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CULTURAL AND HISTORICAL CONTEXT OF BOSNIAN ALJAMIADO LITERATURE

Abstract: Aljamiado literature, approximately at the same time (17th century) as folk oriented literature of Bosnian Franciscans, initiated native Bosnian language as a literary language for the first time since the medieval period. Appearance and development of Aljamiado literature coincided with the social crisis which took place as a result of bad attempts to reform the military Ottoman society into a peaceful model of society. As the crisis intensified, people's chances of getting educated in elite Istanbul learning facilities deteriorated especially in marginal and border regions of the Empire which meant relying on own, very modest educational resources. Discontinuity of Bosnian Muslim literacy in relation to medieval legacy as well as constitutive isolation of cultural milieu from home and foreign language traditions puts Aljamiado writers in traumatic roles of complete autodidacts. The phenomenon of Bosnian Aljamiado poetry, in that sense, is a plausible verification of Eliot's theses about relations between tradition and individual talent as well as Bourdieu's theory of a cultural field as a scene of constant competition of inherited, dominant and emerging forms. Therefore, it seems that we can explain the key paradox of Aljamiado literature which is that Aljamiado texts are extremely popular (some of them have tens of transcripts) although they are very often constrained, ideologically shattered and written in an impossible Serbo-Croatian language.

Keywords: Bosnian Aljamiado literature, inherited and dominant forms, tradition, individual talent.

Since the Bosnian literary historiography started to explore the Ottoman period literature, there has been a permanent ongoing controversy around the arguments of Stojan Novaković, introduced almost 150 years ago, in which he disqualified poetry works of Bosnian Muslims, written in vernacular language in Arabic script, portraying it as mere “blades of grass with no juice, grown from dry soil, that would initially, wither and would appear yellow and drained”¹. It is quite interesting that all the initial strong dissatisfaction, expressed by the Bosnian authors in their works, seems to weaken to the very same thing – subduing the implied, the essence of their replies – to the problem of rhetorical maliciousness and prejudice which Novaković, undoubtedly, lacked. We would feel better if we were able to say that the imagological vocabulary of the former times’ rested spirits is at work here, if only the reality would not deny us. Nevertheless, the general assumption is that the achievements of the Bosnian Aljamiado literature are incapacitated and inferior, particularly in comparison with the contemporary literary praxes such as oral literature and poetry in Oriental languages. The assumption is supported by the following arguments:

1. Poor education of people who wrote in vernacular language, their lower creative skills and unfamiliarity with the Classical Oriental literatures.
2. Lack of authentic vernacular literary tradition.
3. Lack of familiarity with the literary works of their Slavic neighbours.
4. Receptive skills of the audience to which the Aljamiado texts were addressed.
5. A sense of moral-patriotic duty towards one’s neighbour resulted from the feeling and thought is conveyed to them in a comprehensible and denotative language.

Each of the foregoing reasons has its “reasoning” and is unavoidable in understanding the problem we are discussing, so our exposition will be directed towards elaboration and profounder insight into the cultural-historical context, which, determined the character and the profile of the first attempts of literary expression of Muslim Bosniaks in their mother tongue during the Ottoman period.

Maximilian Braun was the first one to contextualize this cultural and historical problem, focusing on the “ecological” background of emergence,

¹ S. Novaković, *Prilozi k istoriji srpske književnosti* [Contributions to the History of Serbian Literature], IV: *Srbi Muhamedovci i turska pismenost* [Muslim Serbs and Turkish Writing], “Glasnik Srpskog učenog društva” 1869, vol. 9.

self-sustainability and development of the cultural phenomena, within the Bosnian society, as a marginal, ethnically complex community of the Ottoman Empire, which can be found in his study *Anfänge der Europäisierung im Kunstschrifttum der moslimischen Slaven in Bosnien und Herzegowina* [*The Beginnings of Europeanization in the Literature of Slavic Muslims in Bosnia and Herzegovina*] (Leipzig, 1934)². The acceptance of Islam, as Braun correctly points out, was dependant on a complete accession to Islamic-Oriental cultural circle, so that

on the literary field, it is quite understandable that the Bosnians and Herzegovinians, have contributed considerably to the Oriental literature of the period, such as Turkish, Persian and Arabic poets. However, the literature itself, expressed in Slavic language, outside the folk poetry, could not be initiated.

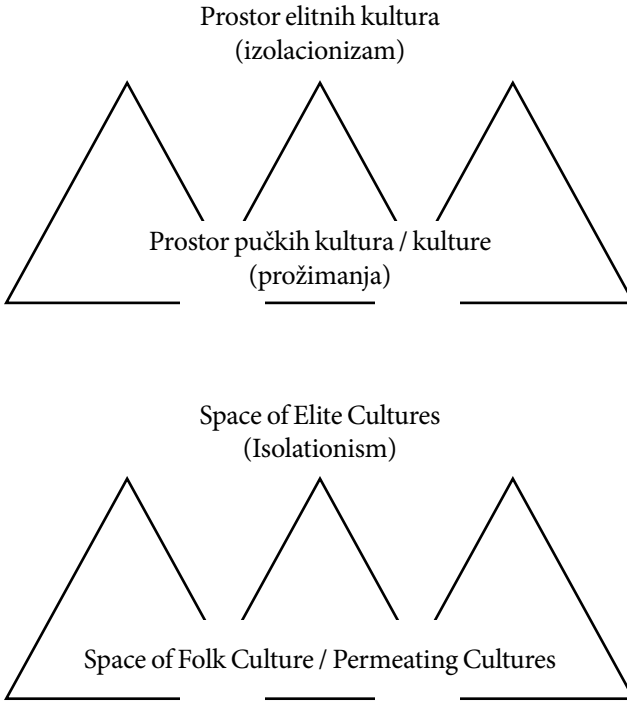
Split between these two powers, such an “artistic literature” had to depend on one of the Empires and could not develop independently. Learning on vernacular poetry has, immediately, resulted in submergence, so that the “artistic literature” of the period could not have been instigated, or, it could have been moulded by the patterns of Oriental literature.

Moreover, for the further development from scarce sources that are mentioned, there was a lack of cultural background, which provides every artistic activity with “a real opportunity for development”³.

Spiritual life in Medieval Bosnia was marked by extreme gap between cultural customs of common people and the elites. For Medieval and Oriental literatures, globally typical dichotomies: scholarly – laic, sacral – profane were additionally complicated by the multi-confessionalism and multilingualism of the Bosnian society. The elite structures of confessional cultures existed within a “cold” regime of tolerance and isolationism, gravitating towards belonging religious doctrines and standard models of literary articulation in non-native languages (Arabic, Turkish, Persian, Latin, Old Slavic...), which held the status of *lingua franca* within their own cultural – civilizational circles: Islamic-Oriental, Western-European and Slavic-Orthodox. Interconfessional cultural exchange took place in mother tongue, exclusively, in the vernacular sphere, at the level of verbal communication, folklore, and oral literary forms.

² M. Braun, *Začeci evropeizacije u književnosti slavenskih muslimana u Bosni i Hercegovini* [*The Beginnings of Europeanisation in the Literature of Slavic Muslims in Bosnia and Herzegovina*], trans. by I. Dizdar and S. Hedžić, Sarajevo: Dobra knjiga, 2009.

³ Ibidem, p. 20.



Aljamiado literature after the Medieval Times, and approximately at the same time (beginning of the 17th century) with the folk oriented literature of Bosnian Franciscans, introduced Bosnian native language as a literary language. Its emergence and development coincided with the increasing social crisis following the unsuccessful attempts to reform the military system of the Ottoman Empire into a peaceful one. As the crisis intensified, the chances of an individual to educate in elite Istanbul learning facilities proportionally decreased, particularly in the border provinces of the Empire, which essentially resulted in relying on one's own, rather limited, educational resources. It would be appropriate, for the purpose of comparison, to reflect on the Vatroslav Jagić's observation with the reference to the first South Slavic written monument in vernacular language – *Povelja Kulina bana* [*The Charter of Kulin Ban*] from 1189, for which this Croatian philologist argues that, unquestionably, it cannot stand alone at the very beginning of the Bosnian literacy, since the text of such rhetorical sophistication must hold a background of rich tradition of written correspondence, un-

fortunately, their artefacts have remained unknown till the present day⁴. Pioneers of Aljamiado literacy are in a far more unfortunate position than Radoje, Kulin Ban's scrivener. Discontinuity of Bosnian Muslim literacy within medieval heritage as well as constitutive isolation of the cultural milieu, in which they wrote from domestic ino-confessional traditions in the same language, puts Aljamiado authors in a frustrating position of complete self-taught men. The phenomenon of Bosnian Aljamiado texts is, in that sense, a plausible verification of explicit potential of Eliot's theses about the relationship between tradition and individual talent⁵, and, to great extent, of Bourdieu's theory of cultural fields that act as arena for constant competition between traditional and emerging forms, with the notions such as habitus and symbolic capital having the highest interpretational operability, and by which, this French sociologist opposes linguistic – historical idealism, notifying inequality at the “linguistic market” caused by the institutionalisation of certain discourses, styles and types of language competencies⁶.

In that regard, perhaps the crucial paradox of Aljamiado literature could be rationalized as extremely popular texts (some of which have been preserved in a few dozen different copies) on the one hand, and which, on the other hand – we'll agree with Muhamed Hadžijahić – are frequently “constrained, ideologically shattered and in an impossible Serbo-Croatian language”⁷. Identical analytical pattern gives an answer to why certain authors like Hasan Kaimija or Abdurahman Sirrija perform incomparably better in Turkish than in Bosnian language. It is fascinating that inter-lingual shifts are quite painful and nonchalant at the same time, so Maximilian Braun rightly suspects that even the very authors were not aware of the shifts they were making from one language to another. “Oriental elements are only superficially laid on Slavic, without blending with it into a new language”⁸.

⁴ V. Jagić, *Historija književnosti naroda hrvatskoga i srpskoga: knjiga prva* [History of Literature of the People of Croatia and Serbia: Book First], Zagreb: Štamparija Dragutina Albrecha, 1867, p. 142.

⁵ T. S. Eliot, *Tradicija i individualni talenat* [Tradition and the Individual Talent], trans. by M. Mihailović, Beograd: Službeni glasnik, 2017.

⁶ See P. Bourdieu, *Što znači govoriti – ekonomija jezičnih razmjena* [The economics of linguistic exchanges], trans. by M. Škiljan and A. Škiljan, Zagreb: Naprijed, 1992.

⁷ *Bosanskohercegovačka književna hrestomatija* [Bosnian-Herzegovinian Literary Miscellanea], vol. 1: *Starija književnost* [Old Literature], ed. by P. Anđelić, M. Hadžijahić, H. Kuna, V. Maksimović, P. Pejčinović, Sarajevo: Zavod za izdavanje udžbenika, 1974, p. 226.

⁸ M. Braun, op. cit., pp. 38–39.

Besides, we should not neglect the psychological burden of the poet, being aware of the importance and seriousness of the work they did (“writing is a toil and turmoil”, one of them says), locating their aims within a rigidly projected horizon of expectations. More than humble receptive possibilities of the potential audience have confined this creativity into rigid shackles of the religious-didactic poetics. However, the example of Feyzo Softa and the famous *Ashikli elif-be* proves that all of that can be different, even if it means preserving the basic educational orientation, provided the approach is more relaxed. That sort of condition, Bosnian Aljamiado literature could not have achieved, particularly within the cultural-historical context; however, it could have refigured the context itself.

From the mid-17th century, Bosnian cultural space, by virtue of the literary written works by Bosnian Muslims in their native Bosnian language, has been considerably redesigned and prepared for the upcoming modernization. The monumentality of the whole venture becomes more vivid if we take into consideration the cultural reality of small people incorporated in the imperial megastructure, which, as Ugo Vlaisavljević notes accurately “is never completely their reality. That is also the reality of a great people and a great imperial culture [...] however, the only dominant reality that exists is the reality of adaptation”⁹. Reversing the mechanism of adjustment in the opposite direction – towards the, towards own language and culture is an emancipatory gesture *par excellence*.

⁹ U. Vlaisavljević, *Rat kao najveći kulturni događaj [War as the Biggest Cultural Event]*, Sarajevo: Maunagić, 2007, p. 88.