

Prof. Montaigne

Subject: Comparative Debates of French and Persian Literatures

Nationality: France / Major : Literature

Dialogue Date: 1966

Ja'fari: Does Victor Hugo's *Les Miserables* still have the same significance and credit that it once had in the West?

Montaigne: Yes, there are still many people who believe that this book is unrivalled in its style and theme. Some literary critics have even called it the "Second Bible". How do you see the value of this book in Islamic and Eastern countries?

Ja'fari: Regardless of the few cases in which this book reflects the culture of society that Hugo has lived in, it depicts the common pains, grieves and needs of humanity as well as their remedies – albeit by means of a metaphorical language – in a beautiful and logical fashion. Accordingly, this book has truly gone beyond the borders of the Occident and impressed most societies around the globe.

To explain man's relationships with his fellow human beings in social life, *Les Miserables* has seemingly indicated several instances of human realities and facts. This book is available in Islamic countries in different translations and editions.

Montaigne: Have you read this book?

Ja'fari: Yes, twice. I found this book both meaningful and sympathetic. I mean, the reader of this book realizes that it has not been written by a capricious author persuaded by material affairs and fame.

Moreover, I have selected almost 150 sentences from this book and discussed them in my preface to the third volume of *Rumi the Man and His Ideas: An Analytical and Critical Interpretation of the Masnavi*.¹

Montaigne: Could you compare Victor Hugo and his masterpiece *Les Miserables* with other famous literati of the East and the West?

Ja'fari: As for Western literati, I should say that I am not familiar with all of them, but my knowledge of Western literature is confined to such renowned figures as Lamartine, Balzac, Shakespeare, Goethe,

1- In 15 volumes published by one of Iranian publishers.

Dostoyevsky, Tolstoy, Henry Longfellow and the like. Although each one of these literati has discussed very interesting points regarding human life, *Les Miserables* and some works of Dostoyevsky's have their own particular magnificence and charm and one can say that they have had ideas to communicate with humanity. It seems that other Western writers in comparison with these renowned literati are like modern poetry as compared to classic poetry. Although modern poetry has presented some messages for the modern world, its classic rival is of fundamental magnificence due to its devotion to the poetic articulation of the principles and rules of the quadruple ontological relationships (man's relationship with himself, with God, with the world and with his fellow human beings).

The Audience: You have presented a comparative discussion of *Les Miserables* in your preface to the third volume of *An Analytical and Critical Interpretation of Rumi's Masnavi*. Do you believe that this comparison has addressed all aspects of the issue?

Ja'fari: Of course not, but a careful reading of both books [*Les Miserables* and *Masnavi*] shows that Victor Hugo was mostly concerned with human relationships in social life, particularly in the view of modern developments that have led to the emergence of "civilization". However, the other three fundamental ontological relationships have also been somehow addressed in *Les Miserables*, while in *Masnavi* Rumi has discussed these quadruple issues in an integrative fashion. To state the matter otherwise, man in the world and in association with his other fellowmen, either individually or collectively, has been more intellectually attractive in Hugo's view, but Rumi is interested in a kind of human being whose existence's transphysical and spiritual aspect is more significant and authentic than its natural and social aspects, although these latter aspects have their own respective significance as seen by Rumi.

Moreover, the boundary that separates the physical from the transphysical is the most important of all:

You paired together the two ends of the rings of existence thanks to the truth.