

The Essence Of Medieval Russian Literature: Origin, Development, Genres & Notable Features

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ABSTRACT

Literature written in the Medieval period has a great relevance with not only to the literary tradition of ancient period, but it also offers itself as a great testimonial monument. At the same time, it provides required room for its means, resources, expertise and experience for the Literature of Modern period to grow. In this article, as we take the example of Medieval Russian literature and try to give a brief introduction to its origin, we shall also identify the process of development, genres and notable features.

There is no doubt that Russian literature is read all over the world with great curiosity and enthusiasm. Though the foreigners usually pick up the works of Modern Russian literature for reading, yet they are unaware of the fact that Medieval Russian Literature too, is prosperous and rich as Russian literature of Modern Period. Hence, the main objective of this article is to get the young students and researchers familiar with treasures and peculiarities of Medieval Russian literature.

We hope that our article would not only give them the joy and the experience of reading the Medieval Russian literature but it will also enable and encourage them to do some interdisciplinary research and comparative studies.

Keywords: Medieval literature, Russia, Heyday, Genres, Modern Era.

Literature is a precious asset for every nation. It is an effective means to unfold and reveal a Country's Treasure. To exhibit the **History, Civilization, Culture, Traditions, Socio, Eco & Political System, State & Mindset of its People and their Achievements**. However, the Literature of every country has not developed instantly. The process of its formation and development goes through a long period.

Although, the origin of most of the literatures of different civilizations, dates back to ancient times, all the literatures of its time, have gained its own importance and peculiarities. Yet the period of **Middle Ages** (The Medieval Time) is viewed as a crucial period in the history of development of the World Literature. Since, this period is characterized with great **upheavals** and **chaos** in human history, a huge impact of them, can also be seen through the writings and nature of literature of this period.

During this Medieval Period, the whole world witnessed drastic changes in the World-Order i.e. **Demographical, Territorial, Political, Economic, Social, Philosophical, Religious and Cultural changes** that took place worldwide. However, these changes did not come into effect everywhere at once or at the same time.

Nevertheless, the spanning and significance of the Medieval Period varied from nation to nation. For example, the period between **Vth and the XVth centuries** is defined as The Medieval Period for **Europe**. On the other hand, the Medieval Period for **India** lasted **from VIth to XVIth century**. And for **Russia**, the Medieval Period began **from IXth century** and **reigned till the XVIIth century**.

The effect of all the above-mentioned changes can apparently be experienced or seen through the literatures of various countries. For example, during the time of Medieval India, a new literary trend "**Bhakti Movement**" blossomed in **Indian Literature**.

Similarly, **Medieval English Literature** experienced heyday of new genres such as **chivalry, romance, courtly love, didactic poetry, lyric and miracle and morality play** etc.

As far as **Russian literature** is concerned, it stands tall, with its pride of holding, some of the great rich Literatures of the world and some master-pieces of which has also become classics of the world literature, Russian Medieval Literary tradition has contributed significantly to enrich and flourish Russian Literature during the Medieval Russia with appearance of some new literary genres.

One of the foremost characteristics of medieval Russian literature was that, there was less space for **fiction**. The literary monuments of this period included specially **historical narratives (Chronicles, Chronicle based stories), Sagas, Motets, Gospels, Psalms, Sermons, Apocrypha, Hagiographies, Epistles, Legends, Novellas, Travel-Notes, Essays on Oratory Art, Apocryphal Stories, Monuments of Political Ideas, Philosophical & Theological Treaties, Natural Science Essays, Messages, Personal Letters and Business Writings.**

Christian religious literature had played a remarkable role in the development of Medieval Russian Literature. As Christian Churches started functioning in Russia since 988¹, **Written Scripts** (Alphabets or Fonts) and Church Literatures were needed. Hence, immediately after adopting Christianity from **Byzantine Empire**² that followed the **Greek Orthodox Churches**, Russia developed its own first official alphabet. And as a result, a new language, known as **Church-Slavonic Language** came into existence. It also became the language of literature. The first Slavic translations of the Bible were also done in it.

After the baptism of Russia, which played a significant role in rapport with the Byzantine Culture, a lot of work began in Kiev and other cities on translation and rewriting of literary monuments of Byzantine, Greek and South Slavonic Countries. Translated Literature opened a new world to the Russian readers and introduced them to see the greatness and beauty of the world.

Translation has not only contributed to **liturgical literature**, but also rendered a great deal of literature wealth to the **World History in Chronicles** and **Great deeds of Real Historical Heroes** such as **Alexander the Great** or **Fictional Characters**. However, in Russia, such translations were considered as Russia's own original literary creations.

How translation played a significant role in development of medieval Russian literature can be understood by the opinions of some experts, according to them, early Medieval Russian literature was, first and foremost, translated literature.

One of the most distinctive peculiarities of Russian Literature of this period was that the literary works were compiled in the form of manuscripts that spread across the Russia through copying. Not only the texts were copied, but sometimes they were also adapted in accordance with the changes in literary tastes and socio-political interests of Russian People.

Main features of early Medieval Russian literary works had very **limited scope for personal views of authors, strictly following facts, lack of fiction, anonymity of authors, repetition of incidents, frequent use of comparisons, metaphors, epithets and literary etiquettes**. Initially, almost the entire famous literature had a theological and religious-educational orientation but later secular literary tradition also started subsequently fiction monuments also appeared.

To have more comprehensive understanding of richness and uniqueness of Medieval Russian Literature we can classify various phases of its development over the period of Medieval Russia in the following manner: The second half of the **Xth century** is viewed as the time of **Origin of Russian Literature**.

Literary process of the **XIth - XIIth centuries** is defined as the process of “**Transplantation**” of Byzantine and Bulgarian literary tradition onto the Russian soil and this time is also known as the **period of formation of indigenous Russian Literature**. Since literature of this time acquired the features of monumental style, therefore **literature of this period is also called Monumental Literature**.

Russian literature of the **XIth - XIIIth centuries** was predominantly about **world history, the history of the emergence of Russia, Russia's struggle against foreign enemies, The Struggle of the Princes for the Kiev³ Throne, Legends etc.**

This was the time when translated literature dominated in Russia. At first, religious texts dominated. Later the secular literature also appeared. During this period, local features and local themes also found their way in literature.

The main theme of literature of the **XIIIth – XVth centuries** was based on **Nation & Patriotism**. Since the end of the **XIVth** and the first half of the **XVth** century was a period of national upsurge therefore literature of the **XIVth – XVth** centuries reflects the ideology and attempts of unification of the principalities around Moscow, the formation of Russian Nation & a Centralized Russian State, Historical & Political unity of Russian People.

The monumental-historical style acquired an expressive character in the literature. Literary works had a tragic shade distinguished by **lyrical elation**. Apart from this, the horrors of the invasion and fight with the Mongol-

¹ In 988 Christianity was recognized as the official religion in Rus (Old name of Russia).

²**Byzantine Empire** (Eastern Roman Empire) existed from 330 to 1453 CE. The capital of the empire was Constantinople. According to some sources, at its peak, the territory of the empire covered present day Italy, Greece, the Balkans, Levant, Asia Minor & North Africa. (Sir Please check here grammar errors)

³**KievanRus** – the name given to the old Slavic state located in modern-day Belarus, Ukraine and part of Russia from end of the 9th century to the middle of the 12th century. Capital of which was Kiev.

Tatars were also described in the literary works of that time. One such notable work was “**The Tale of the Destruction of Ryazan**”.

In the **second half of the XVth century** the genre of “**Hagiography**” began to develop actively. During this period, a large number of biographies of various Patriarchs, Saints, Monks were written. The 15th century, also witnessed a new genre of literature. i.e. **Travel Literature**. In this century people expressed a huge interest in literature related to Travel Expeditions and Trade Journeys. Experience of their journeys was described by authors in the form of **Travel Notes**. One of the most outstanding works of this genre was “**The Journey beyond Three Seas**” (1466-1472) by Tver⁴ merchant Afanasy Nikitin⁵.

As far as **XVIth century’s Russian Literature** is concerned significant amount of works written in this century was about spiritual, legal, political and everyday life of a person. State politics and transformation of society got the attention of writers and readers.

The period between XVIth -XVIIth centuries experienced the fight against heresy, liberation from spiritual illness, because of which Russian literature saw **origin of satire**.

In the **XVIIth century**, the process of transformation of Medieval Literature into Literature of Modern Era began. New literary genres and styles emerged, the process of democratization of literature commenced, and themes of the literature widened. Literature of this period focused on different shades of human life. In other words, now Human Life and Humanity were at the centre of attention of the authors.

To conclude, the beginning of Russian Medieval Literature happened at the end of the **Xth century** and the process of its development continued till the end of the **XVIIth century**. However, legacy of Medieval Russian Literature continued even after the end of the era of the Medieval Russia as it kept on influencing Russian Literature of Modern Times. Consequently, some indigenous genres of modern Russian literature came into existence.

For example the works of Travel Literature of the **XVIIIth century**, the essay literature of the **XIXth & the XXth century’s**, go back to Old Russian Travel Literature tradition. The Ode Poetry in the Literature of Russian Classicism flourished under the influence of oratory works of ancient Russian Literature. Culture of writing Novels in Modern Russian Literature also began based on the experience of **XVIIth century’s** Russian Novellas related to daily life of a person.

Thus, the Modern Russian Literature, we admire and astonished by its richness, has flourished and developed on the ideological values, vast experience, outstanding monuments, treasures of the Medieval Russian Literature. In other words, Medieval Russian Literary tradition provided a foundation for development of the Modern Russian Literature and helped it to secure a reputable position among the richest Literatures in the world.

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⁴Tver is a name of a city in Russia northwest of Moscow.

⁵AfanasyNikitin was a Russian merchant of Tver and one of the first Europeans to travel to and document his visit to India.