

The Concepts and Realities of the Eastern Culture in “The Knight in the Panther's Skin”

Maka Elbakidze

Ivane Javakhishvili Tbilisi State University, Doctor of philology,
Associated professor

Irine Modebadze

Shota Rustaveli Institute of Georgian Literature, Doctor of philology
(Tbilisi, Georgia)

Abstract:

To the present day the research on *The Knight in the Panther's Skin* (“*Vepkhistqaosani*”) in connection with the Eastern Muslim world has been conducted in two main directions:

1. “*Vepkhistqaosani*” and literature composed in the Muslim world (for example, parallels with Nizami, Ferdowsi, Fakhraddin Gorgani etc.);

2. “*Vepkhistqaosani*” and the confession of the Muslim faith: this includes the works, which agree or deny the presence of the Muslim understanding of God, world, romantic love and the relationship between men and women in Rustaveli’s Romance.

When analyzing the concepts and realities of the cultures of the East in “*Vepkhistqaosani*” the most significant is the concept of *mijnuroba* (love). Substantiating his own understanding of *mijnur* in the Prologue, Rustaveli refers the reader to the Arab culture. Presenting the suffering from love as an incurable malady obtained a special literary and aesthetic meaning in the poetry of the Bedouin (Udhrah) tribes of Central Arabia in the 7th and 8th centuries, the poets of which wrote verses on a fatal and almost mystic love that could bring only ordeal, with death being the only possible way out of it. The main motifs of the Udhri lyrics (loss of consciousness, shedding tears of blood, roaming the plains, etc) acquired greater meaning and depth not only in Sufi poetry, but in the “*Vepkhistqaosani*”.

Yet, the conventional motifs, which are typical for both concepts – Bedouin and Sufi poetry – are encountered in Rustaveli’s work only as readymade formulae, which are given a different interpretation as a result of literary revision.

Keywords: Rustaveli, The Knight in the Panther’s Skin, Eastern culture, love concept

Introduction:

“Persian Legend” in Shota Rustaveli’s “Vepkhistqaosani”

Shota Rustaveli’s “Vepkhistqaosani” (“The Knight in the Panther’s Skin”) is a medieval romance (1187-1207) the plot of which unfolds through an Oriental-type framework adapted to Georgian conditions. One of the significant parts of its compositional structure is the Prologue, which in epic works of medieval literature was attributed great significance. In Prologues the authors used to open to their readers a plot of their works, they established their own world outlook and aesthetic views, opinions. Prologue of “Vepkhistqaosani” is construed in full conformity with this tradition. And the fact seems most interesting that in the 9th stanza of the Prologue, telling about creation of the romance, Shota Rustaveli declares that he “*found this beautiful tale from Persia*”, “*translated into Georgian*” and “*have set it in a setting of Georgian verses*”. This assertion couldn’t be left without attention of commentators and researchers of the romance. Back in the beginning of the XVII century the king of Kartli Vakhtang the VI (1675-1737), who knew perfectly the Persian language and literature who, was the first publisher of “Vepkhistqaosani”, in his “Comments” confirmed that in Persian literature even traces of such history couldn’t be found. The expression “Persian tale” turned out to be a poetic symbol, which was rather significant for interpretation of deep meanings of the romance. Poly semantics, foreign tales, allusions, metamorphism are organically inherent to the language of Rustaveli and determination of the meaning of სპარსული [sparsuli] (“Persian”) formed the base for serious scientific polemics and in the process of this polemics many opinions were expressed. Irrespective of difference in expressed interpretations (“alien”, “non-Christian”, “ancient”) it can’t be doubted that trying to give artistic reliability, credibility to described events, the poet uses definition “Persian” as a notion, referring to the whole cultural area of the East, which is proved by the geography of artistic space of the romance.

Artistic approach of “alienation of the plot” is not a rarity in the history of the world literature, inclusive actions shifted to the West (we can bring here as an example “Persian letter” by Charles Montesquieu, “West-Eastern divan” by Goethe and other). It is noteworthy that Georgia's political, religious, and ideological confrontation with various Muslim countries, more specifically, with Persia, has never developed into cultural antagonism.

Hardly anywhere else were Ferdowsi and his successors adored as much as in Georgia. In the Late Middle Ages and for quite some time in the following period, Georgians regarded Persians as masters of artistic word. Those, who used Persian terms, allusions, and artistic images borrowed from the poems of Persian poets, would definitely become successful. So in Rustaveli's romance conditionality of the "Persian history" is created by the use of various artistic approaches:

1. heroes of the romance, conditionally "Muslims"; more than conditionally following Muslim traditions;
2. action takes place in conditional Arabia – არაბეთი [Arabeti] – Arab region, in no less conditional ინდოეთი [Indoeti] – India – country of Indians, as well as in the imaginary Gulansharo, Mulganzari and Kadjeti; absolutely real Khataeti /China (ruled by a "khan", and in other place we find "king"), Khvarazm /Khorezm, Balakhshan/ Badaghshan (country in the lower Pamir at the border of Afghanistan), Egypt, Bagdad and others; at this moment it is considered that all these countries belong to the Muslim world;
3. inter-textual referrals are met appealing to meta-text of oriental poetry;
4. realities of oriental culture are mentioned.
5. All together, the above listed create oriental coloring of artistic space of the romance which is necessary for the poet.

1. Inter-textual referrals

We have to stipulate that speaking about conditionality of the East in the artistic space of "Vepkhistqaosani" it would be a great error to think that that here we speak of conditionality of oriental type. Characteristic peculiarity of development of Georgian culture, irrespective of various rate of closeness in various epochs, there was a close connection with oriental cultures.

"Alongside with the western, European orientation the Georgian culture didn't break links with oriental cultures and this was conditioned not only by geographical, political and economic factors, but also by tendencies of spiritual development" (Tvaradze, 1985, p. 17).

With this in view, as I. Ratiani states, *"in Georgian literature Shota Rustaveli's "Vepkhistkaosani" – is a meeting of western and eastern cultures"*

(2015, p. 41), which clearly illustrates inter-textual roll-calls fixed in the text of the romance. Sending the reader to the summits of oriental poetry, they contribute to the fusion of the “Vepkhistqaosani” with meta-text of poetic culture of the East. In particular, the “Vis and Ramin” by Gurgani is mentioned in Rus-taveli’s romance without any comment (strophe: 181.3; 1068.4; 1529.4), Rostom/Rustam/Rustem (Ferdwsi) (line 192.3), Caen /Qais/(Nizami), Salaman (Strophe 1327.4), that is, the poet is sure that his reader knows well the text referred to by the author.

strophe 181.3:

ოვი ჭირი არ უნახავს არ რამინს და არცა ვისსა.

The sorrows of Vis and Ramin were as nothing to all that he suffered.

strophe1068.4:

ვატმანს ჰკლავიდა უმისობა, რამინისი ვითა ვისსა.

As Ramin’s absence was to Vis so was Avtandil’s to Patman.

strophe1529.4:

ნუ ეჭვ მიჯნურთა მათებრთა ნუცა თუ რამინს და ვისსა.

Their love was stronger by far than the love of Vis and Ramin.

strophe 192.3:

ოსრითა მოკლის ნადირი, როსტომის მკლავ-უგრძესითა.

So he killed game with his arrow, with an arm that was stronger than Rostom’s.

strophe 1327.4:

მისნი ვერ გასძლეხს პატოუნი ვერ კაენ, ვერცა სალამან.

Not even Caen and Salman could have borne the tortures he suffered.

2. Concepts and realities of oriental culture

Inclusion of cultural realities in the narration is of no less significance. First of all, these are concepts of მიჯნურობა [*mijnuroba*].

In particular, substantiating the notion of მიჯნურობა [*Mijnuroba*] in the Prologue, Rustaveli directs his readers to Arabic culture – strophe 22.1: “*In Arabic a lover is called a ‘madman’; because of futile burning he loses his reason*”. So, it’s quite expected that the individual details of Rustaveli’s conception of love bear a clear imprint of oriental culture (the most obvious

example of this is the reference to the main characters as *mijnur*, an Arabic word denoting one maddened by love).

Presenting the suffering from love as an incurable malady obtained a special literary and aesthetic meaning in the poetry of the Bedouin (Udhrah) tribes of Central Arabia in the 7th and 8th centuries, the poets of which wrote verses on a fatal and almost mystic love that could bring only ordeal, with death being the only possible way out of it. Correspondingly, Udhri poetry was full of fatalism, endless melancholy, and impending doom. All these poets had only one beloved woman, who was an ideal. What is the essence of this poetry? – First of all, *death for love's sake*, which is merged with motifs such as *concealing one's love*, representing it as a *malady*, which cannot be cured by medication and which takes away mind and strength from human beings and renders them powerless.

The main motifs of the Udhri lyrics acquired greater meaning and depth in Sufi poetry. The follower of Sufism could not experience divine love until he was tempted by God through carnal love. Therefore, the Sufis in their sermons used the examples of those Udhri lovers who loved their chosen ones selflessly. Among the Udhri poets the Sufis still accorded a special honour to Majnun, who was named as the ideal lover, and his madness was considered as the symbol of his blessed divine vision (Gardavadze, 2018, pp. 85-87).

Arabic sources described the person of Majnun differently. Some Arab theoreticians believed he was a historical person, a poet, whose poems have reached us in our time. According to the traditional reports, the real name of Majnun was Qays ibn Al-Mulawwah and the story of his tragic love was passed on from generation to generation. Although the adventure of *Layla and Majnun* enjoyed an enormous popularity among people, within the Arabic literary tradition it developed in a somewhat fragmented manner. These romantic adventures were first collected, put in a literary form and presented as a complete piece of work by Nizami – the greatest poet of the East. This poem by Nizami constitutes an apology of an unearthly love; it is the hymn to that love which is not destined to flourish in this world, and for the victory of which one has to suppress and destroy one's own ego completely. Nizami was already a committed Sufi when he was writing *Layla and Majnun*. He built his other poem *Treasury of Mysteries* on the principles of Sufism, while in *Khosrow and Shirin* he portrayed of one of the main characters, Farhad, as one who is madly in love with Shirin (Farhad

tells Khosrow: "I can share Shirin's bed only after I shall no longer be alive" (Todua, 1974, p. 8). Yet, in *Layla and Majnun* Nizami chooses an extremely original way:

"Nizami utilizes the Sufi concept of love as a symbol, whenever needed. However, he predominantly draws upon the Udhrī doctrine of love. It is the main root, the indispensable source from which he draws the expression of his social, philosophical, Sufi, artistic and aesthetic thoughts. It also helps to solve the problems of time and humans, humans and fate" (Rustamova, 2020, p. 359).

Consequently, "the passion of Layla and Majnun, which has not found its fulfilment in this life, is not an unlucky love, but an ideal romance, through which a human being achieves perfection by rejecting his own being, his own ego" (Todua, 1974, p. 8).

The poem shows, in sequence, how Majnun's love gradually turns into all-encompassing passion from which he cannot free himself; only death can be its finale. Here is presented that same general and principle contour for the development of love which generally characterizes medieval lyrics. The basic steps in the development of love, which are based on the theoretical and philosophical thought and the ethical belief of that time, are presented distinctly and tangibly. The love of Qays grows from the soil of daily life (Qays and Layla meet each other at school; love sparks in their hearts there. Their classmates are continually gossiping about them, and soon the story of their love "extends to heaven and earth, seized upon by the gossips in the square – the tender secret... revealed" (Nizami, 1966, p. 20), gradually the flame of love arises, (Qays "appeared now here, now there" (22)), intensifies ("Qays was called *Majnun* "When he passed by, people around him shouted: "look, the Madman, Majnun is coming, Majnun!" (22)). Later their love passes beyond earthly understanding, and manifests itself beyond the real. According to Eastern mysticism, an insane person is closer to truth and closer to God than a reasonable one, or than a wise man who is concerned with the troubles of this world. Truth (God) cannot be conceived through one's mind. It requires a great feeling, which will embed into one's "I" and conquer it completely. Therefore, this is the stage of love, when this all-encompassing feeling that took over a person has to defeat the cold mind (Javelidze, 1972, p.105). "Layla – the beloved is the manifestation of God. Here, Majnun sees

God in Layla's image and expresses his love for God through her. The character of Layla and the love for her are a metaphor here, and function as a bridge to reach both truth and God" (Rustamova, 2020, p. 359).

If we imagine these steps (stages) of the development of love in relation to the state of the lover, it will become obvious that falling in love causes contamination by the malady of love, the expressions of which are found in the following symptoms: fainting, loss of consciousness, moaning, sighing, melancholy, paleness, trembling, fear, and the like. The Main character of "Vepkhistqaosani", Tariel, while telling the story of his falling in love, says: "*I had looked on the face of the maiden (Nestan-darejan) and my soul was pierced by her beauty*" (1968, p. 56). When the doctors are summoned to cure him, the latter are unable to conceal their surprise at the unusual state of the sick man. "*Amazed were the learned physicians, they knew not the cause of my illness*". Later they conclude: "*His sickness is not of the body, he is a prey to dejection*" (1968, p. 57). It is clear that the doctors draw the conclusion from their observations of Tariel's condition: "*Sometimes I leaped up like a madman, I uttered idle words*". This reflects spiritual problems of the sick man rather than physical weakness.

It is obvious, that the occasional fainting of Tariel when he was recounting his adventure or when he saw Nestan-darejan for the first time, and also when he saw the letter of his loved one wrapped in the edge of her veil, were nothing but a representation of a normal condition of a roaming knight (compare it with Qays' falling in love – *He tried, but his heart was no longer at one with his reason. If reason asked him to avoid his love, his heart fell ill with longing for her. Away from her, Qays found no peace, yet searching her out was to imperil both*", or the reaction of Farhad seeing Shirin and hearing her voice: "*When Farhad had to hear her word, his stomach started boiling and he screamed as loudly as he could, he became unconscious and fell down to the earth*").

Getting sick with love is followed by the lover's long ordeal, which is expressed in appropriate motifs in the oriental and occidental love poetry and in "Vepkhistqaosani": a) Being in the state of madness, exasperation, and craziness; b) Shedding tears of blood; c) Burning in an unabated fire; d) Having a heart wounded with a lance; e) Longing for death; and f) Roaming the wilderness.

Like Majnun, Tariel "roams the wilderness" after he loses Nestan-darejan, but this state is not yet the madness that would motivate the knight

to turn his back against human society and race among the wild beasts. Despite the misfortune that befell him, he is still able to suppress the painful emotions that torment him, mobilise his forces, and bear the difficulties of his life without batting an eyelid. Only after he loses hope he leaves the "community of men", starts wandering in the fields, and clad in the panther's skin, finds shelter in a remote cave. From now on, Tariel is driven by only one desire – to leave this world as soon as possible, so that he could unite with his separated beloved at least in the other world – with the woman, who was the meaning of his life and who, he thinks, is now dead. The difference between Tariel's and Majnun's madness and quest for death is that it is enough for Tariel to see Nestan's letter wrapped up in her veil, to believe that his lover is alive; the lost hope revives in the person, who "loses consciousness" from unexpected joy and receives the impetus to live and act. From that moment, Tariel relies again on his courage and power in reaching his goal. Together with his sworn brothers, Tariel heads to the fortress of Kajeti in order to regain Nestan and, together with her, the love and spiritual peace he lost. The knight, who returns victorious from Kajeti becomes invincible again. After he unites with the woman he loves, his madness disappears and the motif of roaming the wilderness is no longer necessary.

As the "plague" of love brings ordeal and passion, man has either to tolerate it or fight against it. It is here that the will and spiritual firmness of a person becomes visible. Tariel's sworn brother, Avtandil says: *"A man must not bend before misfortune, but meet it like a man"* (153). It follows that ordeal also has its dialectic: It will not always be there, but will be replaced by joy. Ordeal cannot exist forever. It must be overcome by joy. It is for this purpose that man must be courageous and "firm in trouble". Thus, the philosophy of ordeal is optimistic in *"Vepkhistqaosani"*. Man must resist ordeal and combat it, which is the path upon which a personality can attain perfection (Nozadze, 1975, p. 229).

In *"Vepkhistqaosani"* the pains, ordeals, torments, fires, burnings, and faintings of love are a result of unattained love. There is no one in Rustaveli's romance who would voluntarily want to be in trouble because of love or to be tormented and tortured. On the contrary, the will of every hero becomes visible in their struggle for obtaining love and, if love is a malady, every hero tries to recover from it and escape the malady (Nozadze, 1975, p. 230).

Thus, we can see that enduring pain in amorous relations is equally regarded as obligatory in “*Vepkhistqaosani*” and in oriental poetry. However, in oriental poetry, pain is mostly regarded as a poetic decoration and it is defeated and replaced by joy in Rustaveli’s romance. Love is victorious. Rustaveli closely links amorous torments and joys of love. They are not separated. On the contrary, they are strongly bounded together. The poet concentrates not on the strength of pain and death but on overcoming painful emotions and the ability to cope with them, which leads to the perfection of the lover and the perception of high ideals in this world.

References:

- Gardavadze, D. (2018). Uzriuli ghazali da gadmotsemebi uzriel poet’ mijnurebze [Udhri Ghazal and the Stories of Udhri Lovers]. Tbilisi: ACAD.
- Javelidze, E. (1972). Puzuli [Fuzuli]. Tbilisi: “Nakaduli”.
- Nozadze, V. (1975). Vepkhistq’aosnis mijnurtmet’q’veleba [Metaphorical System of Lovers in The Knight in the Panther’s Skin]. Parisi.
- Ratiani, I. (2005). Kartuli literature da msoplio literaturuli procesebi [Georgian Literature and Global Literary Processes]. Tbilisi: TSU Press.
- Rustaveli, Shota. (1966). *Vepkhist’q’aosani* [The Knight in the Panther’s Skin]. Tbilisi: “Metsniereba”.
- Rustaveli, Shota. (1968). The Knight in the Panther’s Skin. Translated from the Georgian by Venera Urushadze. Tbilisi: Publishing House “Sabchota Sakartvelo”.
- Todua, M. (1975). Kartul-sparsuli et’iudebi, T.2 [Georgian-Persian Studies. Vol.2]. Tbilisi: „Metsniereba“, 146-163.
- Tvaradze, R. (1985). *Txutmet’sauk’unovani mtlianoba*. [Fifteen Century Integrity]. Tbilisi: “Sabch’ota Sakartvelo”.
- Filshinsky, I. (1977). Arabskaja literature v srednie veka. Slovesnoe iskustvo arabov v srednie veka. [Arab Literature in Middle Ages. Verbal Art of the Arabs in Antiquity and the Early Middle Ages]. Moskva: “Nauka”.
- Nizami Ganjavi. (1966). The Story of Layla and Majnun. Translated from the Persian and edited by Dr. R. Gelpke. English version in collaboration with E. Mattin, G. Hill. London: Bruno Cassirer Ltd.
https://archive.org/stream/TheStoryOfLaylaAndMajnun/Leyla%20and%20Majnun_djvu.txt
- Rustamova, A. (2020). Philosophy of Love in Nizami Ganjavi’s Khamsa in the Context of Sufism. In: The Interpretation of Nizami’s Cultural Heritage in the Contemporary Period. Berlin: “Peter Lang”.