



## THE POETRY OF THE MAGNIFICENT SAGE

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*Lecture delivered in Ganja, Azerbaijan*

*on 3 May 2013*

*at Nizami Ganjavi International Center*

*Recorded at the Bibliotheca Alexandrina, Egypt*

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## NOTE

The Nizami Ganjavi International Center of Azerbaijan, invited Dr Ismail Serageldin to give a lecture on Nizami Ganjavi, which was delivered on 3 May 2013, in the city of Ganja at the Azerbaijan State Agrarian Academy Auditorium before a distinguished audience that included 250 professors and scholars. It is worthy of note that this venue was the same historic hall in which Azerbaijan's birth was announced in 1918 as the first Democratic State in the Muslim and Eastern World where women were given the vote. This very hall also hosted Azerbaijan's Parliament.

Because many asked for the lecture to be made available to them, Dr Serageldin re-read the speech at the Studio of the Bibliotheca Alexandrina, in Alexandria Egypt, on 25 May 2013 and this is the recording. The full text with references is included and will also be published in book form separately

## THE POETRY OF THE MAGNIFICENT SAGE

*Lecture delivered in Ganja, Azerbaijan  
Nizami Ganjavi International Center  
(Full text with references)*

It is indeed an honor to be asked to deliver a lecture on Nizami, here at the University in Ganja. I am one of the many who profoundly admire the great poet and sage, Nizami Ganjavi. When I first visited Azerbaijan, I came to Ganja and visited his mausoleum. He is truly a global figure who continues to inspire artists to this day from Germany's Goethe to contemporary poets, from Azerbaijan's Gara Garayev<sup>1</sup> to the West's Eric Clapton<sup>2</sup>.

Nizām Al-Dīn Abū Muhammad Ilyās Ibn-Yūsuf Ibn-Zakkī, was born around 1142 in the town of Ganja, Azerbaijan. By the time of his death in 1209, he would leave his stamp on Azerbaijani history, Farsi literature and global culture. He is known to everyone as “Nizami”.

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<sup>1</sup> Gara Garayev wrote a ballet “The Seven Beauties” inspired by Nizami's Haft Paykar.

<sup>2</sup> Eric Clapton wrote a song titled “Layla” inspired by Nizami's Layla o Majnun which was recorded with Derek and the Dominos, and released on the 1970 album “Layla and Other Assorted Love Songs”.

## NIZAMI: SAGE, MYSTIC, POET

Molded by the indigenous Azerbaijani tradition, he showed how genius can go from the specific to the universal, and how culture specific writing and characters can appeal to all humanity. Steeped in local folklore, he transcended it to produce some of the greatest lyrical and epic poetry of the world. Educated locally, he became an acknowledged sage of his era, renowned for his vast knowledge of almost every subject. Brought up on the local language and dialect, through his writing and his poetry, he became one of the greatest contributors to the Farsi language and to world literature.

Nizami was not a court poet<sup>3</sup>, he was a man of the people. Thus he does not appear in the annals of the dynasties, even though by his achievements the compilers of literary memoirs (the *Tazkerehs*), did acknowledge his immense contributions. But if court poets and chroniclers would have him out of the records of the courts, he certainly lived in the hearts of the people. And today, the world bears witness to his genius: as an amazing poet, a distinguished philosopher and a sage (*Hakim*) of immense erudition. Today, his biography appears in all reference works, and in

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<sup>3</sup> He “refused to have anything to do with court life”, McDonald.M. V, “The Religious and Social Views Nizami of Ganjeh”, British Institute of Persian Studies, vol. 1 (1963), p.99

one of these he is credited with “a prodigious knowledge of mathematics, astronomy, astrology, alchemy, medicine, botany, Koranic exegesis, Islamic theory and law, Persian myths and legends, history, ethics, philosophy and esoteric thought, music, and the visual arts”<sup>4</sup>. From his work, especially the *Khamsa*, we recognize his knowledge of the great myths and works of literature in both Arabic and Farsi, in addition to his profound appreciation of local oral and written popular traditions.

Nizami was a bridge builder through time and space. He helped connect the Persian cultural heritage moving seamlessly between its pre-Islamic legacy and its manifestly Islamic traditions. However, although he emphasized the value of his religious legacy, Nizami was “always praising moderation, and ... He never advocated extreme religious

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<sup>4</sup> Wikipedia, article on Nizami, accessed 22 07 2012, see also: Muhammad Nawaz, *Islam and Muslim Psyche: Reason, Modernity and Orthodoxy*, AuthorHouse (December 2008) p.68 where he is described as “A versatile scholar of philosophy, literature and a number of sciences, he mastered several foreign languages and contributed creditably to world literature. He also developed expertise in mathematics, astronomy, astrology, Islamic law, music and medicine.”

We can say: he is described as “A versatile scholar of philosophy, literature and a number of sciences, he mastered several foreign languages and contributed creditably to world literature. He also developed expertise in mathematics, astronomy, astrology, Islamic law, music and medicine.”.

practices”<sup>5</sup>. Further, his work transcended not only the Persian cultural heritage, it also connected it with the Arabic traditions of other Muslim peoples of his time. Thus while Nizami was primarily an Azerbaijani writer<sup>6</sup>, he mastered the entire cultural heritage of his time. We find him influenced by Firdowsi’s enormous *Shahnameh* (the Book of Kings), from which he drew to produce his own masterworks, just as Shakespeare would draw on Holinshed to write his great historical plays. Echoes of some of Nizami’s influence can be found in the later works of poets writing in Farsi.

Today, Nizami is primarily remembered as a poet, and justly so. But in his time he was also seen as a sage, a *Hakim*, a great and honored title, in recognition of his philosophic bent and his enormous knowledge of all fields of learning. Even today he is often referred to as a philosopher though he did not produce great synthetic works such as Ibn Sina, or great Sufi works such as the *Al-Futuhah Al-Makiyyahs* of Ibn Al-Arabi. On the other hand he was deeply concerned with society and the human condition. Indeed, as McDonald remarks: “Nizami was... a genuine social reformer”<sup>7</sup>.

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<sup>5</sup> McDonald, p.100

<sup>6</sup> His heritage is widely appreciated and shared by Azerbaijan, Afghanistan, Iran, Tajikistan and in Kurdish regions.

<sup>7</sup> McDonald, p.99

Nizami's personal life was marred by tragedy. He lost his first wife whom he loved dearly, the slave girl Appaq (snow white) whom he freed and married but who died after six years leaving him with a small boy. She was probably the most important love of his life, and much later, in his last great work, the *Iskander Nameh*, he mentions her and the pain he suffered on losing her.

Twice more family tragedy would strike him during his long life. Some have speculated that his sensitivity to pain and suffering was drawn from his personal experience. But great artist that he was, he would create well rounded characters in his epic poems, and would communicate their feelings and motivations with enormous sensitivity which moves us to this day.

Nizami visited court only once, detested it and would not return even when he received an official invitation to go there. About the company of kings he writes:

*Refrain from seeking the society of kings..  
Like exposing dry cotton to fire's burnings!  
Light from the fire may be pleasant enough,  
But to be safe one must stay a distance off..  
Moth that's allured by the flame of a candle  
Is burnt when a companion at a banquet table.<sup>8</sup>*

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<sup>8</sup> In choosing English translations to cite passages from Nizami, many choices were available. Indeed, The Poems of Nizami have been

Nizami managed to live comfortably in a village thanks to his earnings from his poetry, and in the long introduction of *Layla and Majnun* he mentions Kizil Arslan's gift which enabled him to live a quiet country life which he loved. He was not only content to live that modest life, but he also advocated it as the basis of true happiness.

*In your village upon your own private estate,  
Don't think of eating from another's plate.  
Fortune will turn upon the unthinking fellow  
Whose foot beyond his garment will allow...<sup>9</sup>*

This is reminiscent of the words of Alexander Pope as a young man when he calls for a "Quiet Life" and says:

*Happy the man whose wish and care  
A few paternal acres bound,*

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translated by several authors. For example, the *Makhzan Al-Asrar (the Treasury of the Mysteries)* itself has been extremely well translated literally into English by G.H. Darab in 1945, and that translation inspired, and was reworked by, Paul Smith for his own rhyming version of 2012. Smith has translated an enormous amount of Farsi literature into English, and is probably among the most recent and the most prolific of translators. I have chosen to take his English language renderings of the Nizami quotations in this essay. The passage here, and subsequent passages, are taken from Paul Smith's "Introduction" in *Nizami: The Treasury of the Mysteries, Translation and introduction by Paul Smith, New Humanity Books, Australia, Copyright Paul Smith 2005, 2012 .p. 25. (henceforth referred to as Paul Smith).*

<sup>9</sup> Ibid., p.25



*Content to breathe his native air  
In his own ground.*

But where Pope would claim ....

*Thus let me live, unseen, unknown;  
Thus unlamented let me die;  
Steal from the world, and not a stone  
Tell where I lie.*

Nizami was very conscious that his poetry would make him famous through the ages. He was proud of his poetic achievements and struggled with his plagiarists and critics, usually ignoring them, but occasionally speaking out against them. But at the same time, he considered that pious and glorious men have long suffered the “slings and arrows of outrageous fortune” and have been obliged to endure enmities without deserving them. But he believed that patience and rising above responding to such critics was the right path, and he never returned the affronts and the harm... even saying:

*For as long as I have lived, never in violent  
Way has the wing of a fly been bent  
Never mixed dregs in another's freshwater  
Sought to disturb another's condition, Never!<sup>10</sup>*

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<sup>10</sup> Ibid. p.37

But Nizami went further. Not only did he advocate not doing harm to one's enemies, but also that the best way to use one's short time here on this earth was to be good to one's neighbors and friends:

*And from dusk to dawn for life to stay is hopeless  
Only seed worth growing is the seed of goodness;  
And because the world will not stay for anyone,  
Being kind to one's friends is best; this I stress<sup>11</sup>.*

Nizami was open to all the cultures of his time. He told all to be open to all the cultures of the world and that they would benefit enormously from such openness.

He says in the *Khirad Nameh* that he researched in all the tongues and found pearls and gems of wisdom that he collected and polished with his poetry to integrate them into a whole:

*From every manuscript some worth came to me,  
I found and embellished it with jewels of poetry.  
I filled up my store from the more recent history:  
The Jewish and Armenian and also the Pahlavi.  
I took from every grain that which was excellent,  
And in from each pod the innermost kernel went.  
I joined riches of one tongue to those of another,  
And the mass into complete whole did I gather.*

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<sup>11</sup> Ibid., p.48

Nizami was not only a great poet, he was undoubtedly the master of the Masnavi, or Mathnawi, form of long poems composed of rhyming couplets<sup>12</sup>. Hafiz of Shiraz (1320–1392) born a century after Nizami’s death, perhaps the world’s greatest mystical poet, in his “*Book Of The Wine Bringer*” Masnavi poem, was so influenced by Nizami’s Masnavi that begins and ends his *Layla and Majnun* that he says:

*In wisdom’s opinion there’s no better adorer of poetry,  
In this old sphere, than the pearls of speech of Nizami.*<sup>13</sup>

Nizami was also a master of all forms of other poetry. He mastered language, meter, rhyme, imagery and metaphor<sup>14</sup>. He collected his personal poems in his divan

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<sup>12</sup> “Masnavi, or Mathnawī, is the name of a poem written in rhyming couplets, or more specifically, ‘a poem based on independent, internally rhyming lines’. Most Mathnawī followed a meter of eleven, or occasionally ten, syllables, but had no limit in their length. The Mathnawi consists of an indefinite number of couplets, with the rhyme scheme aa/bb/cc. Mathnawī have been written in Persian, Arabic, Turkish, and Urdu cultures”. (Wikipedia article on the Masnavi form of poetry, accessed 03 05 2013).

<sup>13</sup> Paul Smith, p.27

<sup>14</sup> For example, Seyed-Gohrab. Ali Asghar (ed), *Metaphor and Imagery in Persian Poetry*, Leiden: Koninklijke Brill, 2012. p 106 says: “Nizami commonly refers to the psychological states of lovers, whether male or female, through candle metaphors.” Candles imply light and heat while being consumed, and Nizami - in *Layla and Majnun*- has the obsessed Qays say: “Although I am burning like a candle with pain for her/I do

throughout his life, and it is said that his divan had some 20,000 poems of which only 4,500 survive today. These include rubaiyat, qatai's, qasidas, ghazals, showing a great diversity of styles and mastery of all. His subjects would vary, but he tended to lean towards religious mysticism and ethical issues. And Kasvini writing shortly after his time says that Nizami wrote a beautiful divan of which the poems were mostly of a religious or admonitory or ethical character and which contain indications for the initiated and their symbols.

So, the sage was always present in the poet, and the religious mystic was there in the quiet man who lived his simple country life producing his stream of historic master pieces. His death in 1209, would leave a void in the world of literature. And Jami, the last great poet of Persia in his masterpiece "Joseph and Zulaikha" sadly emphasizes the loss of so great a talent, so wonderful a person, and says:

*Where is Nizami? Where is his soul-alluring poetry?  
Delicate refinements of his genius full of subtlety?  
He has gone.. Taking his place behind the screen,  
And all but him.. Remaining outside it have been.  
Since he withdrew, we have received no portion ...  
Except those mystical words he took... every one.*

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*not wish that my days should be without her pain". Or elsewhere, "Like a candle, my heart is full of light / Why should I fear if you chop off my head".*

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*None knew them except he who God is near...  
Whose true heart with the divine is made clear.*

...  
*He washed his soul from the image of diversity  
Seeking to fill it again with the mystery of Unity.<sup>15</sup>*

NIZAMI'S KHAMSA

But let us get back to his greatest legacy to the entire world: his enormously influential contributions to epic and lyrical poetry. His works are still read, studied and admired. Much has been written and said about that great poet and his Five Jewels, the *Khamasa* (Arabic for “five”). Quite simply he is the towering figure of romantic epic narrative poetry in Farsi. His choice of subjects, his style, his use of the rhyming couplet, his originality, all make the *Khamasa* (the five Jewels) an unequalled masterpiece, which Chelkowski describes as:

*One of the finest collections of poetical tales in Persian [Farsi] literature is the Khamseh or “Quintet” of Nizami. These tales, written during the last third of the twelfth century, abound with action, intrigue, pageantry, and romance. The plots are dramatic, the characters full-blooded and vulnerably human*

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<sup>15</sup> Ibid. , p.51

*in their psychological make-up, and the overall design is so rich in allegorical meaning that the reader becomes deftly attuned to the higher plane of mystical thought. As a composite and panoramic view of life, these tales are a match for any chivalric romance in the West<sup>16</sup>.*

### **Makhzan Al-Asrar**

*(The Storehouse of the Mysteries)*

The first of these five jewels is the *Makhzan al-Asrar* (“The Storehouse of Mysteries”). It was composed in the 1160s or 1170s, and it is the only one that is not a narrative epic romance. It is a reflective and didactic quasi-philosophical poem of 2,250 rhyming couplets. It is divided into twenty chapters each covering a discourse on a religious or ethical subject. Each chapter is “signed” by Nizami.

In this poem, Nizami sketches out his vision of the ideal way of life, banning injustice and hypocrisy, vanity and selfishness, Nizami addresses all of mankind, not just the king to whom it is dedicated. However, Nizami’s language play and his use of philosophical and scientific learning makes this work difficult for the average reader.

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<sup>16</sup> Chelkowski . Peter J. *Mirror of the Invisible World: Tales from the Khamsah of Nizami.*. New York: Metropolitan Museum of Art, 1975. P.200

This is probably the work with which Nizami most approaches the Sufi tradition. In fact, in the introduction he specifically mentions his *Khalwat* or meditative solitary vigils.

*Makhzan al Asrar* was highly regarded and it influenced, among many, some great works, such as: Amir Khusrow's *Matla'a Al-Anwar* (the Dawn of Lights), Khaju Kermani's *Rowzat Al-Anwar* (the Garden of Lights), Jami's *Tuhfat Al-Ahrar* (the Gift of the Noble)<sup>17</sup>...

Later on, with the other four of the five Jewels, Nizami finds his true vocation: to be the greatest poet of romantic epics in the Muslim world. It is also in these four other Jewels that Nizami rightly earns his attribute of bridge-builder.

### **Khusru o Shirin**

(literally *Khusru and Shirin*)

The first of these four jewels is the epic romantic narrative titled *Khusru o Shirin*, which he wrote in 1177–1181. It is influenced by earlier, pre-Islamic Persian traditions, notably the story of King Khusru's courtship of Princess Shirin, and winning her over his rival, Farhad. They all die at the conclusion and there is no happy ending. The story is told with great lyrical intensity. The

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<sup>17</sup> See Paul Smith, p.16

structure of the narrative is quite complex, using several genres simultaneously. It contains many verbal exchanges and letters, all imbued with poetic power.

It is not surprising that ill-fated lovers are at the heart of this dramatic poem. That is the basic staple of many of the great works of literature, perhaps reaching a pinnacle with Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet*. But *Khusru o Shirin* deserves to be listed as a true masterpiece. With a hitherto unique artistic and structural unity, it would have a tremendous influence on later authors. It is rightly seen as a turning point not only for Nizami but for all of Farsi literature. It also shows his ability to bridge the pre-Islamic Farsi tradition with the subsequent Islamic heritage of his own time, for the story is told by Firdowsi in the *Shahnameh* and is based on a true story that was further romanticized by Farsi poets such as Gogani's *Vis o Raman*.

Of particular interest here is the way that Nizami treats Farhad. In many ways I find him the true hero of the story, regardless of the title of the poem. For it is Farhad's love for Shirin that is tested. It is to win her that he undertakes the impossible task of reshaping the mountains and redirecting the natural flow of rivers, and creates a masterwork so immense, so stunning that people come from far and near, to admire and to learn from the masterpiece. One of the most moving passages is when he is told (falsely) that Shirin has died, and he contemplates his work for the last



time, that monumental work where every blow of the axe had been to the rhythm of his soul calling out to her.. “O No Shirin” ... and says:

*Beyond the portals of death my Shirin I will greet  
So with one leap... death, I now hasten to meet”  
Far into the wide expanse his chisel axe he flung,  
And from that terrible precipice at once he sprung.  
The rocks, the sculptured caves, the valleys green  
Sent back unheard his dying cry: “O no ... Shirin”.*<sup>18</sup>

### **Layla o Majnun**

(meaning *Layla and the Madman*)

*Layla o Majnun*<sup>19</sup>, meaning “Layla and Majnun”, is another story of unfulfilled love. Written in 1192, it is a story of Arabic origin, absorbed and embellished by Farsi story-tellers. The poem of 4,600 rhyming couplets is less than half the length of the *Iskander-Nameh*, another of his five jewels. Like *Khusru o Shirin*, it is a legend of ill-starred lovers: the poet Qays falls in love with his cousin Layla, but her father disapproves and they are prevented from marrying. The distraught Qays roams the desert, obsessed with his love and lives with animals and writes poetry. She resists her marriage to another, but Qays returns to her after she dies and cries at her tomb. The obsession

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<sup>18</sup> Ibid., p.21

<sup>19</sup> Sometimes written “Madjnun”

of Qays becomes so severe that he is given the sobriquet “the Possessed” or the “Madman”(Majnun). Nizami has added much of his own to the Arabic parts that make up the story. The same theme would of course be taken up by Shakespeare in his masterpiece *Romeo and Juliet* four centuries later<sup>20</sup>. In the early twentieth century Ahmad Shawki, the greatest Arab poet of his time, would also use the story of *Layla and Majnun* to write a beautiful verse play by the same name.

Initially, Nizami was dubious about attempting this project. While the love story was very moving, he was concerned that the setting was too severe for his poetic images. Rocks, desert, and the Arabian arid wilderness as a stage, and two simple children as his heroes, nothing but unhappy passion... How could he turn that into a great epic poem? Yet he did, bringing out all the force of the unrequited love, the agony of the separation and the almost mystical transformation of worldly love to a sublimated love that touches the divine.

His poem, well structured, skillfully connected the parts of the story to maximum effect. It remains unsurpassed although great poets like Hatifi and Jami as well as that

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<sup>20</sup> Did Nizami’s story also influence the west? Shakespeare’s “Romeo and Juliet”? or Gottfried von Strasberg’s “Tristan and Isolde”? or the early 13th century French fable “Aucassin and Nicolette”? Perhaps...

other great Azerbaijani poet Fuzuli, tried their hand at that same material, but they fell short of Nizami's masterpiece.

Nizami drew on prior and original material to produce *Layla and Majnun*. Isfahani's *Kitab Al-Aghani* devoted some 90 pages to the story of Qays (the madjnun). But Nizami also had the material of Qays Ibn Al-Mulawwah himself who lived in the second half of the seventh century among the Bedouin Arabs the Banu 'Amir tribe in Najd. But if these were the raw materials he employed, the edifice is completely his own.

Yet we are told that he wrote the entire 4,000 couplets in less than four months, and he boasts that if he had not had other duties he could have finished it in two weeks... How can anyone produce such an amazing literary masterpiece in so short a time? That is where you can differentiate genius from mere talent.

It was this ability to bring to life these amazing love stories that would make Nizami famous among writers through the centuries. Indeed, Goethe says of him:

*A gentle, highly gifted spirit, who, when Ferdowsi had completed the collected heroic traditions, chose for the material of his poems the sweetest encounters of the deepest love. Majnun and Layli, Khosrow and Shirin, lovers he presented; meant for one another by premonition, destiny, nature, habit, inclination,*

*passion staunchly devoted to each other; but divided by mad ideas, stubbornness, chance, necessity, and force, then miraculously reunited, yet in the end again in one way or another torn apart and separated from each other*<sup>21</sup>.

**The Haft Paykar**  
(*The Seven Beauties*)

Despite the enormous appeal of *Layla and Majnun*, it is the *Haft Paykar* (The Seven Beauties), also called the *Bahram-Nameh*, (or the Book/Story of King Bahram Gur) which is probably the greatest of these five Jewels. A pre-Islamic Farsi story, it is a romanticized biography of the Sassanian Persian empire ruler Bahram Gur. Bahram's life and adventures had already been written about by Firdowsi in the *Shahnameh*, which is acknowledged by Nizami. But the great poet has his own interpretation of the story. He omits, or passes over very lightly, the parts of the story that Firdowsi had covered, and concentrates on new material. Thus his work remains original.

In fact, Nizami's *Haft Paykar* (The Seven Beauties), is much more than a chronicle of the history of a king. He builds his masterwork on it, just as Shakespeare built his historic plays taking the actual history as a platform to build his masterful literary creations. Nizami weaves

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<sup>21</sup> Johann Wolfgang von Goethe is quoted in the biographical article on Nizami found in Wikipedia (accessed 22 July 2012).

together the harmony of the universe, the links between the profane and the sacred, and many themes to produce an exciting, fast moving story with interesting characters and while so doing, again links ancient and Islamic traditions. It is one of the most important creations of Farsi literature and even of all of non-western literature, and deserves a place with the best of global literature.

He drew from all the available literature before him... he cites Tabari and Bokhari and other books in Farsi and Arabic.. He drew what pearls he could find... but he just used that as raw material to build his masterful construction. Seven, a mystical number for many, plays an important role in that story of King Bahram Gur. But the stories are complex and have many interconnected vignettes.

One example: Bahram Gur had a slave girl Fitna. She was his favorite, and he wanted to show off for her in his hunt. He asked her to challenge his talent with the bow to hit any part of the animal he was hunting. Coquettishly, she challenged him to transpierce the animal in the hoof and the ear with one shot. He threw a piece of clay into the animal's ear, and when the animal tried to dislodge it from his ear, he shot his bolt and pinned the hoof to the ear! He had achieved the impossible challenge.

But instead of acknowledging his amazing talent, Fitna told him that this only proved that he had practiced a lot

with his bow and that “practice makes perfect”. He was so angry, that he ordered her taken away to be put to death.

She pleads with the soldiers who take her, and they spare her, and she goes into the forest where there is a house or an inn with stairs of 60 steps. She lives there in secret, and every day she carries a new born calf up the stairs, until she can actually carry it the whole stairs. Years later, the king visits that inn in the forest, and sees this woman carry a calf up the stairs, an impossible feat! He asks to meet her, and asks how she could do it. She says: “practice makes perfect”! He then looks at her face and recognizes his beloved Fitna and regretting his prior rash decision, begins to understand. A reconciliation ensues. And that is just one of the many vignettes in the *Haft Paykar* of Nizami.

### **The Iskander-Nameh**

(or *The Book of Alexander*)

The fifth jewel of the *Khamasa* is no less fascinating and important. The *Iskander-Nameh*, or “The Book of Alexander.” It is a romanticized chronicle of Alexander the Great. The poem covers three alleged “stages” of Alexander’s life. First: conqueror of the world; then as a seeker after knowledge, gaining enough wisdom to acknowledge his own ignorance; and finally as a prophet, criss-crossing the world to proclaim monotheism. Not historically accurate, but a work of art. It is based on religious myths

of Alexander, composed close to or at the turn of the thirteenth century, this epic “Romance of Alexander the Great” contains 10,500 couplets. It is not absolutely certain if it or the *Haft Paykar* was the last of the five jewels to be composed, but it remains an important part of the five jewels of Nizami.

In the *Iskander Nameh* the poet reaches another peak. As we just said, he started with an original had a three-fold design, but ended up by folding the two latter parts into one, so we have two books in the saga. The first is called the *Sharaf-Nameh* or the *Iqbal-Nameh*. In it, we see Alexander as conqueror. Here we see the abilities of Nizami in calling forth his poetic talent to recreate in the mind’s eye the sense of battle, with all its bugle calls, pomp and majesty, but also all the dust, dirt and clashes of wars.

In the *Khirad-Nameh*, the second book of the Alexander saga, the book of wisdom, he goes beyond giving his perfect hero wisdom, and endows him with that stage beyond wisdom: prophecy! As usual, Nizami’s craftsmanship with the words in the couplets allows him not only to tell the story but also to reflect on the meaning of wisdom and the dimension of prophecy.

### SOME OBSERVATIONS

In reviewing the body of work of Nizami, it is interesting to note his attitude towards women, his advice to his son, and who might have inspired him.

### NIZAMI'S DEPICTION OF WOMEN

Women in Nizami's epic romantic poems are endowed with great beauty, elevated on a pedestal and are objects of desire that inspire men to great deeds as when Farhad literally moves mountains to win the love of Shirin. But the greatness of Nizami is that he does not limit himself to this typical idealized view of women, so prevalent in his times, and found in so many of the chivalry tales in east and west, where beautiful and chaste damsels in distress inspire courageous knights to slay the dragon and rescue the damsel.

Nizami portrayed women as full blooded creatures, well rounded, who evolved over time, and who could be the equal of men in every way, even in the most unusual, such as physical strength. A striking example of this, is how the coquettish Fitna in the *Haft Paykar*, achieves that. She tells the king that anything can be achieved by determination, because "practice makes perfect", and is sent to her death for her insolence, but is spared and lives unknown for



six years, during which she learns to carry a calf on her shoulders and carry it up and down sixty steps! A feat that few men could equal in physical strength.

Likewise, it is a wise woman, Queen Nushaba of Barda, who teaches an important lesson to Alexander the Great in the *Iskander Nameh*. The Queen, who had recognized Alexander who had come disguised as a messenger, tells him that she knows who he is, and then offers Alexander jewels and gold to eat, which he refuses, to which she points out that yet men are killed for such “treasure” and then offers him bread which is produced by the same men who are killed for the inedible jewels and stones.

In Nizami’s world women learn, and his princesses are educated, skillful and wise as well as beautiful. In *Layla and Majnun*, the two adolescents meet in school where they study together, until Qays is smitten by Layla’s beauty.

Thus Nizami’s views of women as complete beings that can match men in intellect, determination and even physical strength, as well as being beautiful evanescent creatures that attract and inspire men, is noteworthy. It is one more interesting facet of the magnificent sage of Ganja.

**ADVICE TO A DEPARTING SON**

Nizami was overwhelmed by the loss of his beloved Appaq, and he loved his son Mohamed, who would later grow up and go to court against Nizami's hopes. However, Nizami then imparts advice to his departing son, much as Shakespeare (in his play *Hamlet, Act III, scene 1*) would later have Polonius advise his departing son Laertes. Nizami says to his son Mohamed:

*Nothing deserves to be preferred to being a friend,  
A friend who will hold you by the hand to the end;  
That friend... tightly by the cords of the heart, tie<sup>22</sup>.*

And here is Shakespeare's Polonius in *Hamlet*:

*Those friends thou hast, and their adoption tried,  
Grapple them to thy soul with hoops of steel;*

And the importance to tell the truth and to avoid lies is also emphasized by both Nizami and Shakespeare's Polonius. Where Nizami says:

*But let the law instruct you in God's service,  
Let it not teach you how to lie... this I stress<sup>23</sup>.*

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<sup>22</sup> Paul Smith, p.12

<sup>23</sup> Ibid. pp.26-27

Polonius says:

*This above all: to thine own self be true,  
And it must follow, as the night the day,  
Thou canst not then be false to any man.*

It is of course natural that fathers sending their sons into the world would emphasize this kind of advice, but it is striking that it would be recorded in such verse by great poets, once for a real son and once for the Bard's creation.

### AN ECHO OF OMAR KHAYYAM?

Nizami, who read very widely was obviously inspired by many of his great predecessors, even if his own work remains very distinctive. Thus we note that he took much of the historical material from Firdowsi's *Shah Nameh* (the Book of Kings) and drew for *Layla and Majnun* from Asfahani's *Kitab Al-Aghani*, and for *Khusro and Shirin* he was obviously influenced by Golgani's *Vis o Raman*. All of that does not in any way diminish his own magisterial contributions. But it shows how art and culture function, for as John Donne so aptly said, "no man is an island"<sup>24</sup>. But, perhaps lesser known is the echo of Omar Khayyam

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<sup>24</sup> John Donne (1572–1631) is an English metaphysical poet of distinction. He was also a satirist, lawyer and a cleric in the Church of England. He was a contemporary of Shakespeare (1564–1616).

(1048–1131)<sup>25</sup> that I hear in some passages of Nizami's poetry. Listen to Khayyam in Fitzgerald's rendition of the *Rubā'iyat*:

*Dreaming when Dawn's Left Hand was in the Sky  
I heard a Voice within the Tavern cry,*

*"Awake, my Little ones, and fill the Cup  
Before Life's Liquor in its Cup be dry."*

*And, as the Cock crew, those who stood before  
The Tavern shouted – "Open then the Door!  
You know how little while we have to stay,  
And, once departed, may return no more."*

And the echo in Nizami's *Divan* as given by Smith's rendition<sup>2626</sup>:

*I went to Winehouse last night but a way in I couldn't  
see,  
I called and called but no one inside seemed to listen  
to me.  
Either no wine seller was awake or because I was  
nobody,  
In there nobody cared to open the door for me...  
obviously.*

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<sup>25</sup> Ghiyāth ad-Dīn Abu'l-Fath Umar ibn Ibrāhīm al-Khayyām Al-Nīshāpūrī (1048–1131); was a Persian polymath, philosopher, mathematician, astronomer and poet.

<sup>26</sup> Paul smith, pp. 49–50

[...]

[... *And the wine-seller finally answers him saying  
...*]

[...]

*“it’s not the time when door’s opened by one for  
anyone: be  
More thoughtful, it’s no mosque where door is always  
open,  
where you can come, go and push to the front  
deliberately:*

[...]

*Every religious community in the world is here:  
Muslims...  
Hindus, Zoroastrians, Christians, Jews, one  
community.  
Listen, if you’ve anything to say, then first you should  
go  
And make yourself dust under their feet... it is that  
easy!”*

It is clear that Nizami is not speaking of a literal Tavern where wayfarers and locals go to imbibe real wine and get drunk. Indeed, Hafiz, the great mystical poet, decades after Nizami wrote a magnificent Masnavi poem which he called the “*Book of the Wine Bringer*”. Khayyam, who preceded Nizami by a century, was a polymath, and

his Sufi tendencies would have been well-known and probably well-studied by Nizami, the amazingly erudite sage of Ganja. Even if Fitzgerald's popular rendition of the Khayyam quatrains gives them a more earthy flavor, the original is closer to the meaning of Nizami's lines and therefore deserves some mention here.

### NIZAMI'S LEGACY

But where does all this leave us?

Nizami's work is more than a paramount symbol of great Farsi (Persian) literature. It is indeed part of the global heritage of humanity. It has, like all great legacies, reached universality through deep-rooted traditions interpreted with great art. It combines the story-teller's skill with the lyrical language of the poet, but what makes it great art is his richness of expression, characterization, use of metaphor, and sheer virtuosity of storytelling. In all of that Nizami is unequalled. In his review article "New Light on Nizami", Nakjavani comments on the poet's standing and renown saying that it is of great interest to modern and postmodern readers "that Nizami's medieval epistemology approaches the boundaries of the contemporary theory of inter-textuality in its most general and consequential form"<sup>27</sup>.

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<sup>27</sup> Eric Nakjavani, *Edebeyat*, Vol 12, New York, OPA, 2001, p. 283

In addition, we all feel that beyond the art and craft of the wordsmith and the story-teller, there is the sincerity of Nizami. You feel that his sense of justice is not feigned. His spirituality reflects genuine piety, not a showy religiosity. His deep concern for the human condition is not just for the characters in his epics, but for all people. In doing so, he joins the ranks of the immortals. Nizami's masterpieces, his *Khamsa*, like all great classics, from Homer to Shakespeare to the recent past, have stood the test of time. So it is most appropriate that he is celebrated not just in his native Azerbaijan but in the whole world<sup>28</sup>.

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<sup>28</sup> A minor planet 3770 Nizami, discovered by Soviet astronomer Lyudmila Chernykh in 1974 is named after him. Monuments to Nizami are found in many cities of Azerbaijan and Iran, as well as in Moscow, St. Petersburg and Udmurtiya (Russia), Kiev (Ukraine), Tashkent (Uzbekistan), Marneuli (Georgia), Chişinău (Moldova) and Rome (Italy). The Museum of Azerbaijan literature in Baku is named after Nizami.



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Achievement Prize, by the Excellence Awards Foundation, Ghana (2010); The Public Welfare Medal, by the National Academy of Sciences, Washington DC (2011); Commander of the Order of Arts & Letters awarded by the government of France (2011).

He has lectured widely all over the world including delivering the Mandela Lecture (Johannesberg, 2011), the Nexus Lecture (Netherlands, 2011), the Keynote Address to the First International Summit of the Book (Washington DC, 2012).

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