

# The Eastern Motif In 18 Th-Century German Dramaturgy

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**Annotation:** This study is devoted to the examination of Eastern motifs in 18th-century German dramaturgy. The focus is on the process of formation and artistic interpretation of the image of the East in the works of German playwrights of the Enlightenment era. The paper analyzes the features of representing Eastern culture, philosophy, and aesthetics, as well as their influence on the development of theatrical art in Germany. Special attention is given to the interpretation of exotic plots, images, and symbols that were used by authors to express the moral, political, and cultural ideas of their time. The research highlights the role of Eastern themes in broadening the artistic horizons of German dramaturgy and their contribution to intercultural dialogue in the 18th century.

**Keywords:** 18th-century German dramaturgy, Eastern motifs, image of the East, Enlightenment, theatrical art, intercultural dialogue, Orientalism, artistic interpretation, exoticism, cultural influence, philosophical ideas, Eastern aesthetics, dramatic works, symbolism, literary traditions

## Introduction.

Works of Western European dramaturgy that reflect Eastern motifs and carry philosophical-satirical as well as educational significance correspond to the demands of their time. The distinctiveness of Western European Enlightenment literature on Eastern themes can be considered closely connected to the socio-historical characteristics of the literary process in Western Europe, the ideas of tolerance and humanism promoted by Enlightenment thinkers in Western European literature, as well as their perceptions of the East.

Examples of Eastern expressions in Western European dramaturgy can be illustrated through such works as *The Divine Comedy* by Dante Alighieri, *Mahomet*, or *Fanaticism and Zadig*, or *The Book of Fate* by Voltaire, *West-Eastern Divan* by Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, *Persian Letters* by Montesquieu, *The Indiscreet Jewels* by Denis Diderot, and *Les Orientales* by Victor Hugo. These great authors, in their works, sought to harmonize Western and Eastern culture, literature, and poetry. [1:14]

**Literature analysis and methodology.** A musical stage work that is still not well known in Uzbekistan—*Tamerlano* by George Frideric Handel (1685–1759)—is a clear confirmation of this idea. This three-act opera was composed based on an Italian-language libretto by Nicola Francesco Haym. Handel completed the work in July 1724 in just 20 days. The opera was first performed on October 31, 1724, at the King's Theatre in London.

In 1724, the sixth season of the Royal Theatre was opened with *Tamerlano* by George Frideric Handel. The cast of the theatre company included opera stars such as Andrea Pacini (*Tamerlane*), Francesca Cuzzoni (*Asteria*), Anna Vincenza Dotti (*Irene*), as well as, from the previous cast, the tenor Francesco Borosini (*Bayezid*). [2:4]

18th-century German literature and dramaturgy, like the literature and drama of other European countries, passed through various stages of development. This culture also experienced periods such as Enlightenment classicism, Enlightenment realism, sentimentalism, and early Romanticism. However, these literary movements acquired a different significance in the German literary life compared to other countries. [3:55]

**Results.** In contemporary German literature, there are various types of dramaturgy, among which some include:

1. **Enlightenment-inspired dramas:** These works are primarily centered on educational and moral themes such as tolerance, freedom of belief, compassion, and humanism, which form the core content of the drama.
2. **Historical dramas:** These focus on the influence of the past on the present. The themes mainly include wars, National Socialism, the life of the GDR and the FRG, and German reunification.
3. **Transition-period dramas:** The main theme of these works is the representation of “German reunification” and the subsequent changes in unified German society. In particular, issues such as territorial

and social problems faced by people from the former GDR are addressed. Biographical elements are also often present in these dramas.

4. **Popular dramas:** These works mainly address contemporary issues and, unlike memoirs, largely set the past aside. Their main purpose is entertainment. Modern music and film may serve the general interests of people, creating a sense of closeness and mutual trust between readers and audiences.

5. **Postmodern dramas:** The most important feature of this type is intertextuality, meaning references to other literary works within the text. These dramas often combine fictional and real elements.

Today, German literature—especially German dramatic works—has reached a new stage of development, contributing to the enrichment of the spiritual world and aesthetic taste of both Eastern and Western peoples, and exerting a positive mutual influence in both literature and education.

**Discussion.** German dramatists such as Ernst Bloch (1885–1977) and Bertolt Brecht (1898–1956) proposed replacing Aristotle’s tragic theory of “fear and pity” with the concepts of “hope and trust” as well as “the pursuit of knowledge and mutual tolerance.” Based on these alternative ideas, they advanced the notion of dramaturgy that moves away from traditional tragedy and instead creates dramatic works that realize human aspirations and hopes. The most important examples of such dramaturgy include *Nathan the Wise* (1779) by Gotthold Ephraim Lessing, *Iphigenia in Tauris* and *Faust Part Two* by Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, *Prince Friedrich of Homburg* by Heinrich von Kleist, *Libussa* by Franz Grillparzer, and *The Good Person of Szechwan* by Bertolt Brecht. Large-scale comedies also serve as models within the genre of dramaturgy. Around the 1750s, under Lessing’s criticism, drama gradually separated from religious content. Such works aimed to reflect the future possibilities of social life. Until the 18th century, drama had largely been concerned with universal historical concepts such as social development and progress. According to Lessing, reason cannot fully resolve the true value of religion in a purely theoretical way. However, a rational person is still capable of adhering to religious belief through reason. This idea is reflected in Lessing’s drama *Nathan the Wise*. The central idea of the work—the ethical principles of the three monotheistic religions—makes this “dramatic poem” a turning point. Values such as brotherhood, love, humanism, tolerance, and the resolution of religious-historical conflicts are presented as practical forms of human behavior rather than purely doctrinal beliefs. These actions aim at peaceful and harmonious coexistence among people.

Orientalist scholars observed that in German dramaturgy the East was not presented through opposing viewpoints, but rather through an attempt to connect East and West and integrate them into a unified cultural space. In *Mahomets Gesang* (1772/1773), Johann Wolfgang von Goethe presents a completely different image from *Mahomet the Prophet* (1741) by Voltaire. Goethe compares the Prophet Muhammad, who seeks to guide everyone toward God, with forces of nature such as storms and dynamic movements. In Goethe’s view, both Muhammad and the representatives of the “Storm and Stress” (“Sturm und Drang”) movement achieve success in a similar way: each begins as a solitary figure and later gains numerous followers. Voltaire, by contrast, portrays Muhammad as a symbol of religious fanaticism, narrow-mindedness, and intolerance. Similarly, *Nathan the Wise* (1779) by Gotthold Ephraim Lessing creates an image of harmony and offers an alternative vision. The aim of Lessing’s drama *Nathan the Wise* is to promote intercultural and interreligious tolerance, generosity, and moral integrity. [4:9]

Gotthold Ephraim Lessing, who actively opposed the development of French culture and criticized French classicism, along with Johann Christoph Gottsched, argued that the French had misunderstood the theater theory of ancient Greece and Aristotle. Lessing emphasized that the true sources of theater were Greek thought and the works of William Shakespeare. His efforts proved successful, and German literature eventually freed itself from imitating the French and found its own independent path. French classical tragedy, in his view, aimed to maintain and legitimize absolutist rule by frightening the public. In contrast, Lessing’s goal was to create a bourgeois theater. In this new theatrical model, the protagonists would no longer be kings and aristocrats, but members of the bourgeoisie. The public would no longer remain merely the object of dramatic representation. He sought to express social problems through tragedy itself, which is why he critically opposed existing dramatic forms and traditions.

In *Nathan the Wise* by Gotthold Ephraim Lessing and in *The Golden Mirror* by Christoph Martin Wieland, Eastern motifs are also prominently reflected. In addition, Wieland wrote other Enlightenment works as well.

For example, *The History of the Wise Danischmend* (1752) and *Schach Lolo or the Divine Right of Rulers* (1778). In both texts, Eastern motifs from the Arabic tales of One Thousand and One Nights and various Eastern travel narratives were used as a foundation. [5:23]

Gotthold Ephraim Lessing demonstrated his place in the religious-philosophical debates of his time through Enlightenment literature and theater, which were his main fields of interest. His intellectually rich works and dramas had a significant impact on the development of German literature. Lessing stood out among the poets and dramatists of his era and played a leading role in shaping a national literary tradition. It is important to note that, unlike France, Spain, and England, Germany at that time was not a unified national state.

In the creative work of Gotthold Ephraim Lessing, we can base the following view regarding the development of drama within Enlightenment literature: poets and dramatists such as Friedrich Schiller, Lessing himself, Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, and Heinrich Heine, who enriched German prose and poetry in terms of both content and form, stand among the great figures of world literary thought. These writers created artistically mature examples of political and philosophical lyricism, poetic drama, and tragedy, making a significant contribution to the development of world literature. [6:14]

Inspired by English, particularly William Shakespeare, dramaturgy, Friedrich Schiller was also influenced by works such as *Emilia Galotti* by Gotthold Ephraim Lessing and *Goetz von Berlichingen* by Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, which significantly shaped his intellectual development and worldview. In fact, Schiller was not only a master of stage writing, but also one of the artists who, after Lessing and Goethe, made a fruitful contribution to the formation and development of the German national theater. [8:16]

In our research, we have attempted to demonstrate that Gotthold Ephraim Lessing's dramatic theory is based on the classical tradition of Aristotle. Like in ancient Greek literature, Lessing preserved the idea that drama should evoke strong emotions in works intended for the dramatic genre. In the tragedy *Emilia Galotti*, which reflects Western moral didacticism, Lessing promotes the virtues of goodness and compassion among people. Fearing harm to himself and his family due to his sharp criticism of Christianity in his dramas, Gotthold Ephraim Lessing published Hermann Samuel Reimarus's works between 1777 and 1778 under the title "*Wolfenbüttel Fragments*." This publication provoked strong reactions from both Lutherans and liberal theologians. In particular, the debate between the Hamburg pastor Johann Melchior Goeze and Lessing became recognized as one of the most controversial disputes of the post-Enlightenment period. Goeze accused Lessing of presenting interpretations of Christianity that were hostile in tone and of ridiculing the entire Christian world in his writings. The characters in these works were carefully selected symbols reflecting the intellectual and social climate of the time. Lessing brought together symbols of contradictions across ethnic, religious, and social spheres. At the end of the work, he unites many of these symbolic figures—such as Sultan Saladin, the Templar Knight, and Recha—into a single family, thereby revealing his true message. It becomes clear that, for Lessing, humanism is of central importance; however, this humanism is not based on blood relations or membership in a particular community, but rather on a universal, Enlightenment-level understanding of humanity.

**Conclusion.** Thus, the concept of tolerance, in its Enlightenment interpretation, played a very important role in the creative work of Gotthold Ephraim Lessing, which is why he later elaborated on it extensively in his literary works. The central theme of tolerance forms the core content of his poetic dramas and religious writings. The ideas of tolerance and Enlightenment have continued to be regarded up to the present day as fundamental principles for universal human relations and as a criterion for ensuring peaceful and harmonious coexistence within society. [9:48]

The works under analysis are aimed at regulating the experiential perception of the audience or readers; therefore, they propose a sense of probability while concretizing culturally unfamiliar elements. On the other hand, in the religious-philosophical "dramatic poem" by Gotthold Ephraim Lessing, which is not without reason regarded as a "didactic poem," the principles underlying the representation and construction of the East are expressed even more clearly.

More precisely, the philosophy of tolerance was intended to make space for different religions, even though in the work by Gotthold Ephraim Lessing this was represented through a form shaped around Islam. It should be emphasized that the historical narrative is not presented through another religion or a non-European

religious figure in general, but specifically through Islam and in a tone infused with Eastern motifs. This is a relatively rare occurrence in 18th-century German dramaturgy. However, in order to confirm or refute this assumption, it became necessary to examine the transformation of Eastern plots and ideas within 18th-century German dramaturgy.

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