

## Ivan Bunin and the Theme of the Orient

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### Abstract

*The aim of the research is studying I. A. Bunin's prose and lyric poetry, created under the influence of the oriental travels in the period of 1903-1909. Based on the analysis of Bunin's oriental poems, the author identifies dominant themes, motifs, images, perspectives, basic ideas. The author reveals the influence of the Quran on Bunin's poetry, characterizes the image of the East. Basing on the analysis of texts the author of the article proves that Bunin created a syncretic, complex in its concept the image of the East. Conceptually important is the depiction of the East as a united spiritual community. Not the differences, dividing countries and peoples, but origins, uniting them are important for Bunin.*

**Keywords:** I. A. Bunin, oriental journeys, lyrics, poetry, Quran, image of the East

### 1.0. Introduction

Ivan Bunin, in full Ivan Alekseyevich Bunin, born in 1870 in Voronezh, Russia and died in 1953 in Paris, France, was a poet and novelist, the first Russian to receive the Nobel Prize for Literature (1933), and one of the finest of Russian stylists.

Bunin, the descendant of an old noble family, spent his childhood and youth in the Russian provinces. He attended secondary school in Yelets, in western Russia, but did not graduate; his older brother subsequently tutored him. Bunin began publishing poems and short stories in 1887, and in 1889–1892 he worked for the newspaper “The Orlovsky Herald”. His first book, “Poetry: 1887–1891”, appeared in 1891 as a supplement to that newspaper. In the mid-1890s he was strongly drawn to the ideas of the novelist Leo Tolstoy, whom he met in person. During this period Bunin gradually entered the Moscow and St. Petersburg literary scenes, including the growing Symbolist movement. Bunin’s “Falling Leaves”, a book of poetry, testifies to his association with the Symbolists, primarily Valery Bryusov. However, Bunin’s work had more in common with the traditions of classical Russian literature of the 19th century, of which his older contemporaries Tolstoy and Anton Chekhov were models.

By the beginning of the 20th century, Bunin had become one of Russia’s most popular writers. His sketches and stories “Antonov Apples”, “Grammar of Love”, “Light Breathing”, “The Dreams of Chang”, “Dry Valley”, “The Village”, and “The Gentleman from San Francisco” show Bunin’s penchant for extreme precision of language, delicate description of nature, detailed psychological analysis, and masterly control of plot. While his democratic views gave rise to criticism in Russia, they did not turn him into a politically engaged writer. Bunin also believed that change was inevitable in Russian life. His urge to keep his independence is evident in his break with the writer Maxim Gorky and other old friends after the Russian Revolution of 1917, which he perceived as the triumph of the basest side of the Russian people.

Bunin’s articles and diaries of 1917–1920 are a record of Russian life during its years of terror. In May 1918 he left Moscow and settled in Odessa (now in Ukraine), and at the beginning of 1920 he emigrated first to Constantinople (now Istanbul) and then to France, where he lived for the rest of his life. There he became one of the most famous Russian émigré writers. His stories, the novella “Mitya’s Love”, and the autobiographical novel “The Life of Arsenev”—which Bunin began writing during the 1920s and of which he published parts in the 1930s and 1950s—were recognized by critics and Russian readers abroad as testimony of the independence of Russian émigré culture.

Bunin lived in the south of France during World War II, refusing all contact with the Nazis and hiding Jews in his villa. “Dark Avenues, and Other Stories”, a book of short stories, was one of his last great works. After the end of the war, Bunin was invited to return to Russia, but he remained in France. “Memories and Portraits”, which appeared in 1950. An unfinished book, “About Chekhov: The Unfinished Symphony”, was published posthumously. Bunin was one of the first Russian émigré writers whose works were published in Russia after 1950s.

### 2.0. Bunin and the Orient

In Russian literature, the Orient (East) for the first time was mentioned in an artistic language in fifteenth century (A. Nikitin). In the second half of the nineteenth century in Russia began to appear multi-translations (North European languages) of Indian, Arabic, Chinese and other printed literatures, published in numerous print runs Buddhist texts, Quran, religious works and other books of the East. However, Oriental people of the East for many centuries have been regarded as exotica that has been admired.

Europe knowledge of the traditions of the East was refracted through the European "non-European" - an alien, incomprehensible culture. Perfect in a special way was interested in non-European cultures I.A. Bunin.

The creativity of I. A. Bunin of the 1900-1910s was greatly influenced by his oriental travels and "organic, hereditary", according to A. Gorky, "gravitation towards the East". Note that the concept of "East" in Bunin's work includes traditional for Russia and rather large content: these are the countries of the Near and Middle East (Judea, Palestine, Arabia, Turkey, Iran), North Africa (Egypt, Tunisia, Abyssinia), Far East and South Asia (India, Ceylon, Japan, China). In addition, due to the special geographical position of Russia, which combines the territories of the East and the West, the regions of the Crimea, the Caucasus and Central Asia were also referred to in the literature as the countries of the East, and, consequently, the topic of the East.

In 1903, Bunin made his first trip to Turkey, in 1907-1909 he traveled to the countries of the Muslim and Christian East, having visited Turkey, Egypt, Judea, Palestine, Syria, Djibouti, Algeria, Tunisia, Lebanon, Sudan; in 1911 he visited Ceylon. Trips to India and Japan were also planned, which were not realized, as follows from the letters of Bunin, due to illness and lack of funds. As noted by V. N. Muromtseva-Bunina, "repeated trips to the countries of Europe and the East widely spread the world before his (Bunina - T.K.) gaze" [6. P. 289], contributed to the enrichment of his work. Bunin himself more than once wrote about the meaning of travel in his life: "I, as Saadi said, "tried to see the face of the world and leave the stamp of my soul in it" [1. T. 4. S. 544]; "Every journey changes a person very much"; "As for wanderings in general, I ... have developed ... even a certain philosophy. I do not know anything better than traveling, "the writer said in an interview with 1912. However, cautioning against a superficial understanding of his wanderings, Bunin explained that, first of all, he was "occupied with philosophical, religious, moral, historical issues" [1. T. 3. S. 656].

Preparing for trips to the East, the writer seriously studied the Bible, the Koran, the canonical books of Buddhism, got acquainted with ancient Egyptian, Chaldean, Iranian myths, Syrian legends, read the books "The Holy Land" by Olesnitsky, "The History of Baalbek" by Tischendorf, "The Ancient History of the East" by Maspero.

Trips to eastern countries left a huge mark in Bunin's soul and in his work. The image of the East arises in many works of the writer. In this series - a series of "travel poems" "Shadow of the Bird", the stories "Brothers", "Dreams of Chang", "Temir-Aksak-Khan", "Death of the Prophet", "Compatriot", "In the country of ancestors", "Gotami", "The Night of Renunciation", "The City of the King of Kings" and many poems of 1900-1916. Letters, diaries, interviews, artworks of Bunin, memoirs of V.N. Muromtseva-Bunina indicate that the writer had great interest in the cultures and religious systems of the East - aesthetic, scientific and philosophical-worldview. This is evidenced by the recognition of I. A. Bunin himself: "The East is the kingdom of the Sun. The future belongs to the East" [1, T. 3. P. 484]. In an interview with the correspondent of the Odessa Leaf (March 2, 1910), he emphasized: "I generally love the East and the Eastern religion" [4. S. 363].

### **3.0. The Orient in Bunin's Lyrics**

Impressed by travels to the East, Bunin creates 262 oriental poems. The "eastern geography" of Bunin's artistic world-space is wide: from the shores of the Terek and Crimean steppes to Palestine, Judea, Syria, Turkey, Egypt, Algeria, Ceylon. In many of his poems, the Russian poet directly refers to the history, mythology, religion and philosophy of the Near, Middle and Far East, Southeast Asia. The body of oriental verses of Bunin can be divided into several problem-thematic groups. In a number of poems, Bunin paints pictures of nature ("In the Crimean Steppes", "Jasmine", "Towards the East", "Mountainside", "Indian Ocean"), modern or historical life of the countries of the East ("Istanbul", "Ra-Osiris, the lord of the day and the light...", "Cairo", "Ceylon").

In Bunin's landscape poems dedicated to oriental nature, as a rule, romantic traditions with a vivid romantic imagery prevail: "in the azure bright - unearthly / Splendor of peaks" [1. T. 1. S. 138], "cypress mages blacken" [1. T. 1. S. 146], "only shines with a crimson robe / The altar of alla - Shater-Gora" [1. T. 1. P. 138], "mysterious mountain peaks" flickering with "eternal snows". Results and discussion So, for example, in the poem "Slope of the mountains" painted a beautiful night landscape that opens from a mountain height. Bunin creates a fabulous image of the world, filled with harmony, peace and beauty of eternal nature:

The slope of the mountains, gardens and the minaret. Cypresses tend to the stars. The sea is sleeping. Warm moonlight Gilded hills and capes. And motionlessly the night sits above the quiet sea: She has leaned on her knee, - looks At the boulders where the foam melts [1. T. 1. S. 146]. A series of poems in the cycle are paintings of famous cultural monuments

(Hagia Sophia, Temple of the Sun) and transcriptions of texts of Eastern myths, legends and traditions (Hormuzd, Flood, Elburs, Beyond the Sepulcher).

Bunin's poetry amazes with the author's knowledge of history, culture, lifestyle, the realities of the East, the sharp-sighted details in landscape sketches, and a rich "oriental" dictionary. In his works, Bunin used words from Eastern languages (Arabic, Persian, Turkish), transmitting them as accurately as possible using the method of transliteration.

"Monuments of the ancient East, its land itself appear in the works of Bunin as an "open book of Genesis." Historical and cultural signs of the past, existing in the present, serve as an occasion for the author to philosophical reflection" [2. S. 37]. In every eastern culture, Bunin strove to find values testifying to the aspiration of the people to higher, bright principles. In pagan cultures, these principles were portrayed with the help of symbolic images of the Sun, the eternal Light. So, in the poem "Elburs" Bunin conveys the ancient Iranian myth about this mountain, located in northern Iran off the southern coast of the Caspian Sea. Describing Elburs, Bunin creates a poetic image of the sacred mountain - the "crown of the earth", to which only angels - the Iazats, can access. "The Iazats, or Iyazats, among the ancient Indians and Iranians have bright spirits, the main one being Mithra, the deity of light, purity and truth" [1. T. 1. S. 596]. Iazats in Iranian mythology are also perceived as synonymous with the ruler of the universe, God. In Persian, Jazit (Jazat) means not an angel, but God, this is one of the names of God. Sunrise is described through the luminiferous Iranian mythological image of Mithra, the deity of light, purity and truth, "whose holy name / blesses the whole earth." Miter "shines with a gold-plated robe, / And looks from the heights / The sources of rivers, the sands of Iran / And the mountains are undulating ridges." This is "an ancient Iranian mythological character associated with the idea of a treaty, and also acting as the god of the sun. <...> Mithra is the organizer of not only social, but also natural space. It is connected with waters, with the sun, it is the owner of wide pastures and a filler of waters, thanks to it it rains and plants grow" [8].

The worship of the Light is especially vividly depicted in the poem "Hormuzd", dedicated to the Zoroastrian god of fire, light and justice, in which Bunin talks about the ideas of ancient fire worshipers. Hormuzd is the "Greek form named after Ahuramazda, the highest deity of fire worshipers," [1. T. 1. S. 597-598] in antiquity and in the early Middle Ages who lived in Iran, Central Asia, Afghanistan and other countries of the Near and Middle East. "According to their ideas, Ormuzd is the source of all good that arose from the purest light" [1. T. 1. S. 597-598]. It is characteristic that in the poem "Ormuzd" Bunin writes the words "Fire", "Light", "Darkness", "Day" with a capital letter, giving them a symbolic meaning. "No altars, no idols, No dark temples. The world is dressed In the veils of darkness and fog: Adore only Light. The Lord of Light is all in one - In the fight against Darkness. And therefore, light the Lights on top: Hate only Darkness" [1. T. 1. S. 167].

#### **4.0. Bunin and the Global**

This article not only gives an overview of philosophic issues of the Oriental identity in the creative work of the famous Russian poet and writer Ivan Bunin, but also investigates the phenomenon of the «Russian soul constant» in the context of his works, the determination of the aspects of «Russianness» of the genre and style peculiarities of his prose and poetry, as well as Bunin's creative style in general.

The reflection of nature accompanied by sounding silence is the most typical feature of Ivan Bunin's poetry. The human in Bunin's works is a vessel for the reflection of the nature, the organ of its thought and emotional experience. It is the world of nature the images of which occupy 74 % of all artistic descriptions by Bunin and for him it is the world of the highest harmony of the existence.

Another typically Russian aspect of Ivan Bunin's work is his sinaesthetics. Bunin's texts, especially poetry, are first of all very picturesque. It may be said that it is the poetry of thousands of colours, but colours strictly selected and philosophically encoded. The picturesqueness of Bunin's poetry and prose does not have analogues in the Russian literature: at the average use of 70-90 colours formations for 10 thousand words in a text, Bunin uses 190 colours.

At the same time the colourful luxury of Bunin's language according to Vladimir Nabokov is achieved, first of all, by its tone-painting, rhythm, laconism and the highest density of the verse. Letting the impressions through the prism of his concept, the master creates an integral image of heightened life, aims at painting its intensity of emotions, at reaching the superb degree of existence. The framework of the writer's philosophic thought is the entirety of existence. This framework includes all his poetry, plots, motifs, stories. Everything is connected with everything, everything is mutually penetrating, everything has its meaning only in respect to the whole. It is not only ancient logics of the mythocosmos typical for Russian philosophers and writers of various epochs, but also the courage of the thinker to operate with such notions as «eternity», «cosmos», «life» and «death». Love of a man and a woman obsessed with life and charmed with death, is eternal, tragic and mysterious in Bunin's work. His contemporaries used to note «repetitions» and imitation in Bunin's works.

Yu. M. Lotman opened a new era in Bunin's studies by speaking about Bunin's modernist desire to «rewrite» the Russian literature in its art samples. Bunin is a realist only in artistic manner, although it is among the writers-realists of the 19th

century, where he felt at ease. But his everyday life description is anti-natural, selective and symbolic. And in this anti-realist everyday life description Bunin was absolutely original. Another aspect of the «Russianness» artistic concept of Bunin is the memory. It becomes the crossroads of all the motifs of his work. Bunin himself expresses the essence of his work in words which at most cover the verges of life «heightened by art»: «We live by all that, by what we live, only to the extent at which we understand the price of that by what we live. Usually this price is very low: it rises only in the moments of excitement – excitement of happiness or unhappiness, vivid consciousness of the acquisition or loss, and in moments of poetic transfiguration of the past into memory». These and other existential, reason-for-being questions tired pragmatic Western thinkers and especially the European masters of arts of the 19th -20th centuries. For the natural-contemplating harmony of the Oriental civilizations such questions were too straightforward and «humanized». Answers to them the Russian culture gave. And these answers were secretly-mysterious, spiritual-pagan, light sad, tragic majeure. Perhaps these are the questions and the answers of the borderland of civilizations.

### 5.0. Discussion of Results

For Bunin, the East is the ancestral home of all mankind, the place of origin of monotheism religions: Judaism, Christianity, Islam. Therefore, most of Bunin's eastern poems are devoted to philosophical and religious issues. As a rule, such poems represent an arrangement of the texts of the sacred books of the peoples of the East: the Bible and the Koran - and the expression of the philosophical reflections of the author caused by them, comprehension of the religious and moral experience of the eastern peoples ("Day of Wrath. Apocalypse VI", "Abraham", "From the Apocalypse", "Pillar of Fire", "Torah", "Dream. From the Book of the Prophet Daniel", "Son of Man. Apocalypse I", "Pillar of Fire"; "Carpet", "Black Stone of the Kaaba", "For Treason", "Secret", "Tamjid", "Guiding Signs", "Tomb of Safia"). "The image of the East as a single spiritual community formed by Judea, Palestine of Christ and the Muslim East appears to be conceptually significant. Not differences separating countries and peoples are important for Bunin, but uniting principles" [3. S. 54].

In poems of Christian and Muslim themes, Bunin draws a generally religious basis for a religious sense of recognition by God as the highest principle in the world. "Truly worthy of perception are You, Lord, praise, and honor, and strength, Then that everything is Created by You, and exists by Your will!" [1. T. 1. S. 106] - this is the recognition-prayer in Bunin's poem "From the Apocalypse."

Recreating the Old Testament paintings in the poem "Pillar of Fire", Bunin shows that it was faith in God and His help that saved the Jewish people, wandering in the "hot desert." According to the Bible, at the exodus of the Jews from Egypt, where they were in slavery, the path in the desert showed them a pillar of fog during the day, and a pillar of fire at night: "And with flame to the promised land / Yahweh tells us the way!" [1. T. 1. S. 182].

In the poem "Guiding Signs" with an epigraph from the Koran "He puts guiding signs", Allah shows the way to night pilgrims, lights for them the lights - "holy stars of the Dog".

God revived the path through the sands from Gaza to Arim with signs, like before. Hello to you, the stones are the rosary of the pilgrim, In the desert, leading Hagar! [1. T. 1. S. 188].

As R. S. Spivak correctly notes, "Biblical and Quranic plots and parables in the Bunin interpretation are not the complement illustrating the Bible, but organic links in the development of the lyric-philosophical thought of the author about the life of mankind and the individual person" [7. S. 137]. Synthesizing the experience of religious cultures of the peoples of the East, comparing their answers to "eternal questions", Bunin looked for truths common to all mankind. In his eastern poems, Bunin strove to penetrate the very core of a different culture and at the same time find eternal beginnings uniting the peoples of different countries. Thanks to the penetration into other cultures and their poetic styles, he became a worthy successor of the Pushkin and Lermontov traditions of comprehension of the East.

### 6.0. Conclusion

The following conclusion were drawn from the research:

1. I.A. Bunin experiments in a large-scale intercultural culture of the East – aesthetic, scientific, philosophical and worldview.
2. Through the realities of the East, I.A. Bunin passed on his own way of perceiving the world. Synthesizing the experiences of religious cultures of the East, juxtaposing their answers to "eternal questions", he found the peculiarities to all mankind.
3. I.A. Bunin is not an oriental writer. Though, the East is not exotic, the writer studied it at all levels (literary, historical, religious, domestic). He traveled to the East, tried to feel it: people, nature, architecture.
4. In all of the works of I.A. Bunin used the words of Oriental languages (Arabic, Persian, Turkish), transmitting them as directly as possible by means of transliteration.

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