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ONE WHO STEPPED CLOSER TO US

FOR THE 200TH ANNIVERSARY OF MIRZA FATALI AKHUNDOV'S BIRTH



This, in a nutshell, is the life of Mirza Fatali Akhundov (1812-1878): He had the destiny of a

stranger in his own land, a loyal Russian officer of Turkic descent (and a great Azerbaijani writer), someone who was part of the political history of nineteenth-century Russia, who observed the confrontation of three empires – Russian, Persian and Ottoman, and became a witness to Russia's colonization of the Caucasus. The first thing that comes to mind in this connection is this: that Fatali is not a distant ancestor at all, but one of our contemporaries, one who has already lived our life once before, under the despotic rule of that Russian empire, whose development was the Soviet empire, which then continued in... but wait, no hasty forecasts here, the wheels of fortune are still spinning.

As one who had risen to the rank of colonel in the Viceroyalty of the Caucasus in Tiflis, Fatali often wondered: *was it just the illusion of youth, to think that people one day will live happily under a strong central power? Only to plunge into a crisis after experiencing the reality of it all...* For Fatali, this experience came with the beginning of the highland war in the Caucasus, which lasted a quarter of the century. As a translator of Oriental languages, he came to witness the horrors of the tsarist colonial policy in the Caucasus.

As time goes by, the tyrant finally leaves the world of the living (in Akhundov's time it was Nicholas I, while almost a hundred years later it was Joseph Stalin), *and a fleeting*



The house in Shaki in which Fatali was born



hope overwhelms us, which, as it turns out, is also punishable, and we come to the point of a crash, which leaves us unable to pass our experiences on to those who come after us.

It is youngsters with their silly faith who are the source of despotic power: when they finally see the bitterness of false words, it is too late - the time is up. Those who have sold their souls to the devil to climb to the summit of power will have learned and understood everything by then, and the illusions of new youths will only play into their hands. As for those who have lagged behind, hunching their backs – what can they do? As soon as the new generation gets a new calling, it will trample them over without batting an eye.

But there is also that other, Fa-

tali's, tragic lesson of compromise: under his suit of a civil servant beat the heart of a free-thinking democrat, the student of a critical Russian-Western literary culture. His spirit of dissent found its realization through art. Here is where three of Fatali's most shining themes emerge, in prose, drama and in the epistolary genre, which will secure his place in the treasury of Azerbaijani, and perhaps even world, literature.

Really, I can imagine my country's literature taking its own place among the literatures of the world, well-deserved, and without any false aggrandizement. Not to imitate a renowned compatriot of mine, who once reproached British and other Western writers for having no translations of our authors' works: We have to read Shakespeare, Dick-

ens, Balzac, Hugo, etc. in Azerbaijani, *but of our writers, who do you know?...* I understand full well that the literature of my country does not boast too many names deserving the epithet of 'greatness', but Mirza Fatali is clearly one of those few!...

The plot of his novel "The Deceived Stars" is truly one of a rare kind, and good for all times, so it is rather strange that it has yet to see the light of global renown. This is due to nothing more but ordinary ignorance.

When he read the old "Story of Shah Abbas, adorer of the world", Fatali was so moved by one phrase in it, as it was so consonant with his own love of freedom and democratic convictions, that he turned that one phrase into a story. The story is half true, and half legend: A tyrant,



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who dreams himself governor of his subjects forever, suddenly learns from an astrologer that his days are numbered, that the constellation of stars is foreboding his death, and that he could not escape their verdict. But the chief astrologer shows him a path to salvation: the Shah must voluntarily abdicate, become the ordinary man Abbas, after having left the throne to a simple sinner whose life is worth nothing. After the stars have unleashed their devastating force over the head of this pseudo-Shah, he could ascend to the throne once again.

The sinner, however, is *a man of the people*, someone who dreams about the welfare of his people and about fair government, a castaway who castigates tyranny. Once on the Shah's throne, he signs democratic laws concerning the education of his people, so that superstition and ignorance may give way to enlightenment, he cleanses the government of titled bribe-takers and embezzlers, advocates honest labor, etc. etc.

But here's the paradox: the more he attempts to do for the people, the more indignation he arouses among them. They grumble in disbelief: who is it that's governing us? Where are the bodies chopped to pieces and hung at the city gates – we may have been afraid of them, but at least the blood was flowing fresh and didn't stay still! It seems that the new Shah is a meek and weak man, he has neither the will, nor the power, - in short, he is a pussy! And on that day predefined by the stars, the people rebel against this Shah, who remains neither known to them nor known by them, and they overthrow him. The astrologer rejoices in his heart, as a veritable thunderstorm breaks out over the

pseudo-Shah, and a solemn procession approaches the former Shah to put him back on his former throne. And thus Shah Abbas continues to rule his country for decades, humiliating his own people. After all, it is well known that fear gives birth to loyalty, love, obedience, and even adoration! The finale of the story is quite remarkable: *oh, how naive the English are to believe that they can easily outwit such a clever people as the Persians!..*



The second theme is Fatali's successful attempt to compose a play (thus becoming the first playwright in his country's literature), in which he was bold enough to venture to describe the French Revolution, which had aroused the world, but the mere mention of which was strictly forbidden in the Russian Empire. There was a time when Russian censors forbid even to pronounce the words *France* and *Paris* for fear that these alone might incite the mood of rebellion!... The emperor declared: "We are not part of Europe, and will not take orders from it!" Orders about what? Freedom and equality? Or even Brotherhood!? Burn them out

of your memory!... Another thing the emperor (doesn't matter which one) ordered: "Don't you dare to write this word – 'progress'!"

The story that Fatali invented was simple: a respectable and wealthy family from Karabakh, where preparations for the wedding of a daughter are under way, is hosting a guest from France. The botanist Monsieur Jordan, who symbolizes the enlightened West, promises the family to take the talented groom to Paris for his education. But how? By delaying his wedding indefinitely?! Seeing this coming, the future mother-in-law decides to thwart the plan with the help of a sorcerer – *dervish Mas-talishah*, who fools his good, naïve, sincere, and frank countrymen by destroying Paris with the aid of an obedient jinn. This destruction miraculously coincides with news of the French Revolution!... The impulsive Monsieur Jordan exclaims (thus confirming the art of the sorcerer): *Paris!... These devils, demons, jinns, they have destroyed it!...* Leaving his hospitable hosts in Karabakh, he hurries to Paris to save the king and thus, fortunately, the groom will stay away from the world of *licence and corruption*.

Fatali was a master of comedy, and used the genre to highlight differences between Western and Eastern mentalities. He formulated ideas that were still unknown then: *Oh, what a crazy idea it is to tempt history by turning the East onto the path of the West, thereby plunging this blessed land into an abyss of suffering!... Neither will they ever understand us, nor will we ever understand them, because their blessings are our evils, their vices are our virtues. Our men have many wives, while their women have many husbands. Our women cover their heads to conceal*



Fatali's house museum in Tbilisi



Bust of Fatali in the Tbilisi house museum



their faces, while theirs show everything off, which to us is the epitome of impudence and a sign of debauchery! We believe everything our leaders say, whereas they constantly argue with God, with Padishah and even with their own selves. We are all slaves of our Padishah, praying for his welfare day and night, whereas they throw stones at him!...

Monsieur Jordan and Sorcerer Mastalishah appear here not only as opposites, but also as twins. The social basis of the comedy, which is rooted in the views of that time, according to which Monsieur Jordan was the embodiment of *the positive West* and the Sorcerer symbolized *the dark East*, has undergone significant change over time. Contrary to its intention, the story reveals the *comedy* underlying the conflict: both the loyalist Monsieur and the sorcerer are charlatans of sorts, they

promise people prosperity, promises that are based on the path of the West, which is itself bereft with crisis, as well as on *oriental* prejudices, the most important of which are servility and ignorance.

One of Fatali's constant concerns was the problem of power and the people. He put it into words in what is an attempt at presenting his philosophy in the guise of a journalistic mystification, in the *"Three letters of the Indian prince Kemaluddovle ("Wisdom of the State") to the Persian Prince Jalaluddovle ("Wealth of the State") and the latter's response"*. Fatali (under the influence of Russian-Western literature?) claims to have supposedly gained access to the real correspondence of two princes, who had been expelled from their native land and were lamenting the customs and traditions of foreign countries. Persia became the object



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of their criticism. Here, the ruler believed to own the property and lives of his subjects with impunity, and that he was to be worshiped by foolish flatterers and venal poets: "You quietly sit on your throne, while the lord of Byzantium and the master of China are both trembling with fear: the former, awestruck by the sound of your pipes, the latter, amazed at the thunder of your army drums..." Oh, poor people, downtrodden and degraded! If ever you had tasted the sweetness of freedom, a gift that every human being seeing the light of day should, enjoy, as common sense commands. For complete freedom is twofold: spiritual, but that is being taken away by the dogmas, and corporal, that is secular, but that it is taken away by the tyrant and his entourage. Oh, poor people, if only you had known your rights, you would never have agreed to such a shameful slavery in which you are now. You would be aspiring towards progress, you would have established free societies, clubs, protests, seims, you would have found the means that would lead you to unity and to a common understanding, and finally, you would have freed yourself from the yoke of despotism.

So that the Shah may not rejoice in his country remaining in the eternal sleep of ignorance, let him throw a glance at history: has any despotic power ever survived?

My esteemed Jalaluddovle, excuse my frankness, but you yourself have not quite rid yourself of the illusions you hold concerning the special status of your people among other peoples, of its special destiny and purpose. But for you too, it's time to wake up! There you are, entering a mosque, where you notice a man in a broadcloth cloak, with a cashmere sash tied around the hip, a woollen cap on his head underneath a lambskin from Bukhara,

and a long beard dyed with henna and indigo. His face and eyes reveal a person who is mourning the death of someone who must have been, at the very least, his father. But no, he is sad because some time, somewhere, a Shiite imam had fallen in the struggle for power. In another corner, there is an all-too-important man with a shiny ruby ring. Who is this? Is he literate, you ask? "Literate?! – he looks at you in amazement. – Our thanks are due to Allah that he has not been infected with heresy and godlessness!" But shhh! The mullah is at the lectern! First, about the



birth of the Imam. Then, the great feats in infancy. His heroic achievements in adolescence and youth. How he raised the Shiite banner... When we left, my neighbor asked: - So, has your soul been satisfied?

- How could it be satisfied by all this nonsense? This is bird language designed for bird-brains! - I replied.
- Perhaps - the other one, intervened, for the first was already dumbfounded - you might enjoy the doctrine of the four pillars that hold the world?
- I have heard about three whales!

- Quiet, oh unfortunate man! I am talking about the pillars of faith! First is Allah, second is the Prophet, third is the Imams, and fourth is Karim Khan!
- Who is this you are talking about?! That old heap of rubbish?!
- Shut up, you wretch! – growing pale, he looked around, fear in his eyes.

The "Letters..." could not be published, and they were found only half a century later in a chest sold to the Soviets by his namesake grandson. Incidentally, those same powers eventually declared him an enemy of the people in 1937. But Fatali had managed to distribute multiple copies of the letters, which he had copied out by hand... Each of the recipients immediately severed all ties with him, and thus gradually, he was surrounded by a wall of estrangement... And when Fatali died, for a long time they delayed his burial: the Muslims protested, they were reluctant to have a heretic buried in their cemetery. In the end, a grave was dug up in a vacant lot, at a place that belonged to no-one, a neutral location that belonged neither to the Mosque, nor to the Church. It was both adjacent to a Muslim cemetery and remote from the Gregorian, Catholic, Jewish and, of course, the Orthodox ones. In other words, in short, it was neither West nor East. They buried him on the fourth day, swiftly and without much noise.

And now there are statues of Fatali in Tiflis-Tbilisi, where he lived almost all of his life, in Baku, which he never visited, and in the Azerbaijani city of Shaki, where he was born. And it seems that another statue will soon be erected in Moscow – in the avenue of honor, where he will be surrounded by the eminent people of this planet. 🌟