

The Literary Contribution of Nizami Ganjvi to Persian Khamsa Writing

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Introduction:

Jamaluddin Abu Muhammad Ilyas ibn Yusuf ibn Zakki, popularly known as Nizami Ganjvi, was a 12th-century Persian poet. He is considered the greatest romantic epic poet in Persian literature, who brought a colloquial and realistic style to the Persian epic. His heritage is widely appreciated and shared by nations like Afghanistan, Azerbaijan, Iran, the Kurdistan region and Tajikistan. He was born at Ganja, in Northern Persia (modern day Azerbaijan) in 1141 AD. His father died early when Nizami was only a child. Thereafter, he was brought up by his maternal uncle, Khwaja Umar, who took responsibility for him and afforded him an excellent education. His mother named Raksa, was of Kurdish background. His father, whose name was Yusuf, is mentioned once by Nizami in his poetry.

Nizami was married three times. According to Iraj Bashiri, Nizami's first wife was his "most beloved" wife. His only son, Mohammad, was from this wife. She died after "*Khosrow and Shirin*" was completed. Nizami mentions his son again in "*Layla and Majnun*", adding that "now this son is 14 years old" and "apple of my eyes". In "*Haft Peykar*" (Seven Beauties), he also mentions and advises his son about taking more responsibility as the father was growing more frail. Strangely enough, Nizami's two other wives, too, died prematurely – the death of each coinciding with the completion of an epic, prompting the poet to say, "God, why is it that for every *mathnavi*, I must sacrifice a wife!"

Nizami was not a court poet and accordingly, he does not appear in the annals of the dynasties, called *Tazkerehs*. Consequently, few facts are known about Nizami's life, the only source being his own work, which does not provide much information on his personal life. Nizami spent his whole life in Ganj and died in 1209 A.D in Ganj, Persia.

Keywords: Nizami Ganjvi, Persian, Khamsa, Panj Ganj, Masnavi

Significance of Nizami's work in Persian Literature:

The influence of Nizami's work on the subsequent development of Persian literature has been enormous and the *Khamsa* became a pattern that was emulated in later Persian poetry and also in other Islamic literatures. The legacy of Nizami is widely felt in the Islamic world and his poetry has influenced the development of Persian, Arabic, Turkish, Kurdish and Urdu poetry amongst many other languages. In Persian miniature, the stories in Nizami's poems, alongside those of Firdowsi's *Shahnama*, have been the most frequently illustrated literary works.

According to the Encyclopedia Britannica: "*Nizami is admired in Persian-speaking lands for his originality and clarity of style, though his love of language for its own sake and of philosophical and scientific learning makes his work difficult for the average reader.*"

Amongst the many notable poets who have taken the *Five Treasures of Nizami* as their model, may be mentioned- Amir Khusro, Jalal Farahani, Abdul Rahman Jami, Hatefi Jami, Maktabi Shirazi, Abdul Qader-e Bedel Dehlavi, Fayzi, Jamali and Ahmad Khani. Not only poets, but historians such as Rawandi were also influenced by Nizami's poetry and used his poem in rendering history. Besides these, scores of poets have started their composition with the first line of Nizami's *Makhzan al-Asrar*.

According to Dr. Rudolf Gelpke: “Many later poets have imitated Nizami's work, even if they could not equal and certainly not surpass it; Persians, Turks, Indians, to name only the most important ones. The Persian scholar Hekmat has listed not less than forty Persian and thirteen Turkish versions of *Layla and Majnun*.”

According to Vahid Dastgerdi: “If one would search all existing libraries, one would probably find more than 1000 versions of *Layla and Majnun*.”

Jami in his *Nafahatul Unus* remarks: Although most of Nizami's works on the surface appear to be romance, in reality they are a mask for the essential truths and for the explanation of divine knowledge. Yet in his *Baharestan*, Jami mentions that: *Nizami's excellence is more manifest than the sun and has no need of description.*

Hashemi Kermani remarks: *The empire of poetry obtained its law and order from Nizami's beautiful verses and to present words before Nizami's silent speech is only a waste of time.*

Amir Khusroe remarks about the gem of Nizami, in his own style, in these unforgettable words:

*"The ruler of the kingdom of words, famed hero,
Scholar and poet, his goblet [glass] toasts;
In it – pure wine, it's drunkingly sweet,
Yet in goblet [glass] beside us – only muddy setting."*

Goethe, the fourteenth century German philosopher, admires the stature of Nizami as:

*"Among the fourteen poets of the East, seven are the best known.
Among them the most famous is Nizami."*

Nizami's much more famous successors Saadi and Hafiz have left eloquent tributes to his praise.

Saadi says: *"Here is our Nizami, the noble pearl. Heaven created it of purest dew to be the pearl of the world. It shone long unrecognized by men. Therefore, God laid it gently back again in the shed."*

Hafiz gives him even higher praise in these memorable words: *"The song of Nizami, to which no other utterance under the ancient can be compared."*

Nizami's Persian poetry or "Panj Ganj" writing or "Khamsa" Naveesi:

Nizami is best known for his five long narrative poems, which have been preserved. He dedicated his poems to various rulers of the region as was custom of that time for great poets, but avoided court life. Nizami was a master of the *Masnavi* style double-rhymed verses. He wrote poetical works of which the main one is the *Panj Ganj* (Persian: Five Treasures), also known by the Persian pronunciation of the Arabic word *Khamsa* ("Quintet" or "Quinary"). The first of his five 'Treasures', called "*Makhzan al-Asrar*" or "*The Storehouse of Mysteries*" was influenced by Sanai of Ghazna's monumental *Garden of Truth*. The other 'Treasures' were medieval romances. *Khusrow and Shirin*, *Bahram-e Gur*, and *Alexander the Great*, who all have episodes devoted to them in Firdowsi's Book of Kings, appear again here at the center of three of four of Nizami's narrative poems. The adventure of the paired lovers, *Layla and Majnun*, is the subject of the second of his four romances, and derived from Arabic sources. In all these cases, Nizami reworked the material from his sources in a substantial way. The *Khamsa* was a popular subject for lavish manuscripts illustrated with painted miniatures at the Persian and Mughal courts in later centuries e.g. the *Khamsa of Nizami*, created for the Mughal Emperor Akbar in the 1590s. The Quinary (Five Treasures- *Panj Ganj*) includes the five Persian books of Nizami:

1. Makhzan al-Asrar:

Makhzan al-Asrar (Persian: مخزن الاسرار) "The Treasury of Mysteries" (1163-1176) is the first poem of Nizami's Khamsa. It is both the shortest and the earliest of the Quintet and is of quite a different character than the others. This poem was dedicated to Fakhruddin Bahramshah, the ruler of Erzinjan. The story deals with such esoteric subjects as philosophy and theology. The story contains twenty discourses, each of them portraying an exemplary story on religious and ethical topics. The stories which discuss spiritual and practical concerns enjoin kingly justice, riddance of hypocrisy, warning of vanity of this world and the need to prepare for the after-life. The general message of the discourse is that Nizami preaches the ideal way of life drawing attention of his reader to the supreme rank of man among God's creatures and making him aware of his spiritual destination. Being rather a mystical poem with illustrative anecdotes after the fashion of the *Hadiqa* of Sanai or the later *Masnavi* of Jalaluddin Rumi, than a romance, it also appears to be inferior in quality. But this is, perhaps, partly due to the metre in which Nizami wrote. This poem is containing about 2,250 Persian couplets. With this work, Nizami joins the destination of Persian poetry which had started with Sanai and was continued by others, in the first place by Attar. "The Treasury of Mysteries" was translated into English by Gholam H. Darab in 1945. After this early work, Nizami turned into narrative poetry.

2. Khosrow o Shirin:

Khosrow o Shirin (Persian: خسرو و شیرین) "Khosrow and Shirin" (1177-1180) is the second poem of Nizami's Khamsa. Nizami, both as regards matter and style, follows Firdowsi rather than Sana'i. It is a story of pre-Islamic Persian origin which is found in the great epico-historical poems of *Shahnameh*, based on a true story that was further romanticized by Persian poets. The story chosen by Nizami, was commissioned and dedicated to the Seljuk Sultan Toghril II, the Atabek Muhammad ibn Eldiguz Jahan Pahlavan and his brother Qizil Arslan. The story depicts the love of Sassanian Khosrow II Parviz towards his Armenian princess Shirin. "Khusrow and Shirin" recounts the story of King Khosrow's courtship of Princess Shirin, and vanquishing of his love-rival, Farhad. The story has a complex structure with several genres exploited simultaneously it contains many verbal exchanges and letters- all imbued with lyrical intensity. Khosrow endures long journeys- physical and spiritual, before returning to Shirin, his true love. They are eventually married, but eventually Khosrow is killed by his son and Shirin commits suicide over the body of her murdered husband. Pure and selfless love is represented here embodied in the figure of Farhad, secretly in love with Shirin, who finally falls victim to the king's ire and jealousy. In turn, Nizami's great work had a tremendous influence on later authors and many imitations of this work were made. With complete artistic and structural unity, the epic of *Khosrow o Shirin* turned to be a turning point not only for Nizami but for all of Persian literature. This poem is containing about 6,500 Persian couplets.

3. Layla o Majnun:

Layla o Majnun (Persian: لیلی و مجنون) "Layla and Majnun" (1192) is the third poem of Nizami's Khamsa and the most popular love story. It is a story of Arabic origin which was later absorbed and embellished by the Persians. It was dedicated to Abu al-Muzaffar Shirvanshah in 1192. The poem is based on the popular Arab legend of ill-starred lovers: the poet Qays falls in love with his cousin Layla, but is prevented from marrying her by Layla's father. Layla's father forbids contact with Qays and Qays becomes obsessed and starts composing of his love for Layla in public. The obsession becomes so severe that he sees and evaluates everything in terms of Layla; hence his sobriquet "the possessed" (Majnun). Realizing that he cannot obtain union even when other people intercede for him, he leaves society and roams naked in the desert among the beasts. However the image of Layla was so ingrained in him that he cannot eat or sleep. His only activity becomes composing poetry of longing for Layla. Meanwhile, Layla is married against her will, but she guards her virginity by resisting the advances of her husband. Arranging a secret meeting with Majnun, they meet, but have no physical contact. Rather they recite poetry to each other from a distance. Layla's husband dies eventually which removes the legal obstacles to a legal union. However Majnun is so focused on the ideal picture of Layla in his mind that he had fled to the desert. Layla dies out of grief and is buried in her bridal dress. Hearing this news, Majnun rushes to her grave where he instantly dies. They are buried side by side and their grave becomes a site of pilgrimage. Someone dreams that in Paradise they are united and live as a king and queen. Nizami composed his romance at the request of the Shirvanshah Akhsatan. Initially, he doubted that this simple story about the agony and pain of an Arab boy wandering in rough mountains and burning deserts would be a suitable subject for royal

court poetry and his cultured audience. It was his son who persuaded him to undertake the project, saying: "wherever tales of love are read, this will add spice to them". Nizami used many Arabic anecdotes in the story but also adds a strong Persian flavor to the legend. He adapted the disconnected stories about Majnun to fit the requirement of a Persian romance. He Persianizes the poem by adding several techniques borrowed from the Persian epic tradition, such as the portrayal of characters, the relationship between characters, description of time and setting, and adapts the disconnected stories to fit the requirements of a Persian romance. *The Story of Layla and Majnun by Nizami*, was translated and edited by Dr. Rudolf Gelpke into an English version in 1966. A comprehensive analysis in English containing partial translations of Nizami's romance Layla and Majnun examining key themes such as chastity, constancy and suffering through an analysis of the main characters was recently accomplished by Ali Asghar Seyed Gohrab. This poem is containing about 4,600 Persian couplets.

4. Iskandar Nameh:

Iskandar-Nameh (Persian: اسکندرنامه) "The Book of Alexander" (1194) is the fourth poem of Nizami's Khamsa which is written in the heroic *mutaqarib* metre. It is about the romance of great King Alexander- the Great. The names of its dedicatees are uncertain but the ruler of Ahar, Nosart al-Din Bishkin has been mentioned. The story is based on Islamic myths developed about Alexander the Great, which derive from Qur'anic references to the Zulqarnain as well as from the Greek stories about King Alexander. It consists of two books, *Sharaf-Nama* and *Iqbal-Nameh*. The poem narrates the three stages in Alexander's life: first as the conqueror of the world; then as a seeker after knowledge, gaining enough wisdom to acknowledge his own ignorance; and finally as a prophet, traveling once again across the world, from west to east, and south to north to proclaim his monotheistic creed to the world at large. The *Sharaf-Nama* discusses the birth of Alexander, his succession to the throne of Rum (Greece), his wars against Africans who invaded Egypt, his conquest of Persia and his marriage to the daughter of Darius. The episode also discusses Alexander's pilgrimage to Mekkah, his stay in the Caucasus and his visit to Queen Nushaba of Barda' and her court of Amazons. Alexander conquers India, China and the land of the Rus. The *Sharaf-Nama* concludes with Alexander's unsuccessful search for the water of immortal life. The *Iqbal-Nameh* is a description of Alexander's personal growth into the ideal ruler on a model ultimately derived, through Islamic intermediaries, from Plato's Republic. He has debates with Greek and Indian philosophers and a major portion of the text is devoted to the discourses he has with seven Greek sages. The poet then tells of Alexander's end and adds an account of the circumstances of the death of each of the seven sages. Nizami's image of Alexander is that of an Iranian knight. An English translation of the *Sharaf-Nama* by Henry Wilberforce Clarke was published in 1881 under the title *Sikandar Nama e Bara*. This poem is containing about 10,500 Persian couplets. Adapting from Nizami Ganjvi, Sheikh Yaqoob Sarfi Kashmiri also composed a Khamsa or Panj Ganj in which his fourth Ganj is *Maghazi-un-Nabi* which is an adaptation of Nizami's *Iskandar Nameh*.

5. Haft Paykar:

Haft Paykar (Persian: هفت پیکر) "The Seven Beauties" (1197) (also called Bahram-Nama), is the fifth and the last poem of Nizami's Khamsa. It is a pre-Islamic story of Persian origin, dedicated to the ruler of Maragha, 'Ala' Al-Din Korp Arslan. It is the story of Bahram V, the Sassanid king, who is born to Yazdegerd after twenty years of childlessness and supplication to Ahura Mazda for a child. The Haft Paykar is a romanticized biography of the Sasanian Persian empire ruler Bahram Gur. His adventurous life had already been treated by Firdowsi in the Shahnama, to which fact Nizami alludes a number of times. The poet starts by giving an account of the birth of Bahram Gur and his upbringing in the court of the Arab King No'man and his fabled palace Khwarnaq. Bahram whose upbringing is entrusted to Nom'man becomes a formidable huntsman. While wandering through the fabled palace, he discovers a locked room which contains a depiction of seven princesses; hence the name Haft Paykar (seven beauties). Each of these princesses is from the seven different climes and he falls in love with them. His father Yazdegerd-I passes away and Bahram returns to Persia to claim his throne from pretenders. After some episodes he is recognized as King and rescues the Persians from a famine. Once the country is stable, the King searches for the seven princesses and wins them as his brides. His architect is ordered to construct seven domes for each of his new brides. The architect tells him that each of the seven climes is ruled by one of the seven planets and advises him to assure good fortune by adorning each dome with the color that is associated with each clime and planet. Bahram is skeptical but follows the advice of the architect. The princesses take up residence in the splendid

pavilions. On each visit, the king visits the princesses on successive days of the week; on Saturday the Indian princess, who is governed by Saturn and so on. The princesses names are Furak (Nurak), the daughter of the Rajah of India, as beautiful as the moon; Yaghma Naz, the daughter of the Khaqan of the Turks; Naz Pari, the daughter of the king of Khwarazm; Nasrin Nush, the daughter of the king of the Slavs; Azarbin (Azareyon), the daughter of the king of Morocco; Humay, the daughter of the Roman Caesar; and Diroste (wholesome), a beautiful Iranian princess from the House of Kay Ka'us. Each princess relates to the king a story matching the mood of her respective color. These seven beautifully constructed, highly sensuous stories occupy about half of the whole poem. While the king is busy with the seven brides, his evil minister seizes power in the realm. Bahram Gur discovers that the affairs of Persia are in disarray, the treasury is empty and the neighboring rulers are posed to invade. He starts investigating the corrupt minister and from the multitude of complaints, he selects seven who tell him the injustice they have suffered. The minister is subsequently put to death and Bahram Gur restores justice and orders the seven pleasure-domes to be converted to fire temples for the pleasure of God. Bahram then goes hunting for the last time but mysteriously disappears. As a pun on words, while trying to hunt the wild ass (*gūr*) he instead finds his tomb (*gūr*).

Haft Paykar can be described as the best and most beautiful epic in New Persian poetry and one of the most important poetical creations of the whole of oriental Indo-European literature. It is considered the poet's masterpiece. Overall, in this masterpiece, Nizami illustrates the harmony of the universe, the affinity of the sacred and the profane, and the concordance of ancient and Islamic Iran. The story was translated to English in 1924 by Charles Edward Wilson. A newer English rendering based on more complete manuscripts was accomplished by Prof Julia Scott Meisami. This poem is containing about 5,000 Persian couplets.

Conclusion:

To conclude, Nizami Ganjvi is still one of the most celebrated thinker poets of the world, who laid a strong foundation for the great Nizami school of literature. His works with their unique poetic innovations and universal themes, have transcended borders to influence the literature of distant lands. The poet's immortal works that bring up readers in the spirit of love for life and mankind still call to realize beauties, holiness and awaken confidence in the power of the mind, the victory of the truth and goodness. Nizami could be called the pioneer of existentialist philosophy as his romantic epic is full of such instances that unmask the sensuous profile of human mind. He explains what makes human beings behave as they do, revealing their follies, glories, struggles, passions, perplexities, complexities and tragedies. In this perspective, Nizami's motherland country Azerbaijan has recently declared the year 2021 as "*Year of Nizami Ganjvi*" on his 880th birth anniversary, which will surely be a great contribution to the larger research, deeper study and wider promotion of his monumental works in the field of Persian literature especially *Khamsa Naveesi*.

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