

THE IMPACT OF ISLAMIC CONQUESTS ON AZERBAIJANI LITERATURE: TRANSFORMATIONS AND FATE

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Abstract. The Islamic conquests of the 7th century AD marked a radical turning point in the history of the Caucasus region and Azerbaijan in particular. These conquests were not just a passing political and geographical change, but a profound cultural and social event, which left its clear imprint on various aspects of life and Azerbaijani literature had the lion's share of this influence. This expanded essay aims to explore the overall impact of Islamic conquests on Azerbaijani literature, with a particular focus on the profound transformations that have taken place and the outcomes of this literature in the context of interaction with Islamic civilization. In this article, we will follow the course of Azerbaijani literature before the Islamic conquests, trying to clarify its features and characteristics and then move on to a detailed analysis of the transformations it witnessed in the aftermath of these conquests, both at the level of language, form and content, to the results of these transformations and how they affected the subsequent march of Azerbaijani literature, all the way to the modern era.

Keywords: *Islamic conquests, literary transformations, Arabic language influence, Azerbaijani literature, Azerbaijani language identity.*

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1. Introduction

The arrival of Islam in the 7th century CE profoundly reshaped the cultural landscape of the Caucasus and Azerbaijan was no exception. This article delves into the transformative effects of the Islamic conquests on Azerbaijani literature. It examines the pre-Islamic literary traditions, the initial impact of the conquests, the subsequent flourishing of Azerbaijani literature within the broader Islamic world and the long-term consequences of this cultural encounter. The discussion highlights the interplay between indigenous traditions and the influence of Arabic and Persian literary forms, ultimately shaping a unique Azerbaijani literary identity.

2. Azerbaijani Literature before the Islamic Conquests

To understand the radical transformations brought about by the Islamic conquests, it is crucial to explore the characteristics of Azerbaijani literature prior to this period. Historical, archaeological and anthropological studies suggest the existence of rich oral literary traditions in pre-Islamic Azerbaijan, reflecting the beliefs, customs and traditions of the local population. However, researchers face challenges in accurately determining the nature of this literature due to the scarcity of written sources from that era, especially in Arabic.

Despite these difficulties, some general characteristics can be deduced through comparative anthropological and historical studies and scattered references in later Arabic sources. Pre-Islamic Azerbaijani oral literature likely encompassed diverse forms:

- **Founding Myths:** Stories explaining the origins of the people and their land.
- **Fairy Tales and Realism:** Narratives blending fantastical elements with observations of daily life.
- **Ritual and Ceremonial Songs:** Songs associated with religious practices and social events.
- **Traditional Folk Proverbs and Verdicts:** Wisdom sayings passed down through generations.
- **Epic Poems:** Narratives celebrating heroic deeds and significant historical events.

These oral forms were closely tied to pagan and natural beliefs prevalent in the region, which revered the forces of nature and believed in multiple spirits and gods. They also reflected the social and economic life of local communities. The language used was likely one of the original Caucasian languages or a combination influenced by ancient Iranian languages, due to Azerbaijan's geostrategic location and the cultural and political influences of successive Iranian empires (such as the Achaemenid, Parthian and Sassanid Empires) (Al-Balazhari, 1901; Al-Tabari, 1967). Al-Balazhari, in "Futuh al-Buldan" (The Conquest of Countries), mentions the resistance of Azerbaijanis to Islamic conquest, potentially reflecting their adherence to their cultural identity and literary traditions.

It's important to note that Azerbaijan was part of the Caucasian Christian Kingdom of Albania, which converted to Christianity in the 4th century AD. Christian literature may have had a limited influence, especially in urban areas and religious centers, but popular oral literature likely remained dominant, expressing the culture and identity of the people. This oral literature can be conceived as a mixture of pagan and Christian elements, with a clear predominance of popular pagan elements. In general Azerbaijani literature before the Islamic conquests was a local oral literature, reflecting the local culture and beliefs rooted in history, characterized by diversity, orality and sincere expression of the daily life of Azerbaijani communities, with possible influences from neighboring cultures, especially Iranian and Christian (Lang, 1959). Minorsky, in his book "A History of Sharvan and Darband", emphasizes the importance of oral traditions in the Caucasus and the need to study them to understand the region's cultural history.

3. Islamic Conquests and Their Initial Impact on Azerbaijani Literature

The Islamic conquests of Azerbaijan began in the mid-7th century AD, during the reign of Caliph Uthman ibn Affan and continued during the Umayyad and Abbasid caliphates. These conquests were not merely political and administrative changes, but a profound cultural and social event, causing a significant shift in the cultural structure of Azerbaijani society and greatly affecting the lives of the local population, including the literary field.

The most direct impact was the spread of the Arabic language. Arabic quickly became the language of the new religion, the central administration of the nascent Islamic state and of education and high culture. The local population gradually began to learn Arabic, whether to engage with the new administration, understand the spreading religion or acquire a social and cultural position. With increasing conversion to Islam, the importance of Arabic as a sacred language and the language of understanding religious texts grew.

This linguistic and religious shift had a tremendous impact on literature. Arabic gradually infiltrated local oral literature, initially through borrowing religious and administrative vocabulary and later through adopting Arabic methods and expressions. Literary writings in Arabic by individuals of Azerbaijani origin or by Arab writers who settled in Azerbaijan, began to appear (Ibn Khaldun, 1981). Ibn Khaldun (1988), in his “Muqaddimah”, highlights the importance of Arabic as a universal civilizational language in the middle ages and its role in transferring knowledge and science.

The Islamic conquests also brought a rich set of new concepts, values and ideas derived from Islam and Arab-Islamic civilization. The teachings of Islam, stories of prophets and righteous individuals, the ethics of the new religion and the diverse Arab-Islamic literary heritage (poetry, prose, stories, wisdom) spread. Local oral literature began to be influenced by these new concepts. Sufism emerged in Azerbaijan, profoundly impacting the lives of the people. New folk tales and stories inspired by Islamic heritage, such as those found in *One Thousand and One Nights*, tales of Islamic heroism and stories of saints, began to emerge. Early attempts to translate Arabic religious and literary texts into local languages or to reformulate Arabic stories to align with local culture, also appeared. Al-Hamawi (1993), in his “Mu'jam al-Udaba” (Dictionary of Writers), mentions many writers and poets who grew up in conquered areas and contributed to Arabic literature.

At this early stage, the initial impact was constitutive and transformative. Arabic began to spread, Islamic concepts influenced local oral literature and signs of literature written in Arabic emerged, albeit initially limited. Azerbaijani literature written in the Azerbaijani language had not yet emerged clearly and independently and oral literature remained dominant, though influenced by Islamic and Arabic culture. This phase was the seed of change that would later yield profound transformations.

4. Transformations of Azerbaijani Literature in the Islamic Middle Ages: The Age of Prosperity and Cultural Cross-fertilization

The Islamic Middle Ages (9th-15th centuries AD) witnessed profound transformations in Azerbaijani literature, marking an era of cultural flourishing and cross-fertilization. Arabic established itself as a language of science, literature and thought and Islamic influence deepened. New literary forms appeared, new literary content reflecting Islamic values developed and Azerbaijani writers excelled in Arabic and Persian, leaving clear marks on Arabic, Islamic and even world literature.

First: Linguistic and Literary Transformations: The Strong Presence of Arabic

- **Emergence and Flourishing of Literature Written in Arabic:** Azerbaijani writers emerged who wrote in Arabic, excelling in various literary arts such as poetry (praise, lamentation, love poetry, satire, description), artistic prose (Maqamat, letters, sermons), history, geography and religious sciences (interpretation, hadith, jurisprudence, Sufism). Prominent examples include:

- **Abu al-Faraj al-Isfahani** (4th century AH): Author of *Kitab al-Aghani* (The Book of Songs), a vast literary encyclopedia considered one of the most important sources of Arabic literature and socio-cultural history in the Middle Ages. While not directly of Azerbaijani origin (Isfahani origins), he lived for a long time in the region, collecting literary and historical material related to Azerbaijan and the Caucasus.

○ **Al-Khatib al-Tabrizi** (5th century AH): A linguist, writer and great poet, famous for his detailed explanations of the works of ancient poets, such as the *Diwan* of Mutanabbi and the *Diwan* of Hamasa by Abu Tammam. Al-Khatib al-Tabrizi had a great influence on literary and critical studies in the Islamic world.

○ **Qatran Tabrizi** (5th century AH): Considered one of the first poets to write in Persian in Azerbaijan and the founder of the Azerbaijani poetic school in the Persian language. Although written in Persian, it represents an important part of the literary history of Azerbaijan.

• **Profound Impact of the Arabic Language on the Azeri Language:** The Azeri language was deeply influenced by Arabic, with vast numbers of Arabic words and terms entering it, especially in the fields of religion (e.g., *prayer, zakat, pilgrimage, Quran, Hadith, mosque, imam*), literature (e.g., *poetry, prose, rhyme, meter, rhetoric, eloquence*), science (e.g., *science, knowledge, philosophy, logic, engineering, medicine*), philosophy (e.g., *mind, existence, essence, substance, accident*) and administration (e.g., *minister, sultan, judge, court, law*). Azeri grammar and phonology were also influenced, though less pronouncedly than the lexical influence. This linguistic influence had a lasting impact on Azerbaijani literature written in Azeri later on. “When the Arabs entered Azerbaijan, they found that the predominant language is the Pahlavi language as the primary language... That the Persian state has witnessed and has taken in some sciences about the Pahlavi language” (Al-Balazari, 1901).

• **Adoption of the Arabic Alphabet for Writing in Azeri:** At a later stage, Azeri adopted the Arabic alphabet, replacing the old local alphabets. This Arabic alphabet was used for centuries, until the 20th century, when it was replaced by the Latin alphabet, then the Cyrillic alphabet during the Soviet era and then returned to the Latin alphabet after independence. This adoption facilitated writing and publishing in Azeri and linked it to the Arabic and Islamic literary heritage. In the era of the Rashidun caliphs, the keenness to spread the Arabic language came from the highest hierarchical level of authority. From the first day of the conquest of Azerbaijan, Omar ibn al-Khattab was keen to spread Islam and the Arabic language” (Al-Balazari, 1901). The Pahlavi language was the predominant language before Islam, but after the Islamic conquest, there was a keenness to spread Arabic as a language of religion, administration and science, which led to its spread and influence in literature.

Second: Islamic Contents and New Literary Forms

• **Emergence of Dominant Islamic Themes and Values in Literature:** Azerbaijani literature increasingly reflected Islamic themes and values. Prophetic poems and praises (the prophetic adjective), religious stories inspired by the Holy Qur'an, the Sunnah of the Prophet, the stories of the prophets (the Qur'anic stories and the stories of the prophets) and compositions in Sufism and Islamic ethics (Sufi literature and moral literature) have appeared. Qur'anic stories and the stories of the prophets became an integral part of popular literature, adapted to the local culture and literary taste of Azerbaijani society. New literary forms focusing on Islamic values have also emerged, such as didactic poetry aimed at teaching the principles of religion and ethics and sermons and sermons aimed at guidance.

• **Deep Influence of Arabic and Persian Literature: Cross-fertilization of Styles and Forms:** Azerbaijani literature was greatly influenced by Arabic and Persian literature, the two main literatures of the medieval Islamic world. Literary forms such as the *qasida* (poem, in its various genres), the *maqama* (a prose art based on anecdote and humor), the *ghazal* (lyrical poetry) and the *novel* (in its broad anecdotal sense in classical

literature) were inspired, adapted to Azeri language and culture and localized. Many Arabic and Persian literary works were translated into Azerbaijani, enriching Azerbaijani literature and expanding writers' literary horizons. Influences of Arabic literature appeared in Azerbaijani poetry in terms of meters, rhymes and rhetorical images and in prose in terms of styles and compositions. Azerbaijani literature was also influenced by literary trends in Persian literature, such as mysticism, epic poetry and romantic epics.

• **Emergence of Sufism as an Influential Literary and Intellectual Current:**

Sufism spread as a widespread intellectual and spiritual current in medieval Azerbaijan and had a profound influence on literature. Major Azerbaijani mystic poets appeared who wrote Sufi poems in Azeri, Persian and Arabic, expressing their spiritual experiences, divine love and quest for truth. Sufism became an important literary current and its influence lasted until modern times. Prominent Azerbaijani mystics with literary imprints include Yunus Emre (though also considered Turkish, he has roots in and influence on the region) and other local Sufi poets.

Third: The Dawn of Azerbaijani Literature in the Azerbaijani Language: Towards an Independent Literary Identity

Despite the dominance of Arabic and Persian literature, the Azeri language did not disappear. It continued to develop as a living language of daily communication and popular expression. Signs of literature written in Azeri began to emerge, albeit still limited compared to Arabic and Persian literature. Notable examples include:

• **Kitab-i Dede Korkut:** This unique Azeri epic is one of the oldest and most important written Azerbaijani literary works. Its exact date of authorship is debated, but the prevalent view dates it to the Islamic Middle Ages, likely the 11th-13th centuries CE. Combining elements of ancient oral literature with elements of Islamic belief, it represents a unique blend of Turkish, Azeri and Islamic values. It reflects the life of the Oghuz Turkish Bedouins, their struggles, wars and heroic values and includes clear Islamic elements. It is conclusive evidence of the persistence and development of the Azeri language in Islamic times.

• **Poems of Some Azerbaijani Poets in the Azerbaijani Language:** Some historical and literary sources indicate the existence of Azerbaijani poets who wrote in Azeri in the Middle Ages, although their works have not reached us fully. These references suggest that the Azerbaijani language was used in literary writing, albeit in a limited form initially and that there were attempts to create written, independent Azerbaijani literature. These poems might have been in the form of folk songs, short poems or prose passages.

The Fate of Literary Transitions in Later Ages: Continuing Influence and Diversity of Tracks

The literary transformations of medieval Islamic Azerbaijani literature left profound and lasting effects, shaping its main features until modern times. Key outcomes include:

• **Establishing Well-Established Azerbaijani-Islamic Literary Traditions:** The Islamic conquests and subsequent transformations led to the establishment of well-established Azerbaijani-Islamic literary traditions, blending Azeri, Islamic, Arab and Persian elements. Azerbaijani literature became a vital part of wider Islamic literature, while retaining its distinct local characteristics.

• **Flourishing and Brilliance of Azerbaijani Literature in Later Eras (Safavid and Ottoman Eras):** In the later Middle Ages, especially the Safavid (16th-18th centuries CE) and Ottoman (16th-20th centuries CE) eras, Azerbaijani literature

witnessed a great flowering, considered its golden age. Major Azerbaijani poets and writers emerged, including:

- **Fuzuli al-Baghdadi** (10th century AH / 16th century AD): Considered one of the greatest poets of Azeri, Persian and Arabic, he left a vast *diwan* in all three languages, characterized by philosophical depth, artistic beauty and emotional expression. Fuzuli is considered the pinnacle of Azerbaijani classical literature.

- **Mohammed Fuzuli** (10th century AH / 16th century AD): Another Azerbaijani poet of the same name (known as “Little Fuzuli” to distinguish him from the great Fuzuli of Baghdad). He was a prolific poet in various genres in Azeri.

- **Molla Panah Vagif** (12th century AH / 18th century AD): A pioneer of modern Azerbaijani literature, he contributed to developing the Azerbaijani literary language, renewing poetry styles and approaching the popular language. Vagif is a link between classical and modern literature.

- **Khurshidbanu Natavan** (13th Century Hijri / 19th century AD): A prominent 19th-century Azerbaijani poet. She wrote delicate and passionate poems in Azerbaijani and was known as “Khan Qayzi” (daughter of the Khan).

This literary flourishing would not have been possible without the transformations of medieval Islamic Azerbaijani literature.

- **Persistence of Profound Islamic Influence in Modern and Contemporary Azerbaijani Literature:** Despite significant political, social and cultural changes in Azerbaijan, including Russian occupation and the Soviet era, Islamic influence remained strongly present in literature. Modern and contemporary writers continue to draw inspiration from the Islamic heritage and express Islamic values in their works, directly or indirectly. Arabic language and literary heritage remain an important part of Azerbaijani literary culture. Even during Soviet rule, some literary works expressing Islamic identity appeared symbolically. After independence, Islamic influence reappeared more clearly.

- **Diversity and Multiculturalism of Azerbaijani Literature: Outcome of Historical Interactions:** As a result of the complex historical and cultural transformations, Azerbaijani literature became diverse and pluralistic in its forms, contents and trends, combining authentic Azerbaijani local elements, Islamic, Arab and Persian elements and modern Turkish, Russian and European influences. This diversity represents the richness and strength of Azerbaijani literature.

5. Conclusion

In conclusion, the Islamic conquests had a profound, radical and comprehensive impact on Azerbaijani literature, extending beyond changes in language and literary forms to fundamental transformations in content, themes and values. These transformations led to the establishment of rich and diverse Azerbaijani-Islamic literary traditions, the flourishing of Azerbaijani literature in later eras and the continued Islamic influence in modern and contemporary Azerbaijani literature. Understanding the impact of Islamic conquests is essential not only for understanding the history of Azerbaijani literature but also for appreciating its richness and diversity, its importance in the Islamic and world literary context and the complex cultural identity of Azerbaijan.

Key findings include:

- **Replacement of Azerbaijani Script with Arabic Script:** Islam contributed to the spread of Arabic script, replacing the old Azerbaijani script.

- **Spread of the Arabic Language:** Arabic gained a prominent place in Azerbaijan as a language of science, literature and culture, becoming an official language in the early Islamic ages.

- **Emergence of Religious Literature:** New types of literature of a religious nature emerged, such as religious poetry and prose.

- **Influence of Islamic Concepts and Values:** Azerbaijani literature was influenced by Islamic concepts and values, leading to new themes such as asceticism, piety and mysticism.

- **Prosperity of Translation and Transmission:** Azerbaijan witnessed an active movement to translate Islamic science and knowledge into the Azerbaijani language.

- **Role of Muslim Scholars and Intellectuals:** Muslim scholars and jurists played an important role in disseminating science and literature.

- **Mixing of Literary Heritages:** A mixing of Azerbaijani and Islamic literary heritages occurred, producing a unique literature.

- **Emergence of Distinguished Poets and Writers:** Distinguished Muslim poets and writers emerged in Azerbaijan, making valuable contributions to Arab, Islamic and Azerbaijani literature.

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