

Literary-Critical View of the Prominent Azerbaijani Scholar M.F. Akhundzada: the First Systematic Examples of Literary Theory



¹Zamin Babazade

<https://doi.org/10.69760/aghel.02500203>

Keywords	Abstract
literary criticism realism classical genre poetry and prose	<p>This article explores the literary-critical views of M.F. Akhundzada. The study analyzes Akhundzada's critical essays, incorporating perspectives from various critics. Controversial issues related to Akhundzada are discussed, and citations from literary scholars are provided. Special attention is given to the reception of realism, which Akhundzada pioneered, and the early stages of literary criticism. The article also briefly examines the literary-critical ideas found in his artistic works. The tendencies of Akhundzada's criticism are analyzed and interpreted, with references to scholars' opinions.</p> <p>The study provides a brief overview of criticism before Akhundzada and investigates the contributions of Akhundzada and his followers to the development of realist criticism, evaluating his achievements from a scientific perspective. While examining the relationship between Akhundzada's philosophical thoughts and his literary-critical views, the research employs historical-comparative and analytical methods. Additionally, the article discusses Akhundzada's thoughts and opinions on both classical and contemporary literary figures, as well as his literary-critical views.</p> <p>As a result, it is concluded that Akhundzada's literary-critical views represent the first systematic literary-theoretical ideas in Azerbaijani literature and scholarship.</p>

Introduction

Literary fiction is one of the fundamental means through which individuals understand themselves, communicate with others, and connect through shared human experiences. Despite the differences in personal lives, literature allows individuals to transcend historical periods. When reading the works of classical authors, we immerse ourselves in the realities of their time, experiencing history as if we were part of it. Similarly, in M.F. Akhundzada's works, we set aside individual distinctions and focus on the universal

¹ Dr. Zamin Babazade, Nakhchivan State University, zaminbabazade@ndu.edu.az, [ORCID: 0009-0003-1395-2545](https://orcid.org/0009-0003-1395-2545)



themes that unite us. The central ideas in Akhundzada's works revolve around the pursuit of truth, equality, and the struggle against ignorance.

Reading Akhundzada's works brings not only aesthetic pleasure but also a deep realization of human wholeness and deficiencies. His writings continually remind us that ignorance and narrow-mindedness are universal issues across all eras. Among his profound literary works, there are also pieces that reflect his literary-critical views. These works strongly emphasize the importance of emerging realism while dismissing classicism as an outdated literary approach.

Main Part

F.Kocherli analyzed Akhundzada's works and considered him the founder of Azerbaijani realism: "F. Köçərli analyzed M.F. Akhundzada's literary legacy and regarded him as the founder of Azerbaijani realism" (3.41). Azerbaijani writer A. Hagverdiyev, in his article "The Tragedy of Mirza Fatali," offers insightful thoughts on Akhundzada's life, describing it as a life spent in "constant tragedy." The author references Akhundzada's comedy "The Alchemist," where the words of the character Haji Nuru reflect Akhundzada's perspective on literature and art. In a key dialogue, Haji Nuru addresses those who mortgage their properties to buy silver from Mullah Khalil:

"Every man's profession is his own philosopher's stone."

In response, he is asked:

"You are a poet, and poetry is your profession. Why, then, has this profession not brought you wealth?"

Haji Nuru answers:

"Indeed, my talent is truly a philosopher's stone. However, as you say, a philosopher's stone requires another metal to absorb its effect. Likewise, my talent requires an audience with taste, wisdom, and knowledge to appreciate the secrets I reveal. But fate has decreed that my fellow citizens—people like you—lack wisdom, intellect, and reason. Under these circumstances, what benefit can my talent bring? Of what use is my poetry?" (2.335)

This passage conveys the idea that literary works do not exist solely at the moment of their creation. A literary work only comes to life when it is recognized, becomes part of social life, and captures the interest of the public. Through Haji Nuru's words, Akhundzada argues that literature holds no value for those who passively accept their fate and immerse themselves in ignorance. For such people, the "philosopher's stone" brings no benefit to its owner.

Mirza Fatali himself wrote:

"I have written six comedies and one story, and unlike other authors, I do not ask my readers to forgive my shortcomings. Instead, I urge them to familiarize themselves with this type of literature and strive for its dissemination among the people. As a pioneer, I am merely providing an example." (2.339)

Artistic literature is one of the common denominators of the human world, where people understand themselves and communicate with one another. Despite all the different aspects of their lives, individuals transcend historical periods precisely through literature and artistic works. As we read the works of the classics, we begin to perceive ourselves as representatives of that era. When reading the works of M.F. Akhundzadeh, we put aside our individual differences and see the issues that are common to all of us. The highest truth in Akhundzadeh's works is equality and the struggle against ignorance. While reading his



works, we undoubtedly experience great pleasure, but at the same time, we realize that we live life with both human integrity and shortcomings, repeatedly understanding that ignorance and illiteracy are universal problems across all times. Among such profound works of Akhundzadeh, there are also literary-critical writings. The general spirit of these works emphasizes the importance of emerging realism while promoting the redundancy of classicism. F. Kocharli analyzed Akhundzadeh's works and considered him the founder of Azerbaijani realism. (3.41)

A. Hagverdiyev, in his article "Mirza Fatali's Tragedy," expresses many interesting thoughts about Akhundzadeh, noting that his life was "spent in tragedy." The author, referencing Akhundzadeh's comedy "The Alchemist," highlights a dialogue through the character Haji Nuru, which reflects Akhundzadeh's views on literature and art. Haji Nuru addresses those who mortgage their properties and homes to obtain silver from Molla Khalil: "Every man's profession is his own philosopher's stone." In response, he is asked, "You are a poet, and poetry is your profession, so why have you not gained wealth through your art?" Haji Nuru replies: "Yes, indeed, my talent is a philosopher's stone. But as you say, the philosopher's stone inevitably requires another metal to be effective. Likewise, my talent requires people with taste, wisdom, and knowledge to appreciate the mysteries I convey. Since fate has given me fellow countrymen like you, who lack wisdom, intelligence, and thought, what benefit will my talent bring? What use is my poetry?" (2.335).

Indeed, the existence of a literary work is not determined at the moment of its creation. A literary work only truly exists when it is acquired by others, becomes a part of public life, and gains the interest of the masses. The thoughts expressed through Haji Nuru's words imply that literature has no benefit for people who resign themselves to their fates and indulge in ignorance. Because of such individuals, the "philosopher's stone" brings nothing to Haji Nuru.

"Mirza Fatali wrote, 'Having written six comedies and one story, I do not ask my readers to forgive my shortcomings like other authors. Instead, I ask them to familiarize themselves with this type of literature and strive for its dissemination among the people. As a pioneer, I am merely providing an example.'" (2.339)

Akhundzadeh could not predict the exact impact of his comedies on readers. However, as a visionary artist, he understood that innovations would be difficult to accept, which is why he urged intellectuals to work toward spreading "this kind of literature" among the people.

M.F. Akhundov's sociological, historical, ethical, economic, socio-political, philosophical, and literary-critical works include: *The Letters of Kamalüddövlə*, *A Reply to the English Doctor Yuma*, *Debate with Molla Alakbar*, *About One Word*, *John Stuart Mill on Liberty*, *On the Mourning Ceremonies of Muharram*, *The Doctrines of Babism*, *The Story*, *The Allegory of the Philosopher Sismond*, and others.

In *The Letters of Kamalüddövlə*, Akhundzadeh expressed his literary-critical and philosophical ideas. Additionally, in many of his literary-critical articles, he put forward his views on literature. Alongside discussing literature, he also addressed prominent literary figures, commenting on their works and creativity. In his article *On Verse and Prose*, Akhundzadeh particularly emphasized the works of Vagif. As we read this article, we see that there is almost no discussion regarding prose. Akhundzadeh almost entirely talks about the difference between verse and poetry, touching upon the reasons for writing poetry, its form and genre characteristics, and linguistic aspects, yet he does not express any opinions about prose. Literary scholar Ramin Ahmadov, commenting on this aspect of Akhundzadeh's literary-critical article, writes: "If this article had been titled 'Verse and Poetry,' it would have been more accurate. Because in this text, the author only once uses the word 'prose' in a sentence, while in most cases, he emphasizes that pleasure and impact are found more in poetry, and the primary focus is placed on distinguishing 'verse from poetry.'" (5.1) **"Fuzuli is not a poet, and his imaginations have no effect at all; however, Nazimi is a master"** (1.152).



This statement has attracted the attention of many critics, and numerous opinions have been expressed on this matter. From our perspective, it is not particularly surprising that Akhundzade, who claimed that the ghazal and qasida had become outdated as literary genres and who preferred dramatic works capable of realistically portraying public life over lyrical compositions, made such a statement. At the same time, we see that Fuzuli's traditions continued in the 19th century and that "this spell" had not been broken for centuries.

"The great thinker had two main targets of criticism. He criticized religion to advance society and attacked Fuzuli to develop literature. However, in reality, this was not mere rejection but a dialectical negation that encouraged progress in both society and literature. It was as if Mirza Fatali Akhundov, unable to vent his frustration on the ignorant religious figures who hindered the nation's progress, took it out on Islam; and unable to lash out at the epigone poets who could not break free from imitation, could not sense the rhythm of life, and failed to grasp the cognitive and educational significance of literature, he directed his criticism at Muhammad Fuzuli." (5.5,6)

Literary scholar Ramin Ahmadov further notes: "M.F. Akhundov was interested in socio-political issues and sought solutions to change public life. He became acquainted with Russian and Western European culture... He studied the language and culture of the great Russian people in depth and created a powerful turning point in the development of Azerbaijani social thought. M.F. Akhundov thoroughly examined and studied the works of great thinkers such as Spinoza, the 18th-century French materialists, Voltaire, Buckle, Chernyshevsky, and others." (5.6)

In addition to Akhundzade's artistic works, his literary-critical and philosophical writings have been extensively studied. Literary scholars and philosophers such as Samed Vurgun, Kamal Talibzade, Elchin, Yashar Garayev, Salman Mumtaz, Qulu Khalilov, Shikhali Gurbanov, Jafar Jafarov, Heydar Huseynov, Nadir Mammadov, and others have researched and analyzed Akhundzade's literary-critical views, publishing works and monographs on the subject.

In his article about Akhundzade, Samed Vurgun states that Akhundzade was influenced by Russian and European literature, and his followers continued his path by shaping an educational realist literature. According to Samed Vurgun, this literature directed its weapons against the feudal-patriarchal social order and outdated traditions and laws.

In his work "The History of Social and Philosophical Thought in 19th Century Azerbaijan", Heydar Huseynov dedicates a section to Akhundzade, expresses his views on his ideas, and concludes that Akhundzade was a great thinker. According to H. Huseynov, "The Letters of Kamal-ud-Dowleh" and "Response to Hekim Yuma" can also be considered philosophical works. He writes about Akhundzade: "There has been no major or minor issue that this great humanist figure did not address. He discussed topics ranging from drama, story, and poetry to philosophy, religion, ethics, morality, criticism, language, state, school, education, and many others, providing clear and concrete answers appropriate to his era." (6.182)

The literary critic Kamal Talibzade states that "M.F. Akhundzade's literary views are based on his philosophical stance and materialist worldview." K. Talibzade highly values Akhundzade's contributions to criticism, emphasizing that the school he established played a significant role in literary criticism and laid the foundation for realist literary criticism in the East.

Kamal Talibzade identifies three types of criticism in Akhundzade's works:

1. "Critical attitude towards life and societal events,"
2. "The critical nature of literature,"



3. "Criticism as a science." (7.23)

Akhundzade, who made sharp remarks about Fuzuli, later began to express his critical opinions about Vagif. However, he speaks positively about M.P. Vagif. In his article "On Poetry and Prose," Akhundzade describes his view of Vagif as follows: "But during my travels through the lands of Karabakh, I came across some of Molla Panah Vagif's thoughts, and I saw that the conditions I had mentioned were present in his works. Later, I encountered Qasim bey Sarujali Javanshir, whose verses in the Turkish language astonished me. This is because the mentioned conditions were even more apparent in his works. In my opinion, from the Hijri era to the present day, among all the Turkish poets, these two figures stand out." (1.152)

From this statement, it is evident that Vagif's poetry caught Akhundzade's attention, and his "verses" astonished him. According to Akhundzade, from ancient times to his day, only Vagif and Qasim bey Sarujali Javanshir truly deserved the title of poet.

Conclusion

The above discussion clearly shows that Akhundzade's literary-critical views are of great importance in the history of criticism. Akhundzade expanded, systematized, and established some scattered critical ideas found in classical literature, creating the first examples of modern literary criticism. His critical views are extensive and comprehensive. In this article, we have examined only a part of Akhundzade's critical perspectives.

References

- Akhundzade, M. F. (2005). *Selected works (Vol. II)*. Sharq-Qerb Publishing House.
- Babazade, Z. (2025). The first influences of Western literature on Azerbaijani literature: Modernism and tradition in the works of Akhundzadeh. *Acta Globalis Humanitatis et Linguarum*, 2(1), 71-79.
- Hagverdiyev, A. (2005). *Selected works*. Lider Publishing House.
- Huseynov, H. (2007). *From the history of social and philosophical thought in 19th century Azerbaijan*. Sharq-Qerb Publishing House.
- Mammadov, N. (1978). *The realism of M. F. Akhundov*. Elm Publishing House.
- Mirza Fatali Akhundzade and literary criticism. (n.d.). *Kaspi Newspaper*. Retrieved [date], from <http://kaspi.az/az/mirze-feteli-axundzade-edebi-tenqidi>
- Talibzade, K. (1984). *The history of Azerbaijani literary criticism*. Maarif Publishing House.
- Yusifoglu, R. (2012, June 5). Literary-theoretical views of M. F. Akhundzade. *525-ci qəzet*, 5-6.

Received: 02.10.2025

Revised: 02.15.2025

Accepted: 02.20.2025

Published: 02.24.2025



This is an open access article under the
Creative Commons Attribution-
NonCommercial 4.0 International License

Acta Globalis Humanitatis et Linguarum
ISSN 3030-1718