

Azerbaijan in Serbian Literature – Between Realistic Travelogue and Mystical Lure in Postmodern Literature

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Strong oriental influence in the Balkan region had begun to be felt since the end of the 14th century, when Turks conquered most of the Balkan nations on this territory. They remained sovereign rulers during the following five hundred years. Their influence pervaded almost all aspects of life: architecture, lifestyle, habits, language, music, legends, traditional folk stories and witticisms. Nevertheless, when we look closer at Serbian literature from the 15th century till the present, it is clear that there was not direct literary influence of particular works of oriental literature. Oriental elements in Serbian literature appear primarily in themes and motifs, typology and elements of literary images, depiction of characters, authentic atmosphere of certain historical milieux, and topographic and toponymic location of the work. For some Serbian writers, who in the late 19th century became disappointed at achievements of European civilization, the East became a new inspiration, a metaphor of a world which was different from our own and offered a spiritual sanctuary.¹ In each particular period of Serbian literature, there were writers who were inspired by the East and oriental literature. Some of them were the greatest Serbian poets, writers and storytellers such as Jovan Ilić, Aleksa Šantić, Branislav Nušić, Svetozar Ćorović, Stevan Sremac.

Ivo Andrić is a Serbian Nobel Prize Winner and undoubtedly the best Balkan writer of all time. His works have a distinctively strong mark of the East. He traveled extensively, and was the very first one who brought Azerbaijan as a literary motif to Serbian literature. He is a writer who achieved a synthesis of traditional and modern, and ingeniously succeeded in expressing universal human thoughts and concerns. He wrote novels, short stories, poetry, and poetic/meditative prose, and he published articles, essays, and travel writings in numerous

¹ Šop, Ivan: *Orient in the Serbian Literature*, Institut za književnost i jezik, 1982.

literary journals. His range of interests and knowledge of world cultural heritage is best reflected in his essayistic and travel writing works. As we mentioned, fundamental and enduring themes of his work were East and the Orient which he experienced as an exotic world. Born in Bosnia, which is largely populated by Muslims, he cultivated a special interest in the Islamic world. His best stories and novels are based on the description of the mysterious and colorful oriental elements.²

Another well-known Serbian author from the first half of the 20th century, Jovan Dučić, gave the best definition of travel writing: *It is not enough to be a writer and leave to see the country in order to write a book. Writers should be open to compare, feel, love or hate. They should not describe the cities but the vision, not the people, but racial genius, neither works of art but the artistic possibilities, nor cults, but minorities' impact, neither events but higher motives, neither the history of the people but the history of spirit and soul. There is no harder work than travel writing, because there is no more comprehensive study than the study of racial genius; or even more difficult skill than to grasp what the subject of pure science is and erudition through the seemingly naive art. But there is no more personal poetic sensibility than in contact with one another's country.*³ As in the definition, Andrić wrote one interesting travel record about Azerbaijan.

Andrić spent twenty years in diplomatic service, which enabled him to travel and to get to know different nations and their cultures around the world. After diplomats residing in Azerbaijan in 1941 celebrated the 800th anniversary of the birth of great Azerbaijani poet Nezami Ganjavi, he poetically described in a travelogue named *From my trip through Azerbaijan* (literal translation), published in *Književne novine*, 1948.

This literary magazine had an important cultural and historical value and, from its beginning, it was considered a leading literary journal in Serbia. All of this indicates the importance given to the aforementioned Andrić's text, which was published on 17 February, 1948 in the first issue of this journal, as the first text after the editor's introduction.

The travel writing extends over half of the page. In addition to the text, there is a picture of Azerbaijani poet Nezami Ganjavi with pen and paper in his hands. Under

² Секулић, Исидора: *Исток у приповеткама Ива Андрића*, Зборник о Андрићу, СКЗ, Београд, 1999.

стр. 31-43

³ Дуčić, Јован: *Моји сапутници*, Прилози (критике, чланци, белешке), СД, књ. 4, Свјетлост, Сарајево,

1969, стр. 200

the picture was the poet's name, both in Persian and Serbian. Having examined the motifs and literary topos of Azerbaijan during the preparation of this work in detail, we can say that this is his first appearance in written Serbian literature (we have encountered several examples of printing some Azeri folk tales). It can therefore be said that Andrić introduced us with topos of Azerbaijan and brought the poet Nesami to Serbian literature. After him, several Serbian writers visited Azerbaijan and published interesting articles and shorter itineraries from those trips with mostly personal impressions. However, thanks to Andrić's power of comprehensive insight into the inner world, we have been able to conjure up the atmosphere and the main features of the country and people of Azerbaijan.

From the first sentence, he draws us into the story, and makes us interested: *Staying in Baku and Azerbaijan in the short time for us, as overseas delegates, was a source of pleasure and instruction.*⁴ He described Azerbaijan as *a rich, interesting and culturally advanced*⁵ country. Andrić's text showed fundamental understanding of the life and work of Nezami Ganjavi, as well as a deep admiration towards him. At this point Andrić regrets not knowing the original language of this poet, which prevented him from having a full experience of his poetry. However, our Nobel Prize Winner recognized the *strength and size of the poet, wealth of his forms and purity and humanity of moral and social understanding.*⁶ On this celebration Andrić was particularly impressed by realization of the event. That gave him opportunity to mention the technical and economic development of this country. Andrić highlighted the strength and resources which this country had invested in the preservation of its cultural heritage.

As a diplomat, he was impressed by the intercultural cooperation among neighboring countries and how the poet was appreciated outside his country. For example, Andrić notes that each of these countries (Latvia, Moldova, Armenia, Uzbekistan, etc.) sent *a translation of a work or study about Nizami or his portrait for the Nizami museum.*⁷ These gifts for Andrić were not *the signs of a great friendship, as the French dictum says, but truly and deeply humane cultural symbols.*⁸

⁴ Андрић, Иво: *From my trip through Azerbaijan*, Књижевне новине, Београд, (17. Фебруар 1948) Год.1, бр. 1, стр.2

⁵ Андрић, Иво: *From my trip through Azerbaijan*, Књижевне новине, Београд, (17. Фебруар 1948) Год.1, бр. 1, стр.2

⁶ Андрић, Иво: *From my trip through Azerbaijan*, Књижевне новине, Београд, (17. Фебруар 1948) Год.1, бр. 1, стр.2

⁷ Андрић, Иво: *From my trip through Azerbaijan*, Књижевне новине, Београд, (17. Фебруар 1948) Год.1, бр. 1, стр.2

⁸ Андрић, Иво: *From my trip through Azerbaijan*, Књижевне новине, Београд, (17. Фебруар 1948) Год.1, бр. 1, стр.2

According to Andrić, Azerbaijani people are *funny and simple, ready to laugh and play*,⁹ while the modern Azerbaijani writers, whom he had the opportunity to get to know, are *with hot heart and active pen*.¹⁰ Although this travel writing of Azerbaijan lacks a description of its cities and nature, it presents a deeper insight into the cultural consciousness of the people and its heritage. It is a country worth praising, especially when it comes from the pen of someone who belongs to another cultural context, and who thus managed to make readers in Serbia interested in the ancient poetry of distant Azerbaijan.

This is precisely the case with the modern Serbian author, Miomir Petrović, one of the foremost contemporary Serbian writers of the younger generation. In his novel *Persian mirror* (2001) the entire deed takes place in countries of the East such as Turkey, Armenia, Azerbaijan and Iran. According to author, that may be caused by *excessive similarity between the Balkans and the Orient*,¹¹ which made very deep impressions on him during his trip through these counties. Otherwise, this is the first in a series of Petrović's novels inspired by the Orient. In one interview the writer reveals his motivation to write about these areas – he was prompted by prose of French writer Nicholas Buvije.

Persian mirror at first glance looks as an adventure story. In fact is a work of very complex form. Its appearance brought a real change in the perception of the modern novel. It has been written in singular. Its subtitle, *novel arabesque, unambiguously indicates the flamboyant expression with frequent repetitions, and the primary name for the type of ornament in the form of curved lines in Muslim art*.¹²

The main character of this novel is a Serb of Armenian origin. He lives in Belgrade and wants to know more about his origin. By accident he heard a part of an old Persian song (*khamasa*) in Azeri language from a man who died in a mysterious way after he had sung it. The hero starts his search for the ending of *khamasa*, after he finds out that it originates from the Middle East and the Caucasus. While making preparations for the trip, Mitrović's hero Milos Zurburan sees Azerbaijan on the map as a place of *genuine, aimless, but existing hope*.¹³ He firmly believes

⁹ Андрић, Иво: *From my trip through Azerbaijan*, Књижевне новине, Београд, (17. Фебруар 1948) Год.1, бр. 1, стр.2

¹⁰ Андрић, Иво: *From my trip through Azerbaijan*, Књижевне новине, Београд, (17. Фебруар 1948) Год.1, бр. 1, стр.2

¹¹ Denčić, Vesna: *Ideas are not well up accidentally*, Glas javnosti, 18. Новембар, 2008.

¹² Vukša, Marko: *Mimezis nesvesnog - Miomir Petrović: Persijsko ogledalo, Beograd, 2001* u: Borba, God. 80, br. 59 (28. 02. 2002)

¹³ Petrović, Mimir: *Persian mirror; novel arabesque*, Belgrade, Geopoetika, 2001. str. 64

that this country provides the answers that plague him. For him, Azerbaijan is a *Bermuda Triangle that began to breathe*.¹⁴

His journey has two dimensions, both physical and spiritual. The quest for the final version of the poem leads the hero back through centuries. First, he discovers one part of the immortal poem (*khamasa*) of the Persian poet *Fuzuli*. He follows the trace and goes to places where some very interesting people can continue that lost *khamasa*. Nobody knows the whole text, just one part of it. Finally, when he manages to collect his puzzle, he finds out that the original *khamasa* was written by the great Azerbaijani romantic epic poet Nezami Ganjavi. Between the *khamasas* of Nerval and Nezami there is a period of almost half a millennium. The retrospective time through which the hero goes forms a parallel dimension of the story.

In a seductive way Miomir Petrović has managed to show the old Persian literature and how it has been developed and passed on. In particular, he stressed the key role of Nezami's work in that chain. As we learn from other sources, *the influence of Nezami's work on the subsequent development of Persian literature has been enormous and the Khamasa became a pattern that was emulated in later Persian poetry (and also in other Islamic literature)*.¹⁵ Nezami is a poet whose fame is constantly rising. He inspired some of the greatest artists of the world. Johann Wolfgang von Goethe has given a lovely compliment to the poet, saying that he was *a gentle, highly gifted spirit*.¹⁶ Peter Chelkowski admired him, Eric Clapton provided the namesake for a hit single called *Layla* (inspired by Nezami's *Story of Layla and Majnun*), and even one planet was named for him.

Great dramatic tension throughout the novel creates a question of whether the hero will be able to grasp the end of his song. At a time when it seems he has come to a deadlock, suddenly and without any cause a solution emerges and takes the hero to the one who has a solution and who gives him a clue for a further search. In the middle of the Iranian desert, the hero meets a fisherman who knows the great Persian poetry. This seemingly simple man reveals strong belief in the written word. He mentions Baku – the capital of Azerbaijan where he once bought a valuable book of wonderful Amir Hosro. He considers Baku to be a main cultural center of the region. Some dervish asked him for that valuable book; otherwise, he threatened to curse his seed. The hero eventually managed to reach that dervish after all the physical hazards. At the end, it turns out that he is the key person who can help him, because he has the only *copy of the Nezami khamas anthology in*

¹⁴ Petrović, Mimir: *Persian mirror; novel arabesque*, Belgrade, Geopoetika, 2001. str. 64

¹⁵ From Wikipedia: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Nezami_Ganjavi

¹⁶ From Wikipedia: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Nezami_Ganjavi

Masnavi style.¹⁷ Here the circle closes, and everything points to Azerbaijan as the origin of the mysterious verses. The hero never literally entered into the land of Azerbaijan. However, it turned out that this country from the very beginning had a major role in the clarification of the riddle.

Using a comparative method, we wanted to show in which way Azerbaijan as a literary motif inspired two representative Serbian writers who belong to different epochs. First we analyzed realistic travelogue from 1948, then the postmodern novel from 2001. Despite the different literary forms, styles and approaches of these two excellent writers, we may conclude that both Miomir Petrović and Ivo Andrić have created a wonderful literary monument of Azerbaijan in Serbian literature.

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Source on the Internet:

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Summary

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Using a comparative method, the author of this paper intends to show Azerbaijan as a literary motif that inspired two representative Serbian writers. Both used different literary forms, opposite styles and belonged to different epochs. Ivo Andrić, Serbian Nobel Prize Winner, wrote the poetic travel writing *From my trip through Azerbaijan* (Literary Gazette, 1948). With great admiration he describes a celebration of the 800th anniversary of the birth of a great Azerbaijani poet Nezami Ganjavi, customs and virtues of the people who live there, their culture and rich literary tradition. Miomir Petrovic, one of the foremost writers of the younger generation, published the novel *Persian Mirror* (subheading: novel-arabesque) in 2001. This novel has a complex structure with several genres exploited simultaneously, all imbued with lyrical intensity. Through a metaphysical adventure in the Middle East and the Caucasus, the hero of this novel finds the immortal verses of Nezami Ganjavi, whose poem *Khusraw o Shirin* gives answers to all his questions. The Azerbaijani cities of Baku and Ganja are key poetic toponyms in his quest.

KeyWords: Azerbaijan, Nezami Ganjavi, Ivo Andrić, Miomir Petrović, comparative method, travel writing, novel