

The Oriental world of Voltaire and Hugo

The book "The Oriental world of Voltaire and Hugo" by Doctor of Philological Sciences Asgar Zeynalov, covers famous French writers Voltaire and Hugo's work related to the topics of Orientalism. The book examines Voltaire's essays on customs and culture of Eastern nations, the tragedies of "Zaire" and "The Scythians" as well as Hugo's eastern motives and his views on Islam.

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Asgar Zeynalov

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ASGAR ZEYNALOV

(Preface to the English translation of the monograph)

Asgar Mammad oghlu Zeynalov was born in the village of Yukhari Nejili of the Ulukhanli district, not far from Irevan, on 27 September 1951. He graduated from the French Faculty of Azerbaijan University of Languages in the year 1974. PhD and member of the Azerbaijan Union of Writers and Journalists, Asgar Zeynalov is the author of more than 35 books and over 400 scientific and journalistic articles. His articles have been published in Iran, Turkey and Moscow, while his books have been published in St. Petersburg (2011), Moscow (2013), France (2015), Germany (2016), USA (2016), Great Britain (2016), Canada (2016) and India (2017). The first monographs about Voltaire and Hugo in Azerbaijani literary studies belong to A. Zeynalov. In 2003, he defended his doctoral thesis on “The East in French Literature” on the basis of Voltaire’s creative activity.

In 2014, his monograph, “Hugo”, was submitted to the State Prize of the Republic of Azerbaijan. A. Zeynalov is recognised across the world, and even in France, as an accomplished scholar of French literature, especially Hugo. His monograph, “The East in French Literature”, has been reviewed by the outstanding French scholar Jean Louis Bacque-Grammont (1997). The newspaper “L’Est Republicain” published articles about A. Zeynalov, entitling him as ‘the Hugo specialist’, on 11 August 2007 and 24 July 2014. In recognition of his monumental work, Arnaud Laster, the President of the Society of Hugo’s Friends, contributed several articles about the Azerbaijani scholar to the bulletin of the Society in Paris in the years of

2013, 2015 and 2016. His books has been sold in more than 20 countries.

Asgar Zeynalov has attended various conference and forums in several countries. Asgar Zeynalov is a member of New York Academy of Sciences and the academician of Turan Academy of Uzbekistan.

The literary scholar A. Zeynalov has published articles on La Fontaine, Voltaire, Hugo, Balzac, Stendhal, Dumas, George Sand, Flaubert, Merimee and Maupassant at different times. At present, he works at the Azerbaijan University of Languages.

THE INEXHAUSTIBLE THEME

For over thousand years, the theme of 'East and West' has remained the main topic of conversation for world-renowned writers, poets, philosophers and historians and hundreds of problems covered by these notions have been taken onto the agenda. Over the years, scholars in both East and West have increasingly been attracted to the theme. As a result of this increasing interest in the theme across the globe, in the XIX and XX centuries, it drew attention as a separate field of science in Azerbaijan.

The classical writers in Azerbaijan not only read and advocated works reflecting the attitude towards the East in European literature, but also translated them into our language, apart from dedicating articles to the theme. By the late XX century, tens of noteworthy monographs had been written and valuable dissertations had been defended in the field of Azerbaijani and European, notably covering French and Azerbaijani literary links.

However, full coverage of the theme is impossible, despite numerous surveys and interesting books written over the years. Nonetheless, many of the issues and hidden pages in the theme may be investigated through a study of development of cultural relations in different scientific aspects. Towards this end, Asgar Zeynalov's book, "The East in French Literature", may be perceived as a demand of the history of cultural relations that are developing every day and advancing towards new stages, marking the success of our literary criticism.¹

In French literature, the East is a common theme touched upon in the works of almost all French classics, either

directly or indirectly. However, it is impossible to cover this theme completely within one work, and Asgar Zeynalov's book is far from this claim.

The researcher confined himself to a part of this vast theme, limiting his study to the great French writers - Voltaire and Hugo. Nevertheless, he managed to present the sensitivity with which the French writers approach the East through the examples of these two classical French writers and substantiated the value, especially the present importance of the scientific field he has been dealing with.

In general, connections of Voltaire and Hugo with the East may be studied as separate topics, since the works of both these classical French writers' broadly encompass the realm of the East. Notably, both these topics have been sufficiently studied, and numerous works have been written on them in Russia, West-European countries, Middle Asia, countries in the Arab and Turkey. However, no research of this kind has been undertaken in Azerbaijan so far.

Undeniably, many of our literary scholars have touched upon these issues while dealing with the French and Azerbaijani literary links, and a lot of views have been expressed indirectly in this regard; however, no other researcher has considered this theme in the general Eastern context like A. Zeynalov. This work by A. Zeynalov adopts a distinctive approach to the theme, innovative from the standpoints of scope, coverage and inclusion. A. Zeynalov has managed to present the strength and impact of Oriental culture as the main source of inspiration for the classical French writers. This is reflected in the content of his book that is well mirrored in the titles of the chapters it is divided into:

“Voltaire’s Literary Works, Sources and Impacts”, “The Oriental Sources”, “The Impact of Eastern Literature on the Work, ‘Zadig or Fate’”, “Voltaire’s View of the Moslem Realm”, “Voltaire and Oriental Culture”, “Voltaire’s Work, ‘Fanaticism, or Mahomet the Prophet’”, “Voltaire’s Tragedy Derived from Religious Discrimination”, “The Eastern Peoples in Voltaire’s Works”, “Voltaire’s Tragedy, ‘The Scythians’”, “The Oriental Motives in Hugo’s Poetry”, etc.

Majority of the outstanding Azerbaijani scholars, who studied literary relations, have touched upon Voltaire in their research and dealt with his above-mentioned works such as “Zadig or Fate”, “Fanaticism, or Mahomet the Prophet” and “The Scythians”. No other French writer has been bound to the East as much as Voltaire, and thus, no researcher of literary relations can pass by him wordlessly. None of the great writers and researchers of the Eastern realm have ignored this tradition. For instance, our great thinker M.F. Akhundzadeh’s personal archives also contain some books by Voltaire. Moreover, in his scientific-philosophical works as well as his literary works, he has often referred to French literature and its classical writer, Voltaire, expressing an invaluable opinion about him. It is remarkable that A. Zeynalov also followed this tradition, concentrating his research mainly on Voltaire’s works and resources.

This book by A. Zeynalov is a courageous step forward in the study of French-Azerbaijani and French-Oriental literary relations through the example of certain historical personalities. We hope that the researcher will continue his efforts in this direction and involve other classical French writers related to the East in his future works.

Prof., PhD. Samir Kazimoglu, Turkey

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THE ORIENTAL RESOURCES OF VOLTAIRE'S LITERARY WORKS

The West has always attached great importance to the East owing to the earlier development of culture in the East that started its dissemination in Europe centuries ago.

According to the researcher L. M. Kessel, the "Oriental Episodes", which could also be called "novelettes", had started to spread widely as part of Hellenistic literature (he refers to the novelettes about Hephaestus, Aphrodite and Aretha in Homer's "Odyssey").²

Most Greek scholars, including 'the first philosopher' Thales; the giant mathematician Pythagoras; and, the 'wise' Democritus made trips to the East to learn the secrets of science. Naturally, the Greeks, "who were normal children but as wise as the old,"³ could not shut their eyes to this emerging centre of science.

In fact, some Greek myths (the "Trojan War") and works ("Oedipus the Tyrant") created in the Antiquities harmonize with some Oriental legends ("The Legend of Astiyag"). The Greek writers of that period often appealed to Oriental themes (Aeschylus' "The Persians", "The Eumenides" (or "The Kindly Ones") and "The Suppliants").⁴

According to some Western scholars, the Eastern culture spread in Europe through three great events: Alexander of Macedon's march to the East, the Arab's raid against Europe and the Crusades.

In the Middle Ages, i.e. following the Arab conquest, science, mathematics, alchemy, philosophy and astronomy began to develop at a much faster pace in the East. The

works of the Greek philosophers of the Antiquities were widely studied. Suffice it to say, Al-Farabi, who is considered ‘the second teacher’, wrote comments on Aristotle’s “Metaphysics”, “The Categories”, “The Topics”, “Art of Rhetoric” and other works.⁵

The Oriental Renaissance promoted Al-Jahiz, Al-Farabi, Ibn-Sina, Al-Biruni, Omar Khayyam, Nizami Ganjavi and other influential personalities.

Following the Crusades that lasted some 270 years with intervals, the West started to learn the mathematics, philosophy, literature and legends of the East. The Greek culture of the Antiquities also entered Europe through the East during these wars. No doubt, many treasures of the East, manuscripts and pieces of art were taken to the Western countries in this very period. It seemed as if the crusades carried out the exchange of Eastern and Western renaissances.

Thus, it was not a coincidence that Alighieri Dante, the last medieval poet who is also the first in the New Period, referred to the famous legend of Astiyag in his immortal work, “The Divine Comedy”:

At the moment of vengeance

While cruelly killing Cyrus,

Tomris uttered these words,

“You were thirsty of blood, here is blood,

Have it to your heart’s content.”⁶

France, like other European countries, also had a strong

interest in the East in the earlier periods. The XIII-XV centuries saw the formation of schools, colleges and chairs in Oriental languages and training of their specialists in France.⁷ By the XVII century, works started appearing on Oriental themes in France. In 1622, the French playwright Jean Racine wrote the work, “Bayazet”.⁸

In 1697, Barthelemy d’Herbelot, a French scholar in Oriental studies, published his encyclopedic work, “The Oriental Library” (The Bibliothèque Orientale),⁹ that provided some information about the Azerbaijani poets Nizami, Khagani, Falaki and Khatib-Al-Tabrizi.¹⁰

In the XVIII-century Europe, the horizons related to the East were further extended. As the researchers note, even though the interest in the East in European literature had long existed, it was only in the XVIII century that Oriental studies in Europe began existing as a whole science (V. Nikitin).¹¹

In this period, an inclination towards the East was notably intensified in French literature that constituted a huge branch of European literature. It was then, back at the beginning of that century in 1704, that Antoine G’alland, a scholar in Oriental studies who specialized in Arabic studies, started the translation of the masterpiece of Oriental literature – “The Tales of Arabian Nights.” Owing to this serious effort lasting 13 years, these great Oriental tales were published in 12 volumes in Paris in the XVIII century.¹²

Petis de la Croix, an outstanding scholar in Oriental studies, extensively travelled to a number of Eastern countries during this period, making significant contribution to the closer introduction of East in Europe. In 1707, Petis de la Croix (it must be reminded that both his father and son also specialized in Oriental studies) translated “The Turkish Tales” into French. The actual name of these tales

translated from Sheikhzadeh is “The Story of the Persian Sultan and Wezirs.”¹³ During 1710-1712, he translated the collection of tales, “A Thousand and One Days”, from Persian into French.¹⁴

F.de Donville, who wrote a broad introduction to the 1919 edition of the above-mentioned book, noted: “The original versions of these tales were lost in the darkness of time.” According to Donville, being created on the banks of the Ganges, these tales had been disseminated in India, Iran and among the Arabs long before the reign of the Persian ruler Khosrow I, who lived in 501-579. The orally remembered tales were transferred into script in Sanskrit and became known as “Panchatantra” and “Hipotadeva”.¹⁵

Further, Donville stated that the Oriental tales presented the good geniuses as ‘Fairs’ and bad geniuses as ‘Jinn’.¹⁶ He even divided the Jinn into three groups: aerial, aquatic and earthly Jinn.¹⁷

However, the introduction of bad geniuses as Jinn is not accurate. Tales don’t always describe Jinn as the creatures of evil. Few tales also describe Jinn as kind creatures (“The Tale of a Good Man and an Evil Man” in “The Tales of Arabian Nights”).

The image of a ‘Jinni’ introduced in French literature through the translation of Oriental folklore – “The Tales of Arabian Nights” and “A Thousand and One Days” – attracted further attention in the XIX century in vernacular literature through Hugo’s literary works.¹⁸

Petis de la Croix also translated Sharaf ad-Din Ali Yazdi’s book, “Zafarname”, from Persian to French, published as “The History of Timur Bey” in Paris in 1722.¹⁹ H. Vambery noted that even though the work had not been translated very well, it served as a strong source for Voltaire to study the history of Amir Timur.²⁰ Unlike Donville, some

researchers note that while the collection was published as “The Persian Tales” (another name for Petis de la Croix’s “A Thousand and One Tales”), it contained some Chinese, Turkish and Tatar tales as well.²¹

When speaking of the Oriental resources of Voltaire’s literary works, one should specially mention two sources: the French travellers’ travel notes and travel books and the works of ancient Greek historians.

The French travellers, Tavernier, Bernie and Chardin, ‘made fashion’ of the East and played a significant part in the formation of the works related to the East.²² The travellers’ books, “Six Journeys to Turkey and India” (1679), by Jean-Batiste Tavernier (1605-1689), and the travel notes in the form of “The Travel Diaries” by Jean Chardin [who had undertaken two trips (1664-1670 and 1671-1677) to the East], described in detail the geographical and natural conditions of the places and cities they had visited, their historical monuments, the main activities of the populations, their customs, traditions and the administration systems as well.²³ These travel books provided the French, in general (and other European readers, too, as these books evoked a great interest and were translated into other languages as well – A.Z.), with broad information about the East. However, these works were not completely free from ‘errors’. For instance, Jean Chardin, who had lived in Iran for many years, and learnt Persian as his mother tongue, wrote his travel book in 10 volumes; but, unfortunately, did not mention Nizami at all. This surprised A. E. Krimskiy, the outstanding scholar in Oriental studies, as well.²⁴ Was Nizami actually so forgotten in the XVII-century Iran that Chardin did not encounter his name anywhere? It should also be noted that his travels were not restricted to Iran; he had visited many places in the Caucasus too.

Greek sources are considered another Oriental resource in

Voltaire's works. When speaking of the Scythians, Media, as well as the legend of Astiyag, Voltaire undoubtedly made use of the works by Xenophon, whose name he mentioned in his "Essay", and Herodotus, aptly called the 'Father of History',²⁵. It is obvious that along with some European countries, Herodotus had also been to a number of Oriental countries including Iran, Babylonia and Egypt. He described the history, customs, traditions and legends of these countries in the Histories of Herodotus.²⁶ "Clio", the first of the nine books in the "Histories of Herodotus" dealt with Media; its rulers (Phraort, Deyok, Kiaksar and Astiyag); the Scythians' 28-year reign oppressing Media; the legend of Astiyag; the Persian customs such as one's birthday being the greatest holiday, the right to have many wives by law and solving the most important issues over wine); and, Tomris' 29-year reign and her beheading Cyrus and throwing his head into a barrel of blood.²⁷

The fourth book, titled "Melpomene", is devoted entirely to the Scythians.²⁸

As the researchers noted, Herodotus visited Scythia approximately 60-70 years after Darius' raid over the Scythians (in 512 B.C.) and wrote about the then prevalent stories, legends and customs of the Scythians.²⁹

These above-mentioned sources were Voltaire's main Oriental resources.

In 1771, Anquetil Duperron translated the "Zend Avesta" into French.³⁰ The European scholars became seriously involved in the "Avesta"³¹ following his translation. However, it should be stated that this gigantic monument of the East had been disseminated in Europe much before the stated publication. Voltaire had also made use of the manuscripts of "Avesta" through translation before that publication.

The XVIII-century France played the part of the school of Oriental studies for Europe. Both, in that century and later, a number of European writers and poets interested in the East, as well as scholars in Oriental studies, referred to d'Herbelot's works and translations by Galland and Petis de la Croix. That was not the end of the matter, though; both sets of tales, "The Arabian Nights" and "The Persian Tales", were translated into English, not from the original but from French through Galland's and Petis de la Croix' translations, respectively.

According to the researchers, the West-Europeans discovered Eastern topography in the XVI and early XVIII centuries, and the travellers, especially the French travellers (J. Chardin), played an important part in the detailed presentation of the itinerary.³²

In "The Persian-Arabic-English Dictionary" (1777) and in its introduction, "The Dissertation on the Languages, Literatures and Characteristics of the Oriental Peoples", Richardson made use of the works by the French travellers d'Herbelot, J. Chardin and Anquetil Duperron, along with G. Sale and Pokok. This work, rich in new information, became the new resource book for the specialists in Oriental studies.³³

In European literature, the outstanding writers and poets who created works on the Oriental theme benefited greatly from the French Oriental studies. In fact, studies profoundly prove that while creating his famous "Oriental Tales", the English poet Byron familiarized himself with a great part of literature about the East in English and French. He also made use of the tales of "The Arabian Nights" and d'Herbelot's monumental work, "The Oriental Library".³⁴

Later, the researchers who attempted to study the immortal Goethe's book, "The West-East Divan", and Byron's "Oriental Tales",³⁵ turned to French Oriental studies as the

first source to investigate the reasons for the creation of these works and the background of the issues.

W. Beckford also made use of d. Herbelot's famous book when creating his work, "Vathek. Oriental Tales", published in 1786.³⁶

It should be noted that although the author of this work about Vathek (Al-Wasiq – A. Z.), the grandson of the ninth Caliph of the Abbasid dynasty, Harun al-Rashid, and the son of al-Mu'tasim, was English by origin, he wrote "Vathek. Oriental Tales" in French.³⁷

Later, the compilation, "The Tales of Arabian Nights", was translated from French into different languages.

The researcher O. S. Zobotkina points out that in the XVIII century, the word "philosopher" developed a new implication. The philosopher waged a struggle against the power structures. S/He was a locomotive and took an active part in the social struggle of her/his period.³⁸

In this sense, all the great writers of the Enlightenment period

– Montesquieu, Voltaire, Diderot and Rousseau – were also philosophers. And the works of these writers – especially their prose – were philosophical works, apart from being literary pieces. Hence, it is not a coincidence that they are sometimes called "a philosophical novel" (Montesquieu's "The Persian Letters") or "a philosophical long story" (Voltaire's "Zadig or Fate" and "Candide").³⁹

In Pushkin's opinion, in the XVIII century, France was the centre of Europe.⁴⁰ In this period, known as the "Enlightenment Age", France contributed several outstanding figures such as Montesquieu, Diderot, Voltaire, Rousseau, Helvetia and d'Holbach to the world culture. For

their all-inclusive creativity, these persons may be compared with the representatives of the Renaissance. For instance, the great Leonardo da Vinci was an artist, writer, mathematician and inventor. Michelangelo was a sculptor, artist and poet. Prominent writer Stendhal, thus, stated: "Italy would be happy if it had many poets like Michelangelo." ⁴¹

The XVIII-century French Enlightenment writers and philosophers were authors who developed their art profoundly. Characterizing this notable quality, S.D.Artamanov wrote: "Voltaire was a poet, historian and unparalleled satirist – master of philosophical long stories, playwright, philosopher and mathematician; Diderot was a playwright, prominent author of novelettes, philosopher, art theoretician, music critic and a connoisseur of drawing; Rousseau was a master of literary prose, political thinker and composer; and, D'Alembert was a talented mathematician." ⁴²

In this period, French literature did not restrict itself to the frames of its country. It influenced the literature of other peoples. Admitting this truth, Pushkin wrote: "Of all the literatures, it (French literature – A. Z.) is the one that influences our literature the most." ⁴³

The creative activity of the XVIII-century French authors attracted the attention of entire Europe. Speaking about the capacity of this generation of French writers, Pushkin wrote in 1834: "Europe, confused by, astonished at the French writers' fame, was greedily all ears in their presence. German professors held classes about French rules of criticism in their departments. In philosophy, England followed France." ⁴⁴

French literature has contributed a number of writers to the Age of Enlightenment; among whom, undoubtedly, Francois-Marie Arus Voltaire holds the highest position.

As a tribute to this outstanding French writer, Victor Hugo, in his article commemorating Voltaire's 100th death anniversary in the year 1878, wrote: "He was not only a human being, but a century."⁴⁵ Hugo, who characterized that century and the figures developed by it, defined Voltaire's stand as follows: "Great people are few in number. Big trees look higher when they grow in a forest, since they are among their ranks. In the present XVIII century, there is a forest of thoughts around Voltaire. There are peaks among these thoughts – Montesquieu, Buffon and Bon Marche – the highest peaks after Voltaire are Rousseau and Diderot. Truly, these thinkers have taught people how to make a judgment (224)."

Voltaire has been titled the greatest man of the century. Prominent personalities have admitted his greatness, appraising it duly. In 1824, Pushkin wrote: "In history, the French are not lower than the English. If precedence is of any importance, you should not forget that Voltaire was the first to set off along the new path and disseminated the light of philosophy to the dark corners of history."⁴⁶

Back in his lifetime, almost entire Europe reckoned him. "All the clever men followed Voltaire; the dreamy Rousseau announced himself his disciple and the ardent Diderot was the most honourable among his adherents. In the persons of Hume, Gibbon and Walpole, England congratulated the Encyclopedia. Yekaterina started a pen pal correspondence with him. Fredrick quarrelled and later reconciled with him. Europe went to Ferney to pay homage to Voltaire. The public honoured him. Finally, Voltaire died in Paris giving his blessings to Franklin's grandchild and greeting the new world with words unprecedented so far."

⁴⁷

In Goethe's words, "The world ended with Voltaire, and a new world started with Rousseau."⁴⁸

Yes, there were two literary kings in Europe at that time: Frederick, the Prussian king, the strong politician who wrote poems in French, and Voltaire, who filled the stages of Paris as well as other capitals with tragedies.⁴⁹ However, as per general opinion and that of researchers of Voltaire, he is the strongest representative of not only France but also the XVIII-century European literature. An important branch of this influential writer's literary works – his prose, drama and essays – is related to Oriental motives, themes and history. Voltaire's famous prose, "Zadig", is one such work.

It is true that Voltaire was not the only person who wrote works related to the East in that century. Montesquieu created his famous work, "The Persian Letters" (1721), and Diderot wrote "The Invaluable Treasure" in the same century, too. However, Voltaire was the most productive in creating works on this theme among his contemporaries. His prose and plays centered on this theme include "Zaire" (1732), "Fanaticism, or Mahomet the Prophet" (1741), "Zadig or Fate" (1748) and "The Scythians" (1776). A great part of the work - "Essay on the Manners and Spirit of Nations" - written by him in 1756 is related to Oriental peoples, their customs, traditions and cultures. Undeniably, the sources mentioned above had a great impact on the creation of Voltaire's Oriental themes.

VOLTAIRE AND ORIENTAL CULTURE

In the XVIII-century French literature, Voltaire, above all thinkers and writers, referred to the Oriental theme, since he created works of both prose and drama centred on this theme. It should also be reminded that all these works of prose were written in verse.

The famous tragedy, “Fanaticism, or Mahomet the Prophet”, is one of the works on Oriental theme written in verse by Voltaire. However, it should be noted that the character of Mahomet created by the writer is a person quite different from Prophet Muhammad, the founder of Islam. It is, thus, natural to ask why the French writer created such a character. Did he possibly not know Oriental history and its substantial part – Islamic history? Or did he learn it superficially? Did he possibly have no idea about Prophet Muhammad?

Simply enough, one can find answers to these questions in the literary works of Voltaire himself. To do this, one should address the “Essay” written by him in 1756. The author, who described the lifestyles, cultures, customs and traditions of the world nations from ancient times to the early XVIII century on historical principles, dealt comprehensively and extensively with Prophet Muhammad’s life and activities, the formation and development of Islam, Moslem culture and its impact in eight volumes.

According to Voltaire, neither any country all through its existence nor any conquest had ever been described in such detail and accuracy as Muhammad’s life by his contemporaries.