservative notables, navigating imperial reforms and repression, and articulating national projects in rapidly changing urban settings (Suny, 1979; Swietochowski, 1985). The result was a shared, if contested, public sphere in which each community read, commented on, and at times collaborated with the others. Armenian newspapers in Tiflis were deeply entangled with regional developments. *Mshak*, edited by Grigor Artsruni, served as a primary venue for Armenian debates on language, fatherland, and religion, while also closely following Muslim initiatives. When Hasan bey Zardabi founded *Akinchi* in Baku, *Mshak* celebrated the achievement of a "highly educated Turkish youth" who overcame prejudice to publish a vernacular newspaper, framing it as a victory for enlightenment against conservatism (Ardzagank, 1888).

Later, *Mshak* reported sympathetically on Azerbaijani poet Alakbar Sabir's illness and poverty, encouraging fundraising for a Muslim satirist whose work paralleled Armenian critiques of social injustice (The Influence of Azerbaijanis on the Literary Environment of Tiflis, 2018). This pattern illustrates what the dissertation conceptualizes as the press functioning as "the most visible space of cooperation," where Armenian editors recognized Azerbaijani reformers as fellow combatants against ignorance and repression, even as national projects diverged.

This ecology set the stage for the emergence of satirical journals such as *Molla Nasreddin* and *Khatabala* as shared discursive arenas cutting across ethnic boundaries (Chikovani, 2018). These journals did not arise in isolation but were embedded in a dense multilingual press culture that enabled satire to circulate across communal lines.

Molla Nasreddin began publication in Tiflis in April 1906 under the editorship of Jalil Mammadguluzadeh. It emerged directly from the upheavals of the 1905 Revolution, which loosened censorship and opened space for new forms of political expression. One legacy of 1905 was the partial liberalization of the press; in the Caucasus, this led to an explosion of newspapers and journals, particularly among Muslims who had previously been constrained by imperial policy and clerical dominance (Swietochowski, 1995).

Mammadguluzadeh and his collaborators were acutely aware of the limitations of earlier Muslim dailies such as *Hayat* and *Irshad*, whose rarefied Ottomanized language restricted their readership to a small intelligentsia. *Molla Nasreddin* was conceived as a popular intervention: an eight-page weekly combining satirical prose and poetry with striking caricatures, written in accessible Azerbaijani Turkish and printed in Tiflis's cosmopolitan environment (Slavs and Tatars, *Molla Nasreddin*, 1906, no. 11).

Visual satire was central to the journal's appeal. Roughly half of each issue was devoted to illustrations, ensuring accessibility even to illiterate readers. Artists such as Oskar Schmerling, Joseph Rotter, and Azim Azimzadeh supplied images that translated complex political and social commentary into everyday scenes recognizable across the Caucasus and beyond (Hunziker, 2019). The figure of "Molla Nasreddin" himself, a folkloric wise fool, anchored this visual regime, appearing on covers in slippers and robe, gesturing ironically at the world (Suny, 1994). The early success of *Molla Nasreddin* points to the existence of a wide and curious readership, even in a society where many could not read fluently. Within a short time, the journal circulated far beyond the Caucasus, reaching Iran, Central Asia, and the Ottoman Empire, and inspiring similar satirical experiments elsewhere. Its appeal lay not only in humor but in its capacity to name social figures, clerics, reformers, ordinary people, and render them visible and discussable. In this sense, *Molla Nasreddin* did more than comment on society; it helped shape how that society understood itself.

Khatabala, founded in Tiflis in 1906 by Astvatsatur (Bogdan) Yeritsyan, emerged from the same unsettled moment. By choosing a title drawn from Sundukyan's theater, the journal signaled from the outset that satire, confusion, and social tension would be its language. Together, these journals demonstrate how satire became a shared space for reflection, criticism, and experimentation in the rapidly changing world of the South Caucasus (Suny, 1994).

Khatabala's early 1906 issues center on Armenian–Azerbaijani violence, state negligence, and famine; later numbers address education (the Nersisian School), parliamentary politics (the State Duma), labor, and global events such as the Balkan Wars and the Adana massacres (*Khatabala*, 1906–1908). In Foucauldian terms, the analytical table constructed for this study functions as a map of discursive "thresholds": the emergence of consistent themes, their articulation into critiques of social and political order (epistemologization), and their intersection with scientific or expert languages, including references to Marxism, sociology, and criminology (Foucault, 1972, pp. 206–210).

Foucault insists that modern power operates not primarily through juridical prohibition but via "technologies" that organize conduct by deploying knowledge (Foucault, 2003, p. 34; Foucault, 1980, pp. 245–246). Programs of reform, even when only partially realized, define what counts as normal behavior, rational policy, or enlightened belief. *Mshak*, *Molla Nasreddin*, and *Khatabala* can be read as such technologies. *Mshak* articulated an Armenian program of enlightenment, vernacular education, constitutionalism, and social reform, under the sign of "fatherland" and "people." Armenian readers learned to see themselves through the lens of "civilized nationhood" and to judge others (Kurds, Turks, "Easterners") against this yardstick. In doing so, the paper exercised an authority of *veridiction*, pronouncing what counted as true Armenian behavior and legitimate politics.

Thematic Frequencies in Khatabala (1906-1926), (Appendix 1)
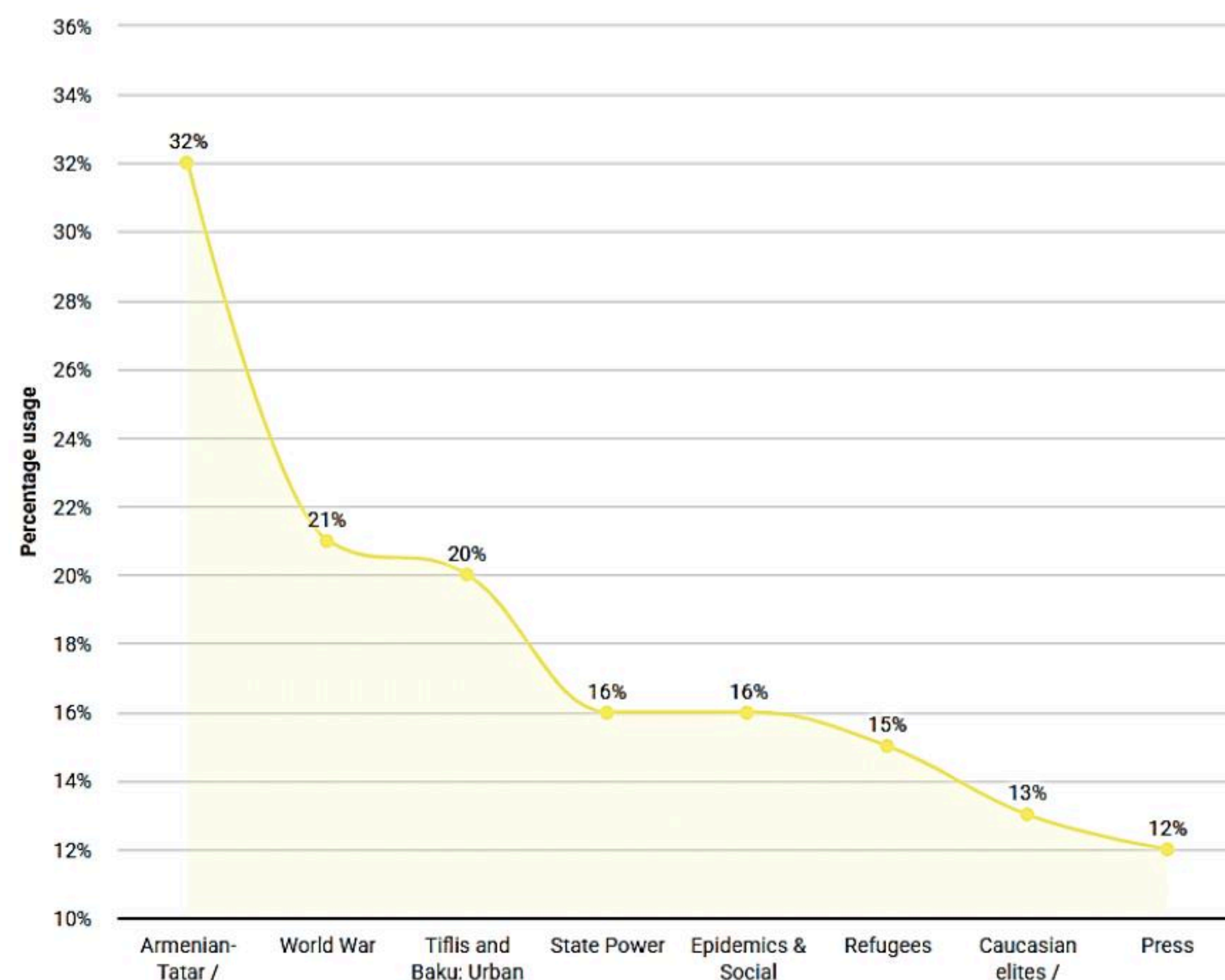
Source: Author's original dataset compiled through systematic thematic coding of *Khatabala* issues (1906–1926).

Molla Nasreddin and *Khatabala* likewise positioned themselves as educators and judges. Early *Molla Nasreddin* issues mocked Muslims for not opening schools or publishing books, contrasting them unfavorably with Armenians, Georgians, and Russians. This discursive move both shamed and interpellated Muslim readers as backward subjects in need of reform (*Molla Nasreddin*, 1906, no. 7; *Molla Nasreddin*, 1907, March 15). This was not mere polemic; it constituted a governmental rationality that defined the "population" and set norms for its improvement.

The *Khatabala* database reveals repeated themes of "ignorant peasants," "corrupt officials," "reactionary priests," and "modern intellectuals," constructing a social taxonomy of Armenians (*Khatabala*, 1906–1908). By labeling and caricaturing these figures, the journal disciplined Armenian public opinion, making certain positions, support for education, sympathy with workers, condemnation of chauvinism, appear as self-evident marks of modernity (see Appendix 1).

The intersection of gender, religion, and ideology constitutes one of the principal axes along which these journals produced norms and regulated social behavior. Foucault's analysis of modern power shows how women's bodies, childhood conduct, family life, and forms of behavior deemed deviant become privileged sites of intensified discourse, moral scrutiny, and institutional regulation (Foucault, 1978, pp. 104–105). *Molla Nasreddin* repeatedly caricatured veiled women, polygamy, and child marriage in Muslim communities, often juxtaposing them with images of unveiled, educated Armenian or Russian women. Such images functioned both as critiques of patriarchal practices and as reinforcements of a civilizational hierarchy in which Muslims were depicted as lagging behind Christians in gender equality. They contributed to a biopolitical project of reshaping family and reproduction in line with a modern national ideal.

Khatabala addressed gender through speech satire, reports on Baku women's meetings, and poems and stories on topics such as domestic violence, infanticide, and the "crossed girl" whose life is constrained by moral double standards (*Khatabala*, 1906–1908). These issues were framed within a broader critique of bourgeois greed, clerical hypocrisy, and state indifference.

In both journals, religious authority appears as an object of relentless satire. Mullahs, priests, and monks are depicted as obstructing education, extorting money, and abusing their pastoral power. This echoes Foucault's analysis of Christian "pastoral" power as a form of government over souls that disciplines bodies through confession, surveillance, and moral injunctions (Foucault, 1991). In attacking such figures, the journals contest not only individual misdeeds but an entire regime of truth about sin, virtue, and salvation. Yet these critiques are often ambivalent. *Molla Nasreddin*'s call to replace clerical authority with secular intelligentsia can be read as a

transfer of pastoral power rather than its abolition. *Khatabala*'s appeals to national duty and moral purity sometimes reproduce patriarchal gender norms and racialized images of enemies. Foucault's insistence that power is productive rather than purely repressive allows us to see how these journals generate new disciplines even as they contest old ones.

Epidemics occupy a striking position in the satirical imagination of the South Caucasus. Cholera appears in *Khatabala* not only as a medical event but as a political metaphor and a biopolitical threshold. Reports, caricatures, and instructional texts on hygiene expose the state's inability to protect life while simultaneously producing new regimes of bodily discipline (*Khatabala*, 1906–1925). Here, disease becomes a site where power intervenes directly in the biological existence of populations, transforming illness into a technology of social ordering rather than a neutral natural disaster.

In *Society Must Be Defended*, Foucault analyzes a strand of historico,political discourse that interprets history as a war between races or peoples, a discourse that later underpins modern racism and state biopolitics (Foucault, 2003, p. 271). In the South Caucasus, such discourses were pervasive. Armenian nationalists spoke of historical enmity with "Turks" and "Tatars," while Azerbaijani and Georgian texts constructed their own historical antagonisms.

Satirical journals both reflected and complicated these narratives. The analytical table constructed from *Khatabala* lists issues devoted to the Adana massacres, the "Cilicia genocide," the Balkan wars, and questions of the "Armenian past and future" (*Khatabala*, 1908–1913). These pieces depict Armenians as victims of Ottoman violence and international intrigue, reinforcing a historico,political narrative of racial struggle. At the same time, the journal's later issues from 1915–1926, written amid the genocide, contain explicit editorial reflections on the dangers of racial hatred and the need to resist chauvinism even under conditions of extreme suffering (*Khatabala*, 1915–1916). This tension is analytically central: satire can simultaneously mobilize enemy images and undermine them, depending on historical pressure and the audience it imagines.

Molla Nasreddin's anti,Abdülhamid cartoons and critiques of Young Turk constitutionalism

also belong to this field. They portray Ottoman politics as a theatre of hypocrisy and violence, exposing both despotism and revolutionary enthusiasm as vulnerable to corruption (Swietochowski, 1985). The journal's pan-Islamic and pan-Turkic sympathies did not prevent it from mocking nationalist slogans when they masked elite self-interest. A Foucauldian reading thus highlights how these journals mobilized historico-political discourses of war and race while also revealing their fragility and contradictions. They did not simply echo ethnic antagonisms; they staged them, ironized them, and left room for alternative solidarities.

The South Caucasus at the turn of the twentieth century can be understood as a space of overlapping governmentalities. The Russian imperial administration governed through law, schools, and police; Armenian, Azerbaijani, and Georgian national parties sought to discipline their communities; socialist and anarchist movements proposed new forms of collective rule; and religious institutions maintained their own pastoral regimes. *Molla Nasreddin* and *Khatabala* functioned as laboratories in which alternative arts of government were imagined. They educated readers in the language of rights and duties, ridiculed corruption and fanaticism, and proposed new models of subjectivity, the enlightened citizen, the modern mother, and the hardworking yet critical worker. In doing so, they participated in what Foucault calls "the politics of truth": the struggle over what can be said, who may speak, and which statements count as true (Foucault, 1980, pp. 229–237).

Bhabha's concepts of hybridity and the "Third Space" sharpen this perspective. Tiflis and Baku were hybrid urban spaces where Armenians and Azerbaijanis measured themselves against Russians, Persians, and each other (Suny, 1979; Swietochowski, 1985). Armenian newspapers such as *Mshak* criticized Muslim "backwardness" while simultaneously defending Muslim newspapers' right to exist. *Molla Nasreddin* used Armenians and Georgians as positive examples of modernity while critiquing their nationalisms, and *Khatabala* satirized Armenian chauvinism alongside external threats.

These ambivalences reveal that Caucasus modernity cannot be neatly divided into oppressors and oppressed, colonizers and colonized. Armenian and Azerbaijani intellectuals were simultaneously subjects of empire and aspirant national governors. Their discourses appropriated European concepts of civilization and science while forging local critiques of imperial racism and internal oppression. A decolonial reading attentive to what Walter Mignolo calls "the darker side of Western modernity" would emphasize how imperial modernization in the Caucasus selectively empowered certain vernacular projects (such as Armenian printing), suppressed others (such as Azerbaijani publishing in Tiflis), and fostered competition for imperial favor (Mignolo, 2011). Modernity, in this sense, arrived as an unequal distribution of voice, print, education, and visibility, and satire was one of the ways this inequality was both reproduced and exposed.

Conclusion

By reading the Armenian and Azerbaijani satirical press through Foucault's ideas on power, discourse, and knowledge, this article has shown that *Molla Nasreddin* and *Khatabala* were not marginal publications but central actors in the making of South Caucasus modernity. Emerging from multilingual urban environments and shaped by imperial rule, nationalist aspirations, and socialist ideas, these journals helped form new ways of seeing society and oneself. Their caricatures and editorials did more than comment on social life: they named and shaped figures such as "the nation," "the ignorant masses," "the fanatic cleric," and "the modern woman," thereby suggesting how people ought to behave, believe, and belong.

Satire governed not through formal authority but through ridicule, irony, and shared moral judgments, making laughter and shame powerful tools of social regulation. Seen through Bhabha's notion of hybridity and the "Third Space," these journals reveal the unsettled and in-between nature of Caucasian identities. Writing from within imperial modernity, they neither fully embraced nor simply rejected it, but reworked its languages and values in local and often unexpected ways. In this sense, satire functioned as a decolonial resource: a space where Armenians and Azerbaijanis could question imperial hierarchies, criticize their own elites, and imagine forms of coexistence that later political developments would increasingly foreclose (Central Historical Ar-

chive of Georgia. (1891). Fond 480, opis′ 1, delo 1056, Tbilisi, Georgia).

Rereading Caucasus modernity through this combined Foucauldian and postcolonial lens not only deepens our understanding of Armenian and Azerbaijani intellectual life, but also invites broader reflection on how power and knowledge operate in colonial and postcolonial settings far from imperial centers.

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