

# The Role Of European Culture In Shaping Ahmad Donish's Worldview

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**Annotation.** This article analyzes the views of the 19th-century Bukharan thinker Ahmad Donish- who lived and worked during a period of socio-political crisis in the Emirate of Bukhara - regarding European culture, science, and enlightenment. The author examines, on a scholarly basis, Donish's real-life observations made during his journey to Russia, his reflections on European progress, his comparative assessment of Eastern and Western civilizations, and his proposals for reforming Bukharan society.

**Keywords:** Ahmad Donish, European culture, Emirate of Bukhara, enlightenment, reform, East and West, journey to Russia, civilization, science and education, thinker, sources of Jadidism

## INTRODUCTION

During the period of social and political crisis in the Emirate of Bukhara, the thinker Ahmad Donish worked as a representative who embodied the aspirations and desires of the Uzbek people. Donish's primary goal was to rescue the peoples of Central Asia from ignorance and to lead them toward enlightenment and culture. Although Ahmad Donish traveled only to Russia and did not journey to Western European or Muslim countries like Ismail Bey Gasprinsky, Jamal al-Din al-Afghani, or Abdurauf Fitrat—and although he never wore European-style clothing but instead dressed like the local intellectuals in a traditional Uzbek *chopon*, turban, and with a beard—his intellect and worldview were far more advanced compared to those of his contemporaries. As his contemporary, the poet Shamsiddin Shohin, put it, he was “like an eagle among pigeons and crows; he soared higher than all and saw farther than the rest” [1;59]. Ahmad Donish admired the culture of European intellectuals and praised them in his writings. However, he never visited Europe itself; rather, he first became acquainted with Europeans when he traveled to St. Petersburg as the secretary of a diplomatic mission sent by the Emirate of Bukhara to the Russian Empire. Addressing the Europeans, he once remarked: “Forgive us; we do not know your city, your laws and customs—we are like untamed cattle, ignorant” [2;128].

## METHODOLOGY AND METHODS

This research is conducted on the basis of a historical-cultural and literary-analytical approach. The main objective of the study is to identify and analyze the influence of European culture, science, and socio-political ideas on the formation of the worldview of Ahmad Donish, one of the Central Asian Enlightenment thinkers of the nineteenth century.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

In his work *Navādir al-Waqāyi*, Ahmad Donish compares the lives of Asians and Europeans, praising the achievements of Europeans—*farang*—in science, culture, education, and military art. Ahmad Donish also offers numerous reflections on the nature of a wise person. In his view, “a wise person is one who knows moderation, he argues [1;106]. Many of Ahmad Donish's contemporaries, as well later thinkers, wrote that Europeans were enemies of Muslim life, culture, and religion. Intellectuals from

Iran, the Arab world, and Turkey—such as Rifa‘a al-Tahtawi, Ali Mubarak, Fares al-Marjani, Ismail Gasprinsky, Jamal al-Din al-Afghani, and Abdurauf Fitrat—often portrayed Europe and the Islamic world as mutually antagonistic civilizations striving to overcome and suppress one another. Ahmad Donish, however, argued that Muslim peoples should learn ethics, enlightenment, law, politics, and culture from Europeans. In his story *Foramishkhona* (“The House of Oblivion”), the thinker wrote: “The Europeans (Farang) have set themselves the goal of bringing prosperity to the whole world; therefore they have achieved unparalleled success in crafts and professions, and they never deviate from this goal.” He further stated that “the aim of the Europeans is to improve the entire world, and they have uncovered the secrets of the material universe” [2;88]. According to Ahmad Donish in his *Safarnama*, “The rulers of the Emirate of Bukhara possess no such noble purpose. These rulers are, by nature, ignorant and narrow-minded; they live only with concern for their own appetites. They are inclined toward corruption, adultery, gambling, and drunkenness” [89]. Donish saw his own aspirations reflected in the goals and actions of Europeans. In his view, Europeans base their activities on reason, intellect, and science; therefore, they have achieved great success both in their personal lives and in the structure of their societies.

He writes: “Compared to Rum (which at that time was under Muslim rule), the lands of Europe and Russia are vast, their seas are deep, and because the Europeans have engaged in many wars and battles, their armies are large. Since the distances are great and the steppes are boundless, they apply all their intellect and abilities, create new inventions, and achieve whatever goals they pursue. As for us, we claim that we have no such goals, and with this we try to justify our shortcomings [3;130]. During his journey to St. Petersburg, he visited the Museum of the Imperial Academy of Sciences, the Pulkovo Observatory, the Imperial Botanical Garden, the Institute of Technology, a children’s school in Tsarskoye Selo, the Mint, a textile manufacturing plant producing fabrics, and the opera and ballet theatre, thus becoming acquainted with Russian culture. Upon returning to Bukhara, the thinker conveyed to Amir Muzaffar his impressions of the trip and proposed that European culture should be studied, and that institutions of higher education, factories, and industrial plants should be established. The Amir, however, did not accept these proposals [2;120]. Because Russian officials were protecting Donish, the Amir did not sentence him to death; instead, hoping to make use of him as an interpreter proficient in Uzbek and Russian, he merely demoted him. Disregarding Ahmad Donish’s written proposal on reforming the state system, Amir Muzaffar remarked: “I honored him and sent him abroad, and now he has returned trying to teach me wisdom. I will never send him on a diplomatic mission again” [2;131].

Donish believed that studying European culture and educational systems would cause no harm; on the contrary, it would help the country escape backwardness. According to Ahmad Donish, Islamic scholars considered innovation (*bid‘ah*) to be harmful, thinking that the secrets of the material world and the creatures in water should be accepted exactly as God created them, and that attempting to understand these mysteries would be detrimental to religion. The Jadids, in contrast, focused their attention on the reform of education.

Greek philosophers, on the other hand, studied the secrets of nature in order to overcome scarcity and improve material conditions. They sought answers to questions such as “What is this? From what? Why?” Europeans devoted their valuable time and labor to finding rational answers to these questions, and even today, they continue to

seek answers and invent new things. According to Islamic scholars, however, such endeavors were seen as futile engagement in philosophy, misleading people and leading them astray: “No defender can be found for a people who have gone astray [5:126]. Donish, during his journey to St. Petersburg in 1857, became even more convinced that the study of science could comprehensively improve society. Observing Europe’s advanced progress in science and craftsmanship, Ahmad Donish lamented that in Central Asia at that time there were no notable individuals who, like the Europeans, dedicated their lives and efforts to knowledge, had absorbed the legacy of earlier great thinkers, and had internalized their sciences, to serve in state affairs. When the Amir offered him a government position, Donish imposed a condition: all ignorant, unlearned, and incompetent people must be removed from power and state administration. If the Amir agreed, he would write a treatise outlining the principles of rational governance. In his view, a ruler who relies on knowledge and experience can fulfill his duties effectively [4;152].

### CONCLUSION

It is possible to rescue Central Asia from ignorance and backwardness through knowledge and enlightenment. Unfortunately, at that time neither the government nor the common people recognized this truth. Reflecting on his era, Ahmad Donish wrote: “In our time, the truth is neither heard by ears nor seen by eyes. Only one path remains: I record what I know, I read it myself, and I weep alone. There is no remedy to escape this misfortune. Whoever speaks the truth is labeled insane, a troublemaker, or a dreamer” [2;130]. The thinker’s idea that society can be developed through knowledge can today be linked to the attention devoted to science and education in Uzbekistan.

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