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Yagut Bahadur gizi Ashrafova

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## AZERBAIJAN STORYTELLING TRADITION

Ягут Бахадур кызы Ашрафова

Кандидат филологических наук

Музей Азербайджанской Литературы имени Низами Гянджеви

## ТРАДИЦИЯ ДАСТАННОГО ИСПОЛНИТЕЛЬСТВА В АЗЕРБАЙДЖАНЕ

**Abstract.**

The preservation of the traditions of ancient history is one of the important tasks of the Azerbaijani ashig art. One of the important genres included in the traditions of epic is epos and one of the leading directions of ashig art is epic creativity. The study of the traditions of Azerbaijani epic implies the study of the genre of the epic, the refinement of the epic creativity of the ashigs, the study of the specific technique of performing the epic and other similar issues. In the article the similarities and differences of the plot structure and semantic structure of heroic epics with the structure of love epics, traditional thematic and traditional composition in epic creativity, epic poetics, etc. are studied.

**Аннотация.**

Сохранение эпических традиций, имеющих древнюю историю, является одной из важных задач, стоящих перед азербайджанским ашугским искусством. Эпос – один из важных жанров, входящих в эпические традиции, а эпическое творчество – одно из ведущих направлений ашугского искусства. Изучение традиций азербайджанского эпического сказительства предполагает изучение эпического жанра, уточнение эпического творчества ашугов, исследование уникальной техники эпического исполнения и другие подобные вопросы. В статье рассматриваются сходство и различия сюжетной структуры и смысловой значимости героических эпосов со структурой любовных эпосов, была изучена традиционная тематика и традиционная композиция, эпическая поэтика в дастанном исполнительстве.

**Keywords:** epic, Azerbaijani epics, narration, epic folklore, structure, plot

**Ключевые слова:** эпос, Азербайджанские дастаны, нарратив, сказительство, эпический фольклор, структура, сюжет

The main criterion for the all types of folk activity is the stability and immutability of traditional norms passed from generation to generation. Therefore, the folk singer is obliged to realize all his improvisational capabilities and mastery within the framework of the accepted norms of the tradition. As P.A. Grincher noted, the main task of the epic narrator is to convey the story familiar to him in a traditional way, familiar to the listener and for successful, uninterrupted performance, the performer must fully master the technique of verbal creativity, in other words, traditional language, thematics and traditional compositional tricks". (1, 32).

It is noteworthy that this universal regularity of epic poetics is also typical for the work of Ashiq Ahmad, who is well-known as an outstanding narrator in the Shirvan ashig environment. He was brought up in such a story-telling environment where the art of ashig, its creativity, performance, including story-telling traditions have a centuries-old history. "Traditional language" of narration in Shirvan ashig environment, "traditional theme and traditional compositional tricks" are petrified art codes of Azerbaijani-Turkic (Oghuz) ashig art and Ashiq

Ahmad was one of the classic representatives of this tradition.

Before looking at the unique technique of Ashiq Ahmad's narration, let's pay attention to the elements of traditional language, thematics, composition, which are universal "indicators" of the art tradition, in the basis of Azerbaijani-Turkic narration, to which ashig belongs.

The "traditional language" element of epic performance implies petrified elements of epic narration. Here, traditional language does not mean at all the vocabulary and dialect quality of a living language. This "language" is a system of descriptive and expressive tools and patterns that are unique to the epic.

One of the important indicators of the tradition of narration is "traditional thematics". In Ashiq Ahmad's activity one can clearly observe "the traditional theme" in the epics created by him. Although the epics created by ashig do not coincide with the classic epic themes exactly, but at the same time, his texts retain "the traditional thematics" as their main indicators. For example, the epic "Ashiq Bilal" created by Ashiq Ahmad is considered the peak of his epic activity. This

text, which has an original plot, as it is seen from the name, is dedicated to Ashiq Bilal, a very prominent representative of the Shirvan Ashiq environment (see: 103). The theme of the text is original, as very interesting biographical facts about Ashiq Bilal are epicized in the epic. However, Ashiq Ahmad's mastery manifested itself in the fact that he was able "to cover" an original theme into the traditional theme of the epic plot, into the traditional plot scheme. The epic has its own plot scheme. Ashiq Ahmad subordinated Ashiq Bilal's life, the hero of the work, to this scheme. In other words, he mentioned the moments from Ashiq Bilal's life, which are typical elements of the plot of love stories. It includes: the main character falling in love, fighting the forces that hinder love, telling quatrains and so on. All these events in the epic were adapted by the master to the "thematic scheme" characteristic of love epics, and as a result, an epic was produced that was original in terms of craftsmanship and very popular in Shirvan narration.

The other indicator of originality of the tradition of narration is the "traditional composition". It should be noted that the epic composition is one of the important elements of the tradition of narration. It has petrified, stable structure elements. In the epics by Ashiq Ahmad the fixed elements of the epic composition were creatively developed with constant preservation. This is one of the factors that make his epics interesting for listeners, making them famous. As an old master Ashiq Ahmad played a prominent role in preserving and keeping the traditions of storytelling in the Shirvan ashig environment for many years.

Ashiq Ahmed's story-telling in all cases reflects the characteristic creative features of the Azerbaijani-Turkic tradition of story-telling. He grew up in an environment very rich in the traditions of storytelling, absorbed this tradition into his soul and memory, and with his epics, he unequivocally became a classic representative of these traditions. But at the same time, we observe innovative qualities in Ashiq Ahmad's narration systematically, which we'll consider, proceeding from his talent and artistic power.

According to the universal canons of epic poetics, the epic work is never deprived of the folk spirit, despite the fact that it is "reborn" in each process of performance. Epic narration in all cases works on the basis of the plot and motifs, ready-made models and formulas, compositional techniques that are in his memory: "The language of the epic narrator is the language of traditional formulas and he uses these formulas according to the needs of his narrative and the context (instead)" (1, 36). The formula, as M.Parri defined it, is the basic unit of the epic language. The epics of Ashiq Ahmad, along with the qualities reflecting the individuality of the artist, constantly reflect the creative spirit. The whole system of the tradition of narration found its lyrical and epic embodiment in his works. Here, along with the unique qualities of epic creativity, the unique qualities of the audience were also preserved. The epic lives in the memory of the listener, just as it lives in the memory of the narrator. The audience will not accept an epic that does not correspond to the tradition. The fact that the

epics by Ashiq Ahmad are decoration of Shirvan assemblies, in turn, the other indicators of the loyalty of his epic creativity to the tradition.

The narrator, as it has already been said, tells his story in adherence to tradition. Therefore, in the language of Azerbaijani epic examples, including Ashig Ahmad's work, it is a rule appealing the transitional formulas such as "Let them stay here, now let's see...", "Let's see what he said", "He took his instrument "saz" and began", "The word came to the end", "Let me tell you about", "One day", etc. at certain points.

The traditional number formulas in Azerbaijani epic are 3, 7, 40: "forty thin-waisted girls", "forty heroes", "forty robbers", "fortieth room", "forty days, forty nights", "the sacred place "Fory", "three days, three nights", "three-stringed saz", "three sisters", "three brothers", "three free days", "three apples", "seven days, seven nights", "seven brothers", "seven-headed dragon", "seven layers" and so on. These figures-formulas are also characteristic of Ashiq Ahmad's activity.

Among the numerous components of the epic tradition, as noted by the scientists studying folklore pragmatics, there is also a complex of epic genres, the various schools of traditional performance, an epic auditorium and so on (2, 4).

Azerbaijani local epic performing art, of course, finds its clearer expression in ashig art. The fact that ashig art is based on the master-student tradition, continuous and unbreakable, has allowed a variety of plots, motifs, compositions, forms and other elements in the epic tradition to be transported from century to century on a larger scale.

As ashig art is a phenomenon of Azerbaijani Turkic culture differentiated from the only Oghuz ethnic-cultural circle, the epic creativity of ashigs can be considered as an indicator of the development of Azerbaijani epic thinking.

Professor A.Nabiyev writes: "The use of the national epic for a certain period of time to glorify the heroic history in the work of ozan ultimately led to the creation of the heroic epic Oghuz. These plots were polished in the repertoire of ozan over a long historical period. The formation process of the Azerbaijani heroic epic, which is an important part of the Oghuz heroic epic, took place precisely in these creative conditions. The medieval epics created through improvisation based on the traditions of ashig art were also perfected and polished by the strength and grandeur of national thinking" (3, 26).

It should be noted that in all environments, the price of any lover as an artist was first measured by which master he studied and how many epics he knew. However, it made possible for the ashig to apply to the traditional genres, plots and themes. As it mentioned earlier, Ashiq Ahmad also passed the school of stable and crystal traditions of master-student relations and mastered all the main qualities of the tradition of narration in this "school".

It is a well-known fact that the love epics of Azerbaijan, in comparison with the heroic epics, found an understanding in the later historical periods and the

love motifs retained a leading position until the last period of the epic. The numerous heroic epics of the end of the 19th and the beginning of the 20th centuries (“Gachag Karam”, “Gachag Nabi”, “Sattarkhan”, etc.) could not change the direction of that stream. As M.Allahmanli claims, the Azerbaijani love epics, unlike heroic epics, do not have whole, impressive episodes: “Epics are somehow created and consolidated in the community of tellers. The variety of events in love epics is close-range and its impact on artistic thinking is different. This is also shown by the epic tradition of the last period. Here, at the same time, the integrity of the episodes does not look so impressively. It means, the epic itself becomes whole. In heroic epics there are differences and integrity of episodes. But in themselves, they do not appear as events, each with different effectiveness. Therefore, these examples should be viewed purely from the perspective of the characteristic features of the epic tradition” (4, 81).

Azerbaijani heroic epics are characterized by a tendency to single-heroism. Professor N.Jafarov wrote the image of a single (one) hero in the Turkic epic tradition, linking it with the formation of the idea of God: “For perfect epic contemplation, a single God (a single ruler, a single hero) was needed. Therefore, the main heroes of the ancient Turkic epic (the epics preserved in one way or another in various sources) are the rulers - heroes who are transformers of the image of “God”, whose will is the direct will of the epic thinking (the people, ethnos, ethnocultural system, etc.) that created that epic” (5, 14).

The archetype of the lonely hero stands for the mythological (archaic) epic hero. As a rule, the lonely heroes who have preserved the archaic elements of the Turkic epic are the sons of God. The name of Er Sogotoh, the famous hero of the Yakut epic, gives that place: “Lonely Er”.

The motif of a lonely hero in the development of epic thinking has passed a long centuries-old path and under the influence of history and social processes has been transformed into “a stranger hero”. The role of ashik creativity associated with Sufi sect should be emphasized in this process.

Although Azerbaijani love epics are nominally “with two heroes”, in fact, only a lover is functional throughout the plot in those epics. As M.H.Tahmasib noted, the main content of almost all of the Azerbaijani “love epics”, some parts and chapters of a number of heroic epics such as “The Book of Dede Gorgud” and “Koroglu”, that is, the plot consists of a description of the hero’s struggle to reach his love (6, 65).

The structure of Azerbaijani love epics, as noted by the scientists, first of all, is a phenomenon of tradition. Azerbaijani epics have a traditional syntactic structure. Even at one time, Otto Spitz, while researching Turkic folk novels, divided the structure of epics into four parts:

- The miraculous birth of the hero;
- The emergence of love between a boy and a girl;
- The desire of two lovers to reunite with each other and the obstacles they meet;
- To reach to love or not (7, 12).

The division of the plot of love epics based on this principle is used in Azerbaijani folklore-study by M.H.Tahmasib, M.Jafarli and it is also appreciated by others with slight changes (6, 65; 8, 25-64).

It is characteristic that Ashiq Ahmad’s epic creativity reflects the structural scheme of Azerbaijani epics in all cases. It is true, observing this at first glance causes some difficulty. For example, the plot of the epic “Shirvan and Fargana”, which we mentioned about a little earlier, at first glance does not “equate” with the structural scheme of our classic love epics. However, further, analyzing the plot of the epic in detail, we will see that the love between these young people, characteristic representatives of the Azerbaijani and Uzbek youth, working people of the 20th century, despite all its “modernity”, was skillfully subordinated by Ashiq Ahmad to the structural scheme of classical love epics.

In the Azerbaijani epic tradition, those who have miraculous birth sacral powers (the elder, the dervish, the sacral person and others) come true with the help of their prayer (applause) or the magic power they give. According to the Azerbaijani epic tradition, when a hero is born, attributes appear that determine his type of hero. Before Rovshan has yet passed to the status of Koroglu, the epic “presents” his name and sword. At the same time, Shah Ismail was born and his name was Gamarnishan (for the same reason - because the dervish was magical). In epics, in many cases, the hero and his lover are born simultaneously and connected to the same cause.

The image of the Dervish in the Azerbaijani epic tradition has several functions:

- The birth of the hero occurs through his magic;
- The hero is given “buta”;
- The hero is warned;
- The hero is given a magic ability, etc.

Dervish in the Azerbaijani epic tradition fulfills the mission of God.

In the epics such as “Oghuz Kagan”, “The Book of Dede Gorgud” and “Oghuzname” the functions are usually performed by wise people, shamans or tribal elders such as Ulu Turk, Dede Gorgud, Irkil Goja. According to F.Bayat’s thought “the invariant of the image of the counselor, the wise old man from the epic is the first shaman or shaman patron” (9, 58-59). In the epic “Koroglu” that function is carried out by Ashiq Junun. In some epics and fairy tales the image of Khizir or Hazrat Ali acts in that status.

Speaking about the semantics of the image of dervish in the epic tradition in his work “Poetics of Azerbaijani love epics” M.Jafarli writes: “In love epics the lover is the bearer of divine beauty, the embodiment of the Divine. In this regard, they mediate among dervish - Khizir, Hazrat Ali and lovers, in fact, between this world and that world, among the world of people and the Divine World. This mediation is both direct mediation in the epic (in this way the heroes are born, they are engaged to each other through “buta”) and mediation is also manifested in the form of salvation: the mediator saves the entire hero. He has to get involved. However, let’s remember that all his rescues are miraculous. He fills the heart of the fighting hero

with words, “whispers” mysteriously the answers to the riddles given to him. The hero in love always wins with the help of his patron” (8, 166-167).

The fact that a boy and a girl fall in love with each other is realized in most of the Azerbaijani love epics by “giving buta” in a dream. The process of “giving buta”, which determines the transition of the hero from one status to another, turns him (the hero) into a lover, gives the ability to read and recite the poems. In most cases, “giving buta” is realized by drinking the mysterious “wine of love” of the dervish (Khizir, Hazrat Ali, the sacred person) in the hero’s dream.

As a tradition, *ashiq*, who considers his mission to travel around the country, sends his hero on a journey. The hero’s adventure (going abroad) forms the longest part of the love epics. In dozens of folk novels such as “Tahir and Zohra”, “Miskin Abdal and Sanubar”, “Gul Mahmud”, “Shah Ismail”, “Gurbani” the hero goes on a journey after receiving “buta”.

Although the plot structure (semantic structure) of our heroic epics is largely identical to the structure of love epics, heroism, which determines the motivation of the journey in the former, leaves its place in the latter to the “power of love”. Just as brave self-sufficiency in heroic epics is realized in the battle with the “infidel”, the hero of the love epics proves his loyalty to love and the right power of his own love at parties of negotiations. The motif of violent abduction of a spouse by struggle, which, according to the tradition of the heroic epic, is a condition of “heroic marriage”, does not appear in our love epics. However, as far as the departure of the lover to abroad is beyond the heroic content as in the chapters of the epic “Koroglu”, by inertia of tradition, even in our modern epics, it sometimes preserves the old motifs of epics and *ashiq* narrations in the name. For example: “Ashiq Ali’s visit to Turkey”, “Ashiq Alasgar’s visit to Garagoyunlu”, “Ashiq Alasgar’s visit to Karabakh”, “Novras Iman’s Tibilisi visit” and so on.

In our epics the hero’s departure on a trip (“leaving home”) is largely tied to the following “reasons”:

1. The hero leaves home to defeat the harmful enemy;
2. The hero leaves home to hunt or get loot;
3. The hero leaves home to find a wife.

The first case is specific only for heroic epics. It is usually met in the parts of the epics such as “Oghuz Kagan”, “The Book of Dede Gorgud”, in some chapters of the epic “Koroglu”. In fairy tales the hero also goes on a journey in pursuit of fantastic forces that have damaged him (his family, his homeland) (for example, the ogre, who stole the magic apple). The second and third cause-related visits are found in both heroic and love epics.

There are many variant derivatives in our epics of “the hero leaving home to get a wife for himself”:

1. The hero found out (or got acquainted) with the girl, or received a letter from the girl and went after her (for example, some chapters of the epic “Koroglu”).

2. The hero leaves his homeland in order to be reunited with his lover, who was given to him by “buta”.

As a rule, the second variant has two types and they are also observed in our epics:

a) the hero’s lover is in a distant hometown (lives in a distant hometown, or moved to a distant hometown);

b) in order to get enough money to reunite with his beloved, the hero goes abroad;

The fact that the hero left his native land and went abroad in order to collect the necessary money to reunite with his beloved is found in modern, or rather, relatively close to us love epics. The same socially oriented motivation is in the foreground in modern epics such as “Ashiq Ali’s visit to Turkey”, “Janbakhish’s epic”. In the epic “Alasgar and Sahnabanu” Ashiq Alasgar also being poor, cannot meet his beloved, he joins Ashiq Ali and leaves the native land, when he returns to his village, he hears that Sahnabanu was given to the rich Muharram’s son Mustafa. Going on a journey, the hero has to meet a number of obstacles along the way and overcome trials.

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