

**TURKISMS IN THE TRAGEDY “TAMIRA AND SELIM” BY M. V. LOMONOSOV:
ETYMOLOGY, FUNCTIONS, AND CULTURAL SIGNIFICANCE**

Muminova Nodira Makhmudovna

Kokand University Andijan Branch, Andijan, Uzbekistan

e-mail: muminova.77.uz@gmail.com

phone number: +998916080204

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Abstract

The present article explores the lexical layer of Turkic-originated words (turkisms) found in the works of eighteenth-century Russian writers, with a particular focus on the tragedy “Tamira and Selim” (1750) by Mikhail Vasilyevich Lomonosov. Written at the command of Empress Elizabeth and set against the backdrop of the Battle of Kulikovo (1380), the play unfolds entirely within the Crimean Khanate, requiring the author to employ an extensive range of Eastern vocabulary to achieve historical and cultural authenticity. The study identifies and classifies the turkisms present in the text according to several thematic categories: titles and social designations (vizier, murza, tsar/khan), geographical and ethnic names (Kafa, Crimea, horde, Tatars), military terminology (regiment, treasury, bogatyr), and the proper names of the characters, which draw upon Arabic, Persian, and Turkic onomastic traditions. The article discusses the etymology of each identified turkism, tracing its path from the source language through Turkic mediation into Russian literary usage. Furthermore, the analysis reveals the stylistic functions these borrowings perform in the text: creating an Eastern cultural milieu, ensuring historical verisimilitude, characterising the dramatis personae through semantically motivated naming, and constructing an ideological opposition between the Russian and Eastern worlds. The paper also situates Lomonosov’s use of turkisms within the broader context of Russo-Turkic linguistic contacts and the development of Eastern-themed literary traditions in Russian letters, demonstrating that the tragedy represents an early and deliberate instance of turkisms being used as a style-forming literary device.

Keywords: turkisms, Lomonosov, Tamira and Selim, lexical borrowings, Turkic languages, Russian literary language, eighteenth-century Russian literature, etymology, cultural contact

1. Introduction

The lexicon of the Russian language has been profoundly shaped by centuries of contact with Turkic-speaking peoples. From the earliest Slavic-Turkic encounters in the pre-Mongol period through the era of the Golden Horde and the subsequent formation of successor khanates, a substantial stratum of Turkic vocabulary entered the Russian language, permeating its everyday speech, administrative terminology, military nomenclature, and literary register. By the middle of the eighteenth century, according to data compiled by E. N. Shipova, the Russian language had absorbed approximately two thousand lexical items of Turkic origin or Turkic mediation, many of which had become so thoroughly assimilated that their foreign provenance was no longer perceptible to native speakers.

The tragedy “Tamira and Selim” (1750) by Mikhail Vasilyevich Lomonosov occupies a distinctive position in this linguistic landscape. Composed at the oral command of Empress Elizabeth Petrovna, who

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ordered both Lomonosov and Trediakovsky to produce tragedies for the court stage, the play addresses one of the most consequential events in Russian history: the defeat of Khan Mamay's forces at the Battle of Kulikovo in 1380 by Grand Prince Dimitry Ivanovich. However, the dramatic action takes place not among the Russians but entirely within the camp of their adversaries — in the Crimean city of Kafa (modern Feodosia), at the court of the Crimean king Mumet.

This deliberate choice of perspective necessitated a dense deployment of Eastern vocabulary. Lomonosov, who was simultaneously engaged in historical research and drew upon the "Tale of the Battle on the Don" in its Kiprianian redaction from the Nikon Chronicle as well as Innokentiy Gizel's "Synopsis," needed to construct a linguistically credible Eastern world for his audience. The present paper undertakes a systematic analysis of the Turkic-originated lexical items in this tragedy, examining their etymological provenance, semantic characteristics, and stylistic functions.

2. Theoretical Framework and Methodology

In accordance with established practice in Russian historical lexicology, the term "turkism" is understood broadly in this study. It encompasses not only words of directly Turkic etymological origin but also lexical items of Arabic and Persian provenance that entered Russian through Turkic mediation. This approach follows the tradition established by Shipova (1976), Galliullin, Yunaleeva (2005), and Karimullina (2007), and reflects the historical reality whereby the Turkic languages of the Golden Horde and its successor states served as a conduit for a wide range of Oriental vocabulary into Russian.

The methodology of the present study involves several stages. First, the complete text of the tragedy was examined to identify all lexical items of potential Turkic, Arabic-via-Turkic, or Persian-via-Turkic origin. Second, each identified item was verified against standard etymological sources, principally Fasmer's Etymological Dictionary of the Russian Language, Shipova's Dictionary of Turkisms, and the Dictionary of the Russian Language of the Eighteenth Century. Third, the identified turkisms were classified into thematic groups. Finally, their stylistic functions within the literary text were analysed with reference to the principles of eighteenth-century Russian classicism.

3. Classification of Turkisms in the Text

3.1. Titles and Social Designations. The most prominent group of turkisms in the tragedy comprises terms denoting social rank, governmental office, and feudal hierarchy. The word vizir (from Arabic wazīr, "bearer of burdens," transmitted through Ottoman Turkish into Russian) appears directly in the list of dramatis personae: Zaisan is designated as "vizir Mumetov" — Mumet's vizier. The term murza (from Persian amīr-zāde, "son of an emir," via Turkic adaptation) denotes members of the Tatar aristocracy who play a role in the climactic confrontation. Lomonosov notably substitutes the Russian word tsar' for the Turkic khan, reflecting the contemporary Russian diplomatic convention of rendering the title of Eastern rulers in Russian equivalents for the educated audience. The compound tsarevich ("prince"), built upon the Turkic-originated root tsar' with a Russian patronymic suffix, applies to both Selim and Narsim, exemplifying the morphological integration of turkisms into Russian word-formation patterns.

3.2. Geographical and Ethnic Terms. The spatial setting of the tragedy is constructed through a series of toponyms and ethnonyms with Turkic connections. Kafa (Crimean Tatar Kefe), the principal locus of the action, is described in the preface as the "most notable maritime city of the Crimea." The word Krym (Crimea) itself derives from Turkic qırım, meaning "trench" or "fortification." The ethnonym tatary (Tatars) and the term orda (horde, from Turkic ordu, "royal camp, army") recur throughout the text

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to designate the forces and polity of Mamay. Lomonosov also refers to Natoliya (Anatolia), through whose Turkish form Anadolu the name entered Russian, in describing Selim's route to the Black Sea.

3.3. Military Vocabulary. The martial theme of the tragedy naturally draws upon military terminology, much of which entered Russian from Turkic sources during the period of the Golden Horde and later. The word bogatyr' (from Turkic baġatur / Mongolian baghatur, "hero, valiant warrior") carries associations of martial prowess. The term kazna ("treasury," from Arabic xazna through Turkic) and karaul ("guard, watch," from Turkic qarawul) appear in contexts related to the resources and defences of the besieged city. These items, unlike the exotic titles, were fully assimilated into Russian by the eighteenth century and function as unmarked vocabulary within the text.

3.4. Onomasticon: Personal Names. The anthroponymic system of the tragedy merits particular attention. The name Mamay is historical and Turkic in origin. Selim derives from Arabic salīm ("safe, peaceful"), semantically reinforcing the hero's portrayal as enlightened and noble. Mumet is a Turkic-adapted form of the Arabic name Muhammad. Nadir (Arabic for "rare, exceptional") characterises the wise uncle of Tamira. Zaisan echoes the Mongol-Turkic title zaisang, denoting a member of a noble lineage. Only Kleona, the nursemaid, bears a Greek name — a deliberate contrast that aligns her with the classical tradition of the confidante figure in French neoclassical tragedy.

4. Stylistic Functions of Turkisms

The turkisms identified in "Tamira and Selim" perform several interconnected stylistic functions. The primary function is the creation of an Eastern cultural atmosphere ("exoticisation"). Terms such as vizir', murza, orda, and the Turkic-rooted proper names immerse the audience in an unfamiliar world, establishing the dramatic setting as distinctly non-Russian. This Eastern colouring is not merely decorative; it serves the ideological architecture of the play by constructing a binary opposition between the "own" (Russian) and the "other" (Tatar, Crimean, Oriental). The Russian victory at Kulikovo is never shown directly but is reported through the mouths of Eastern characters, so that the turkism-laden language of those characters becomes the very medium through which Russian triumph is communicated.

A second function is historical authentication. Lomonosov, himself an active historian, drew on chronicle sources and was evidently concerned with the verisimilitude of the depicted world. The precise use of feudal terminology (vizir', murza, tsarevich) and geographic designations (Kafa, Krym, Natoliya) demonstrates that the playwright sought to anchor his fictional plot in verifiable historical realities.

Third, the semantically motivated onomasticon functions as a characterological device. Selim's name evokes peace and safety, prefiguring his role as the noble and enlightened hero. Nadir's name ("rare") signals his exceptional moral quality as the only court member who champions justice. Zaisan's title-derived name anchors him in the power structure as an establishment figure whose counsel is self-interested.

5. Turkisms and Russo-Turkic Cultural Relations

The presence of turkisms in "Tamira and Selim" reflects the deep and multifaceted nature of Russo-Turkic cultural contacts. The very fact that Lomonosov could construct a dramatically coherent Eastern world using vocabulary already available in the Russian literary language testifies to the extent of lexical interpenetration between the two linguistic traditions by the mid-eighteenth century. The turkisms in the tragedy span a wide chronological range of borrowing: some, like orda and bogatyr', entered Russian during the Mongol period; others, such as vizir' and kazna, arrived through Ottoman Turkish influence in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries.

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Moreover, the tragedy illustrates the cultural bilateralism inherent in these contacts. While the play ostensibly celebrates a Russian military victory, it simultaneously acknowledges the complexity of the Eastern world by populating it with characters of moral depth and emotional nuance. Tamira and Selim are sympathetic protagonists; Nadir is a voice of wisdom and justice. The linguistic fabric of the play — its turkisms — thus serves not only as a marker of cultural difference but also as a bridge of cultural understanding, recognising the sophistication of the Turkic-Islamic civilisation even as it celebrates Russian military valour.

6. Conclusion

The analysis undertaken in this paper demonstrates that turkisms constitute a significant and functionally diverse lexical stratum in Lomonosov's tragedy "Tamira and Selim." They encompass titles and social designations, geographical and ethnic nomenclature, military terminology, and a carefully constructed onomasticon rooted in Arabic, Persian, and Turkic naming traditions. These borrowings perform multiple stylistic roles: exoticisation, historical authentication, characterisation, and ideological framing. Lomonosov's handling of turkisms reveals him as both a poet attuned to the expressive potential of lexical borrowings and a historian committed to the faithful rendering of Eastern realities. The tragedy thus stands as one of the earliest deliberate deployments of turkisms as a style-forming device in Russian literature, anticipating the "Eastern text" tradition that would flourish in the works of Pushkin, Lermontov, and later Russian writers.

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