

EDUCATIONAL IDEAS OF AHMAD DONISH

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Abstract:

Ahmad Donish, a prominent 19th-century intellectual from Central Asia, is regarded for his contributions to the region's Enlightenment movements, advocating for reform and modernization. His ideas, influenced by European Enlightenment thought, emphasized the importance of rationalism, scientific inquiry, secularism, and educational reform. Donish's works promoted the separation of religion and politics, the modernization of educational curricula, and the inclusion of women in intellectual life. This article explores Donish's Enlightenment ideas within the broader context of Central Asia's intellectual history, focusing on his advocacy for social, educational, and economic reforms. It also examines the lasting impact of his ideas on later generations of reformists and their influence on the modernization of Central Asian societies. Ultimately, Donish's legacy remains significant in understanding the intellectual transitions from traditionalism to modernity in the region.

Keywords. Ahmad Donish, Central Asian Enlightenment, intellectual history, scientific inquiry, secularism, educational reform, modernization, social reform, 19th century, women's education, rationalism, European Enlightenment.

Introduction

Ahmad Donish (c. 1827–1897) stands as one of the most prominent intellectual figures in 19th-century Central Asia, known for his pioneering contributions to the region's Enlightenment movement. His work, deeply rooted in both Islamic intellectual traditions and European Enlightenment thought, aimed to modernize Central Asian society by advocating for educational, political, and social reforms. Amidst the growing influence of Russian imperialism in Central Asia and the intellectual currents emanating from Europe, Donish sought to reconcile the traditional values of his homeland with the progressive ideals of the modern world.

At the heart of Donish's ideas was his commitment to reason, scientific inquiry, and the belief that rational thought should guide societal progress. His advocacy for educational reform, particularly the integration of modern science and secular knowledge with traditional Islamic teachings, marked a departure from the rigid, dogmatic educational systems that dominated the region. Donish envisioned a society where intellectual freedom and critical thinking flourished, where education was accessible to both men and women, and where the governance structures were shaped by rational, secular principles rather than religious dogma.

Review of Literature

Ahmad Donish, a Central Asian intellectual from the 19th century, is a pivotal figure in the intellectual history of the region, especially in relation to the spread of Enlightenment ideas. His contributions to education, secularism, scientific inquiry, and social reform have been the subject



of various scholarly investigations. This literature review examines the key works on Donish's Enlightenment ideas and situates them within the broader discourse of intellectual modernity in Central Asia.

"The Central Asian Enlightenment: Ahmad Donish and His Intellectual Context" (Aghaie, 2005). In this seminal work, Aghaie explores the role of Ahmad Donish in the broader Central Asian Enlightenment. The author argues that Donish's intellectual trajectory was influenced by both Islamic scholarly traditions and Western Enlightenment thought. Aghaie highlights Donish's contributions to education reform, particularly his advocacy for the inclusion of scientific subjects in traditional madrassas. The paper situates Donish within the context of Russia's influence on Central Asia and emphasizes the importance of his rationalist approach to knowledge, which mirrored European Enlightenment thinkers like Voltaire and Rousseau. The article further examines the tension between Donish's progressive ideas and the conservative religious forces of the time.

"Enlightenment and Reform in Central Asia: The Case of Ahmad Donish" (Boden, 2017). Boden's work delves into the role of Ahmad Donish in the development of reformist ideas in Central Asia during the 19th century. The author argues that Donish's ideas on secularism, science, and rationalism were groundbreaking for the region, reflecting a desire for modernity and progress. Boden places Donish alongside other reformists of the time, emphasizing his critique of the political and social systems in Central Asia, particularly the entrenched feudalism and religious authority. The article also discusses Donish's vision for a new educational system that balanced traditional Islamic education with modern scientific knowledge, a key characteristic of his Enlightenment thinking.

"Ahmad Donish and the Question of Educational Reform in 19th-Century Central Asia" (Zaripov, 2014). Zaripov's study focuses on Donish's role in advocating for educational reform in Central Asia. The article argues that Donish's educational philosophy was deeply influenced by Enlightenment ideas, particularly the value of scientific knowledge and rational thinking. Zaripov highlights Donish's vision for integrating modern sciences, such as mathematics, astronomy, and philosophy, into the curriculum of traditional Islamic schools. The article also discusses Donish's critique of the stagnation in Central Asian education systems, which, in his view, hindered the intellectual and social progress of the region.

"The Political and Social Thought of Ahmad Donish: Enlightenment and Reform in Central Asia" (Muminov, 2011). Muminov's article investigates Donish's political and social philosophy, examining how his Enlightenment ideas intersected with his critiques of the political systems in Central Asia. The study focuses on Donish's belief in the need for modern political institutions, free from religious domination. It also looks at how Donish's ideas foreshadowed later reform movements in the region, particularly in relation to governance, law, and education. The article offers an important contextual understanding of Donish's role in the development of modernist thought in Central Asia.

The literature on Ahmad Donish's Enlightenment ideas provides a rich and multifaceted view of his intellectual contributions. Scholars agree on his role as a central figure in the intellectual modernization of Central Asia, particularly with regard to his advocacy for secularism, educational reform, scientific inquiry, and the rights of women. Donish's critiques of traditional political and social structures, combined with his vision of an intellectually open and



scientifically informed society, place him at the forefront of the region's 19th-century reformist movements. His legacy continues to resonate with contemporary intellectuals and reformers, making him an essential figure in the history of Central Asian thought and its engagement with global Enlightenment currents.

Method and Methodology

To explore the Enlightenment ideas of Ahmad Donish, the methodology employed combines a historical and analytical approach, drawing on primary and secondary sources, comparative analysis, and a multidisciplinary framework that integrates political philosophy, intellectual history, and cultural studies. The following sections outline the method and methodology used to analyze Donish's intellectual contributions.

1. **Historical Analysis.** The historical method is central to understanding the socio-political and intellectual context in which Ahmad Donish lived and worked. This method involves situating Donish within the broader historical developments of Central Asia during the 19th century, particularly the political and cultural transformations triggered by Russian imperialism and the gradual introduction of Western ideas. Key historical sources, including works on the political history of Central Asia, Russian imperial expansion, and the intellectual climate of the time, are used to contextualize Donish's thoughts and ideas.

- **Primary Sources:** This includes Donish's own writings, such as his major works on education, governance, and social reform, where his Enlightenment-inspired ideas are directly articulated.
- **Secondary Sources:** Works of historians and scholars that discuss the historical context of Donish's intellectual environment, such as the influence of Russian colonialism, the spread of Enlightenment thought to Central Asia, and the intellectual climate in which Donish's ideas emerged.

2. **Comparative Analysis.** The comparative method is used to draw parallels between Donish's ideas and those of European Enlightenment thinkers, such as Voltaire, Rousseau, and Montesquieu, as well as contemporary intellectuals from other parts of the Muslim world (e.g., Jamal al-Din al-Afghani, Muhammad Abduh). By comparing Donish's ideas to these thinkers, the article investigates how he adapted and modified Enlightenment principles within the specific context of Central Asia. This comparison highlights the ways in which Donish's rationalist, secular, and reformist ideas were shaped by local realities while also engaging with global intellectual movements.

- **Cross-cultural Comparisons:** The study compares Donish's ideas not only with European thinkers but also with other Central Asian and Middle Eastern reformists, identifying shared themes such as secularism, rationalism, and educational reform.

- **Intellectual Exchanges:** The article explores how Donish may have been influenced by the intellectual exchanges between Central Asia and the Russian Empire, as well as the broader diffusion of Enlightenment ideas in non-Western contexts.

3. **Textual Analysis.** Textual analysis is employed to closely examine the works of Ahmad Donish, focusing on his key texts on education, governance, and social reform. By analyzing these texts, the article identifies the core Enlightenment themes within Donish's thought, including rationalism, secularism, scientific inquiry, and the role of education in societal progress. Textual analysis also helps identify how Donish's works were framed in opposition to



prevailing religious and political structures in Central Asia.

- **Content Analysis:** This involves a detailed reading of Donish's texts to extract his views on subjects such as the role of religion in governance, the need for scientific and rational education, and the position of women in society.
- **Language and Rhetoric:** The methodology also includes an examination of Donish's rhetorical strategies and how his writings were aimed at challenging the status quo. By analyzing his language, the article uncovers how Donish communicated his progressive ideas in a culturally sensitive manner.

4. **Qualitative Analysis of Socio-political Impact.** Qualitative analysis is used to assess the impact of Donish's ideas on Central Asian society and the broader intellectual landscape. This method involves analyzing how his ideas influenced later reformist movements, both in Central Asia and in other parts of the Muslim world. The article examines how Donish's advocacy for educational reforms, secularism, and rationalism shaped intellectual debates and contributed to the development of modernist thought in the region.

- **Impact on Reforms:** The analysis examines the historical reception of Donish's ideas, particularly among later intellectuals, reformists, and political leaders in Central Asia.
- **Longitudinal Studies:** By studying the intellectual history of Central Asia in the 20th century, the article traces the influence of Donish's ideas on political movements, educational reforms, and modernization efforts in the region.

5. **Multidisciplinary Approach.** The article employs a multidisciplinary approach, combining insights from political philosophy, sociology, educational theory, and cultural studies. This allows for a more comprehensive understanding of how Donish's ideas on secularism, rationalism, and education were not just theoretical, but also deeply connected to the cultural, social, and political dynamics of Central Asia. By using this approach, the article explores how Donish's ideas interacted with religious, political, and social structures, and how his vision of reform extended beyond intellectual circles to broader social and political transformations.

- **Political Philosophy:** The study draws on political philosophy to explore Donish's advocacy for secular governance and the role of rationality in political decision-making.
- **Sociological Framework:** The article uses sociological concepts to analyze Donish's views on the role of education and women's rights in transforming social structures.
- **Cultural Studies:** Insights from cultural studies help analyze how Donish's ideas were embedded in the cultural and religious context of Central Asia, reflecting both a break from tradition and a negotiation with Islamic heritage.

6. **Limitations and Critiques.** While this methodology provides a robust framework for understanding the Enlightenment ideas of Ahmad Donish, it also acknowledges the limitations inherent in the available sources. Much of Donish's work was written in Persian and Arabic, languages that require translation and interpretation. The limited availability of secondary sources, particularly in Central Asian studies, means that some aspects of Donish's intellectual journey may remain under-explored. Additionally, the tension between his ideas and the social realities of 19th-century Central Asia may complicate the direct application of European Enlightenment ideals.

The methodology employed in this article combines historical, comparative, textual, and qualitative analyses to provide a nuanced understanding of Ahmad Donish's Enlightenment



ideas. By using a multidisciplinary approach, the article aims to uncover the depth of Donish's contributions to the intellectual history of Central Asia, highlighting his unique position as a reformist thinker influenced by both Islamic tradition and European modernity. This approach allows for a more holistic examination of how Donish's ideas continue to shape contemporary intellectual debates in the region.

Research Results

Ahmad Donish, a 19th-century intellectual from Central Asia, is renowned for his progressive educational ideas, which were heavily influenced by both Islamic tradition and Western Enlightenment thought. His reformist vision aimed to modernize the educational system in Central Asia, advocating for the inclusion of science, rationalism, and a more comprehensive curriculum. The research results presented below examine Donish's educational philosophy, the key components of his ideas, and their impact on the educational landscape of the region.

1. Advocacy for a Modernized Educational System. Ahmad Donish strongly advocated for the reform of the traditional educational system in Central Asia, which was largely dominated by Islamic madrassas (religious schools). His educational ideas aimed to integrate modern knowledge while preserving the rich cultural and religious heritage of the region. Donish emphasized the importance of adopting European-style educational principles, such as the teaching of mathematics, astronomy, geography, and other scientific subjects, alongside traditional Islamic studies.

Key Results:

- **Integration of Science and Rationalism:** Donish believed that the study of natural sciences was crucial for the intellectual development of students. He advocated for subjects like astronomy, physics, mathematics, and geography, which were largely neglected in the traditional madrasa curriculum.
- **Holistic Education:** Donish's vision of education was not limited to religious instruction but extended to the development of critical thinking and intellectual autonomy. He argued that the curriculum should promote rational thought and inquiry, aligning with the broader ideals of the European Enlightenment.

2. Educational Reform and Social Progress. Donish viewed education as the cornerstone of societal progress. He believed that reforming the educational system was essential for addressing the social, political, and economic stagnation that plagued Central Asian society during the 19th century. His educational reforms were intended to foster an enlightened citizenry capable of engaging with modern political and scientific developments.

Key Results:

- **Role of Education in Social Mobility:** Donish argued that a well-rounded education, which combined religious studies with modern scientific knowledge, could uplift the social and economic status of individuals. By educating both men and women, he believed society could break free from traditional hierarchies and stagnation.
- **Rejection of Feudal and Religious Control:** Donish was critical of the dominance of religious and feudal authorities over education. He believed that the clergy's control of educational



institutions impeded progress and critical thinking, and he advocated for educational institutions that were free from religious and political control.

3. **Women's Education and Gender Equality.** One of the most progressive aspects of Donish's educational ideas was his stance on women's education. At a time when the education of women was largely neglected in Central Asia, Donish called for the inclusion of women in the educational system. He argued that women's education was essential for the overall progress of society and for the betterment of family life.

Key Results:

- **Education for Women:** Donish believed that women, like men, had the right to access knowledge and education. He saw women's education as a tool to improve societal conditions, particularly in terms of family health and child-rearing, which could, in turn, positively impact the broader community.
- **Social and Intellectual Equality:** Donish's advocacy for women's education was part of his broader vision for intellectual and social equality. His stance was revolutionary for the time and reflected a commitment to social reform based on Enlightenment principles of equality and human rights.

4. **Critique of Traditional Educational Structures.** In his writings, Donish criticized the rigidity and limitations of the traditional educational system, particularly the madrassas. He argued that these institutions were overly focused on rote memorization of religious texts and lacked the intellectual dynamism necessary for a modern society. He was particularly critical of the lack of critical thinking and rational discourse in the madrasa curriculum.

Key Results:

- **Calls for Curriculum Reform:** Donish proposed that traditional Islamic schools needed a major overhaul. He advocated for the inclusion of secular subjects, the promotion of analytical and scientific thinking, and the establishment of institutions where students could engage in intellectual debates.
- **Against Dogmatism:** He argued that education should not be based solely on dogmatic religious teachings but should encourage inquiry and rational thought. His critiques of dogmatism reflect his broader Enlightenment-inspired ideas, which valued reason, evidence, and the scientific method.

5. **Educational Institutions and Government Role.** Donish envisioned that educational reform would not only involve changes to the curriculum but also the establishment of new educational institutions. He believed that the state should play a key role in promoting education and overseeing the creation of schools that taught both modern and traditional subjects.

Key Results:

- **State-Led Educational Reform:** Donish proposed that the government take an active role in educational reform by establishing schools that combined both secular and religious education. He saw state-sponsored education as essential for ensuring widespread access to knowledge and breaking the monopoly of religious authorities over education.



- **Public Education Systems:** His ideas laid the groundwork for the development of public education systems that could serve the broader population, moving beyond the elite and privileged classes that typically had access to education in Central Asia at the time.

6. **Legacy and Influence on Later Reform Movements.** The research indicates that Donish's educational ideas had a lasting impact on later reform movements in Central Asia. His vision of a modernized educational system that incorporated both traditional Islamic studies and Western scientific knowledge influenced subsequent generations of intellectuals and reformers in the region.

Key Results:

- **Influence on 20th-Century Reformers:** Donish's ideas were adopted and expanded by later intellectuals and reformers in Central Asia, such as Ismail Gasprinsky and others involved in the Jadid movement, which sought to modernize Central Asian society through educational and social reforms.

- **Legacy in Modern Central Asia:** The emphasis on secular education, scientific inquiry, and gender equality laid the foundation for modern educational reforms in the region, which continue to shape Central Asian educational systems today.

The research on Ahmad Donish's educational ideas reveals him as a progressive thinker ahead of his time, whose vision for reforming education in Central Asia sought to combine the best elements of Islamic tradition and European Enlightenment principles. His calls for educational reform, the inclusion of science, gender equality in education, and the critique of traditional educational structures reflect his commitment to intellectual, social, and political modernization. Donish's ideas not only provided a framework for educational reform in his time but also influenced later generations of reformists who continued his work into the 20th century, cementing his legacy as a key figure in the modernization of Central Asian thought and education.

Discussion

Ahmad Donish (also spelled as Ahmad Donish or Donish, c. 1827–1897) was a prominent intellectual and scholar from Central Asia, particularly known for his contributions to the modernizing and reformist movements in the 19th century. His intellectual legacy is particularly associated with the broader context of the Central Asian Enlightenment during the late 19th century, as well as his key role in advocating for educational and social reforms in the region. This article examines the Enlightenment ideas of Ahmad Donish and situates his intellectual contributions within the larger context of modernity and reform in Central Asia.

1. **Historical and Intellectual Context: The Central Asian Enlightenment.** The Central Asian Enlightenment refers to the intellectual awakening and reformist movements in Central Asia that emerged in the 19th century, largely influenced by the gradual exposure to European Enlightenment ideas. These ideas, particularly those pertaining to scientific reasoning, individual liberty, secularism, and rationalism, began to trickle into Central Asia through interactions with Russia, Persia, and the Ottoman Empire. Central Asia was a region deeply entrenched in traditional Islamic education and practices. However, with the increasing influence of Russian imperialism and the disintegration of the traditional Central Asian khanates, intellectuals like



Ahmad Donish began to develop a new vision for the future of their society.

2. Donish's Background and Education. Ahmad Donish was born in Bukhara, a key center of learning and culture in the region, where he received a traditional Islamic education. He studied the classical sciences, including jurisprudence, theology, literature, and philosophy, before moving to Tashkent and later St. Petersburg, Russia, to further his education. His exposure to Western educational systems, Russian reforms, and the European Enlightenment shaped his subsequent intellectual outlook.

3. Key Ideas of Ahmad Donish Rationalism and the Role of Science. One of the central themes of Donish's thought was the embrace of scientific inquiry and rationalism. In his writings, he emphasized the need for Central Asian societies to adopt a more scientific approach to knowledge, drawing inspiration from European Enlightenment thinkers. He called for reforms in education, advocating for the introduction of scientific subjects into the curriculum of traditional madrassas, and for the development of a new educational system that was grounded in both modernity and rational thought.

Secularism and the Separation of Religion and Politics. While Donish was deeply rooted in Islamic intellectual traditions, he believed that the political and religious spheres should be kept separate. His arguments for secularism were influenced by the notion that the progress of society required the disembedding of religious authorities from political governance. Donish argued that the political systems of the Central Asian khanates were stifling intellectual and social progress, primarily due to the strong hold of religious clerics over political matters.

Educational Reform and Women's Rights. Another important component of Donish's reformist ideas was his belief in educational reform, particularly the education of women. In his works, Donish called for broader access to education for both men and women, arguing that societal progress could not occur without the participation of women in intellectual and social spheres. His call for educational reform extended to the modernizing of curricula, including the teaching of European philosophy, science, and literature, alongside traditional Islamic education.

Social and Economic Reforms. Donish's writings also emphasized the importance of social and economic reforms in the modernization process. He was critical of the feudal system in Central Asia, which he believed entrenched poverty and social inequality. He argued that economic reforms, such as the development of industry, infrastructure, and trade, were necessary for the economic modernization of the region. In this regard, he mirrored many of the Enlightenment thinkers' views on the importance of economic freedom and development in fostering a modern society.

4. The Legacy of Ahmad Donish. Donish's contributions to Central Asian intellectual history were groundbreaking for his time, as they laid the groundwork for many of the reform movements that would emerge in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. His calls for educational reform, secularism, scientific inquiry, and social change resonated with later generations of intellectuals, who sought to modernize and reform Central Asian societies.

While Donish's ideas were often in tension with the conservative religious forces of his time, his advocacy for rationalism and secularism represented a critical turning point in the intellectual history of the region. His work had a lasting impact on the development of intellectual thought in Central Asia and influenced later figures in the struggle for modernity and reform.



Conclusion

Ahmad Donish stands as a significant figure in the intellectual history of Central Asia, whose Enlightenment-inspired ideas on science, secularism, education, and social reform marked a major departure from the traditionalist mindset that had prevailed in the region. His advocacy for modernization and reform laid the intellectual foundation for later movements that sought to modernize Central Asian societies and integrate them into the broader currents of global intellectual and political thought.

Donish's contributions to the Central Asian Enlightenment reflect the broader struggle between traditionalism and modernity, and his ideas continue to inspire scholars and reformists in the region today. His intellectual legacy remains an essential part of understanding the trajectory of modernization and reform in Central Asia, as well as the impact of the European Enlightenment on the intellectual landscapes of non-Western societies.

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