

The impact of the Arabic calligraphy in the German literature:

The Divan of Johan v. Goethe as an example

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Abstract:

Some people may sometimes confuse Arabic calligraphy with writing and the difference between them. The word calligraphy is a term related to Arabic calligraphy that Muslims invented and developed, different styles and different types of literal drawings are governed by rules established by calligraphers and they developed them over time, until they settled on their current known form, which are six main lines.

In order for us to know Arabic calligraphy, we will find that the word calligraphy means "calligraphy by the pen, that is, books," as well as in other civilizations.

As for when we say Arabic calligraphy, here we define and allocate more to this definition and connect the calligraphy to Arabic. It means drawing beautiful Arabic letters to draw out in an artistic way that shows consistency, convergence, flow, and integration.

The Arabic calligraphy structures have a unique aesthetic character that fascinates the viewer, even if their texts cannot be understood. This is one of the aesthetic features that have crossed this linguistic and cultural boundary and taken it to the world. In the art of Arabic calligraphy, flexibility and dynamism has put it since ancient times in a permanent dialogue with other arts, especially architecture, sculpture and modern plastic arts. In the formation of Islamic art, Muslims relied on the arts of other nations' civilizations.

Pictures were widespread in Christian art and were prohibited in Islam, so writing in Arabic script replaced it.

Arabic manuscripts, antiques, and ornate artifacts such as textiles, ceramics, and glass, which were transmitted to Europe in recent centuries, had a role in the definition and publication of Arabic calligraphy. German culture was not in its European dimension in isolation from being influenced by the aesthetic and symbolic components of Arabic calligraphy. This influence was evident in the arts of drawing, literature, and philosophical theorization, which prompted the great German Poet Von Goethe, to praise Arabic calligraphy and try to learn Arabic writing. This research sheds light on the history of Arabic calligraphy in Germany and the aspects of its handling in German literature.

Keywords:

Arabic calligraphy, culture, German literature

Introduction:

The structures of the Arabic calligraphy have a unique aesthetic character that fascinates the viewer even if their texts cannot be understood. And this is one of the aesthetic features that carried Arabic calligraphy across the linguistic and cultural boundaries and took it to the world. The art of Arabic calligraphy has flexibility and dynamism that put it since ancient times in a permanent dialogue with other arts, especially with architecture, sculpture and modern plastic

arts. Arabic manuscripts, ornate artifacts such as textiles, ceramics and glass, which were transported to Europe in recent centuries, have had a role in introducing and disseminating Arabic calligraphy. German culture in its European dimension was not in isolation from the aesthetic and symbolic components of Arabic calligraphy. This influence was evident in the arts of drawing, literature and philosophical theorization, which prompted the great German poet Johann v. Goethe to study the Arabic script and to exercise Arabic writing. This article sheds light on the aspects of the Arabic script in Goethe's *West-Eastern Divan*.

The publisher Johann Friedrich Cotta presented to his friend Goethe a two-volume edition of the Divan composed by the Persian poet Hafez (approx. 1315 - 1390) in its first translation into German by the Viennese orientalist Joseph von Hammer-Purgstall.¹ The reading of the Divan of Hafez inspired Goethe to deal with the Orient, its spiritual and religious foundations, but also its aesthetic forms. A few years later in August 1819 Goethe's *West-Eastern Divan* – a collection of 200 poems – was published. On the occasion of the 200th anniversary of the *West-Eastern Divan* (2019) an exhibition took place in the Goethe-House in Frankfurt, which uses examples of poetry to show how Goethe dealt with the heritage of the Orient and how he transformed it for his poetic purposes. Materials from the estate testify to the love for Marianne von Willemer (1784 – 1860). In this exhibition Arabic characters are projected onto five screens. These are intended to illustrate Goethe's fascination with the Arabic script in which he practiced himself.

The study shows the processing of Arabic calligraphy in the Divan on several levels: receptive and creative levels. The layout of the cover and the title of the Divan in its first edition are extraordinarily designed and expose Goethe's cultural vision of the Divan. The cover juxtaposes the German title *West-Östlicher Divan* on the right and the chalcography (الديوان الشرقي للمؤلف) (الغربي) in Arabic by Carl Wilhelm Lieber on the left side. The Arabic title means literally: *The Eastern Divan of the Western Author*. This Arabic script on the left side can be interpreted as an expression of Goethe's vision about a literary exchange between Orient and Occident. The Divan is an Arabic word and means a collection of poems. Goethe calls it the “Eastern” Divan, referring to the fact that his Divan contains oriental motifs and topics. The “Western” author refers to Goethe himself, a poet who meets the oriental culture with openness and self-confidence.

It is surprising that the Egyptian philosopher and professor Abd-al-Rahman Badawi had adopted the Arabic title of the first edition of the Divan when he translated it to Arabic as *The Eastern Divan of the Western Author* and did not translate the German title *The West-Eastern Divan* that one would normally expect.

The preliminary stages of *West-Eastern Divan* consisted not only of reading Arabic and Persian poetry but also of scientific studies on oriental literature in general. These are paper sources of oriental texts, Arabic, Persian and Ottoman writings, which Goethe used during his work on the Divan.² Goethe's intellectual sensitivity gave him an idea of the fundamental role of writing in Muslim, Arabic and Persian culture. So he tried to learn the Arabic writing and calligraphy in order to reveal the special relationship between writing and language by handwriting many examples in the Divan. In a letter to Christian Gottlob Voigt (1815) Goethe wrote: One must at least see the same manuscripts, even if one cannot read them, in order to get an idea of the oriental poetry and literature. The infinite appreciation for their poets, worldly wise men and scholars, as well as the greatest patience and care are expressed in these manuscripts.³

Before Goethe started composing the Divan, he practiced Arabic writing and tried to learn the Arabic language. Calligraphy provided Goethe with an approach to understand oriental culture. Goethe himself had sources in the original language and copied Arabic names and vocabulary. It seemed he enjoyed this experience which was proven by the letter he wrote to his friend Johann Heinrich Schlosser (1780-1851). Goethe wrote in 1815:

Little is missing that I am still learning Arabic, at least I want to practice my writing skills so much that I can reproduce the amulets, talismans, abraxas and seals in the original. Perhaps in no language is mind, word, and writing so originally composed.⁴

Anyway, the 65-year-old Goethe did not really on learning the language, it remained with writing and rudimentary grammar exercises.

The script and some styles of Arabic calligraphy are part of the literary aesthetic in the Divan. They form rhetorical figures and motifs to express literary content. A good example is shown in the following poem, in which the calligraphy styles Naskhi and Talik occur. It is believed that Goethe took the term Talik from the Persian manuscripts and sources.

Schreibt er in Neski,	When he writes in Neski,
So sagt ers treulich,	He says it faithfully,
Schreibt er in Talik,	When he writes in Talik,
's ist gar erfreulich,	It is quite enjoyable,
Eins wie das andre,	one like the other,
Genug! er liebt. ⁵	Enough! he loves.

The poet attributes to calligraphy the ability to express feelings of fidelity and joy. The intensity of a lover's feelings varies depending on whether he writes in the style of *Naskhi* or in the style of *Talik*.

Above this poem written in German, Goethe wrote the following couplet in Arabic Naskhi style: (مقبول السلطان مسعود / مبعوض الخاقان مردود). This means: „Those who are in the Sultan ‘s favor are happy. Those who are ignored by the Khagan (emperor) are rejected.“

The poem “*The Four Favours*” (*Vier Gnaden*) is also one of those examples in which Arabic script appears in the Divan. In this poem Goethe describes the Arabs, their lifestyle and the landscape in which they live. In the original manuscript Goethe wrote by hand the *basmala* (in the name of God, the Most Gracious, the Most Merciful) in Arabic imitating the suras of the Quran which begin with the *basmala*. In addition to the Arabic lines in the Divan, Goethe wrote also the first four verses of the 114th surah of the Quran. Goethe himself carried out the ornamentation for this script.⁶

The Arabic script in the Divan has also an aesthetic function. It can be assumed that an average German reader cannot read and understand the Arabic words in the Divan. These words would rather appear exotic, beautiful and strange to him. Besides the foreign words, there are also foreign topics, motifs and names of persons from Arabic and Persian culture. These should expand the reader's intercultural experience in interpreting the Divan.

The aesthetic function of Arabic calligraphy is not only limited to the examples of Arabic script in the Divan. Goethe also transferred aesthetic elements of Arabic calligraphy and used them to decorate the German text. The decoration of the following poem shows this clearly.

God is the East!
God is the West!

Northern and southern lands

repose in the peace of his hands.⁷

Goethe placed this famous poem in the typical cloud-like writing space, which can be found, for example, in Persian Quran manuscripts. He shows creativity in his Divan's illustration by imitating Arab-Persian art. Goethe wrote this poem twice on the same page of the original manuscript. To the eye of an experienced calligrapher, the first creation seems to serve as a sketch, so to speak as a template for the second, more decorative creation. The last one is also decorated with a hand-drawn palm leaf motif.

The Divan's poetry is under the law of polarity and is permeated with the ideal of eternal love.⁸ The story of Hatem and Zulekha in the Divan is nothing more than a veiled expression of Goethe's incomplete love story for Marianne von Willemer. This lady is a singer and actress of Austrian origin for whom the poet "The Book of Zulekha" was dedicated in the Divan, and it is one of its main chapters. It became clear after the death of Goethe that this lady wrote some of the poems of the Divan. In other words, Goethe was not the only author of the *West-Eastern Divan*. The poet gave himself in the Divan the name Hatem and his beloved Marianna the name Zulekha. The correspondence between them was overwhelmed by pictures of oriental love, overshadowed by the spirit of the East and often surrounded by a veil of secrecy. So the communication between them was done with what we might call encrypted messages with Arabic numbers and Arabic names like "Zulekha". Finally, it should also be mentioned that Marianne gave Goethe slippers as a gift, on which her name is embroidered in Arabic.

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Goethe, Johann: Goethes Werke. IV. 25. Weimar: 1887 ff. 165.⁴

Divan. 285.⁵

Polaschegg 2005. 290.⁶

Divan. 12.⁷

Schimmel 1995. 67.⁸