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# Investigation of Gender Identity in the Literary Works of Prominent Medieval Azerbaijani Authors

Vusala Aghabayli<sup>1</sup>

## Abstract

This research delves into the exploration of gender identity within medieval Azerbaijani literature, aiming to uncover nuanced perspectives on societal norms and cultural dynamics of the time. Employing a meticulous methodology, selected literary works from the era are analyzed to discern patterns and themes related to gender roles, expressions, and identity. The research addresses key questions surrounding the representation of gender in diverse contexts, offering a comprehensive understanding of how medieval Azerbaijani society conceptualized and portrayed gender. The anticipated findings not only contribute to the field of gender studies but also shed light on the broader cultural and social milieu of the historical Azerbaijani context. Through this investigation, the study endeavors to bridge gaps in existing scholarship, fostering a more nuanced appreciation of gender dynamics in medieval Azerbaijani literature.

**Key words:** *gender identity, medieval Azerbaijani writers, woman, literature, society.*

## Introduction

Gender identity, a complex and multifaceted concept, plays a pivotal role in shaping societal norms and cultural perceptions. This research embarks on an exploration of gender identity within the literary corpus of prominent medieval Azerbaijani authors. By delving into the works of these influential writers, we seek to unravel the nuanced representations of gender roles, expressions, and identities prevalent during the medieval period in Azerbaijan. The study aims to contribute to our understanding of the cultural and social

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dynamics that influenced the portrayal of gender in the literary landscape of medieval Azerbaijani society. Through a focused analysis, we endeavor to shed light on the intricacies of gender identity as depicted in the enduring works of these esteemed authors. This study explores gender identity in the literary works of significant medieval Azerbaijani writers. Employing meticulous analysis, it investigates representations of gender roles and expressions within these influential works. The research contributes valuable insights into the cultural and societal understanding of gender during the medieval Azerbaijani era.

In medieval prose, women were sometimes depicted as obedient wives and mothers, conforming to traditional gender roles. This was in line with the prevailing societal norms of the time. However, some stories did showcase women who defied conventions and displayed remarkable strength and intelligence. Azerbaijani folktales often featured both male and female characters that embodied a mix of stereotypes and progressive qualities. While female characters might be seen as nurturing and subservient, they also displayed cleverness, resilience, and courage.

The influence of Islamic and Turkic cultures played a significant role in shaping gender roles in early Azerbaijani literature. Islamic values, while emphasizing modesty and family, also promoted the idea of education and knowledge, which gave rise to strong female characters who were scholars and poets. Azerbaijani literature, like literature in many cultures, has often played a dual role in shaping and reflecting societal norms. It both perpetuated traditional gender roles and served as a platform for challenging them.

Early Azerbaijani literature produced notable female poets and writers who contributed to the literary landscape, such as Mahsati Ganjavi<sup>1</sup>, who was celebrated for her lyrical poetry. Over time, as Azerbaijani society underwent changes and modernization, gender representations in literature evolved. The influence of European literature and the advent of the 19th-century Azerbaijani literary revival brought about new narratives that challenged traditional gender norms and explored women's roles in a changing society.

In summary, early gender representation in Azerbaijani literature was a reflection of the historical, cultural, and religious context of the region. It featured a mix of traditional and progressive depic-

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<sup>1</sup> Mahsati Ganjavi, a poetess and philosopher of the 12th century, was recognized not only in her epoch, but much later also. Her works are considered valuable examples of Azerbaijani and world literature.

tions of men and women. The evolving nature of Azerbaijani literature, influenced by both internal and external factors, would lead to significant changes in gender representation in the years to come, ultimately contributing to the ongoing discourse on gender issues in Azerbaijani culture and society.

The primary objective of this research is to comprehensively investigate the portrayal and conceptualization of gender identity in the literary works of prominent medieval Azerbaijani authors. By scrutinizing the narratives, characters, and themes within these influential works, the study aims to discern patterns, nuances, and cultural representations of gender during the medieval period in Azerbaijan. This research seeks to contribute valuable insights into the understanding of how gender identity was constructed, perceived, and communicated through the literary expressions of noteworthy Azerbaijani writers.

### **Methodology**

The research employs a multifaceted methodology to achieve its objectives. Literary analysis forms the core of the study, involving a systematic examination of selected works from prominent medieval Azerbaijani authors. The process includes identifying and categorizing gender-related themes, character depictions, and narrative structures. Additionally, a comparative approach is employed to highlight variations and consistencies across different works. The analysis is guided by established theories in gender studies, ensuring a robust and insightful exploration of gender identity within the context of medieval Azerbaijani literature. The research adopts a meticulous and systematic approach to derive meaningful conclusions from the textual materials, aiming to provide a nuanced understanding of gender dynamics in this historical literary landscape.

### **Gender Perspectives in Early Azerbaijani Literary Texts**

The role of women in public life in the culture of the Middle Ages (XII-XVIII centuries) in Azerbaijan is undeniable: Momina Khatun (XII century), Sara Khatun - the first female diplomat of Azerbaijan (XV century), Mahinbanu (XVI century) and others. The dominance and concrete position of such famous female figures in the administration and authority was almost non-existent in Western countries or Russia at the same period. For example, the first queen in the history of England, Mary, ascended the throne in the 16th century (1553).

Although we do not touch on the most ancient stages of Azerbaijani literature, oral folk literature, it should be briefly noted that the images of women are described differently in the epos. In the epos of love, women suffered, endure longing and hijra, and in the epos of heroism, women supported men, used swords in their hands on the battlefields. In the epos of “Dada Gorgud”<sup>1</sup>, a woman is depicted as a noble figure, as well as in battle scenes with men, on horseback, in courage. In this epos, the Turkish-Oghuz woman is highly valued, the mother’s respect is equal to God’s respect. The honour of a woman is valued and symbolized as the honour of the family and the people [Kerimi 2014, 15]. In the saga, Kanturali is looking for a worthy wife. This woman must be someone who wakes up before him, attacks the enemy before him, and has more courage and bravery than him. Indeed, the lady that he finds, Selcan khatun is not only beautiful but also a brave woman. In particular, other women that are described in the saga, like Burla Khatun, Banuchichek, Dirs Khan’s Khatun, are distinguished by their courage and skill.

The main genres of medieval Azerbaijani poetry are gasida, ghazal and rubai. While gasidas mostly praised kings, sultans, and commanders, the ghazals and rubais were lyrical in nature and were written mainly on love, women’s praise, and socio-philosophical themes, which allows them to analyse gender issues in terms of gender perspective. In the 12th-13th centuries, women poets such as Mahsati Ganjavi, Raziya Ganjavi and their works confirm that a woman could study and write in Azerbaijan at that time. Mahsati Ganjavi was the first famous Azerbaijani female poet and writer, the first female chess player, the first prominent female musician and, most likely, the first female composer. Mahsati was well educated for her time and, it is clear from her works that she travelled to Rum, Merv, Balkh, Nishapur, Herat, Ganja, Khorasan, Iraq, Zuzan, Arran and many other cities. Her life and creativity, which were considered unusual for her time, were memorized and turned into epics and myths. Mahsati’s epos “Amir Ahmad and Mahsati” is also said to reflect her biography [Mahsati, 2022].

In Eastern literature, Mahsati is known as the greatest rubai master after Omar Khayyam. Wishing women and men to be equal, the poet tries to protect women’s rights in her works. Another main problem that maid Mahsati think and object was the purchase of

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<sup>1</sup> The Book of Dede Gorgud (Kitabi-Dada Qorqud) is a heroic epic poem of the Oghuz – a Turkic tribal group who were the ancestors of the Azerbaijanis, Turks, Turkmens and the Gagauz.

young girls by older men, she always objected to. In the epos “Amir Ahmad and Mahsati”, based on her own biography, the female poet notes that she received a perfect education and studied the Qur’an until she was 12 years old. Later, her theologian father sent Mahsati to specialists to teach her music, playing instruments such as jang and oud, and dancing. People around her blamed her father for this step. Because at that time, dancers (girls) were considered immoral and graceless. Therefore, they said to Mahsati’s father that, being a theologian, on the one hand, you gave good education to your daughter, taught the Qur’an, and on the other hand, do you want her to be graceless? The father replied, “Let my daughter be ready for any situation.” [Mahsati, 2022] According to the 12th-century environment, Mahsati’s thoughts, the description of girls’ education, and their involvement in additional creativity required a lot of courage. From what we have mentioned, it is clear that although the attitude of the time towards a free woman and a creative woman was not good, Mahsati was able to realize all her dreams by being educated, intelligent and purposeful. Her rubais reflect the desire for free intellect and the desire to break the bondage of women.

### **Gender Roles and Stereotypes in Literary Works by Renowned Authors**

Nizami Ganjavi is considered to be the greatest poet of the time. It is said that he had good friendly relations with Mahsati Ganjavi. Nizami Ganjavi’s work is so rich and multi-branched that it has become the object of many studies. It is also important to study and analyze Nizami’s work in terms of gender perspective. In his works, the human personality, the issue of women come to the forefront of the poet’s thoughts.

Besides being the first poet to bring the folk epos about “Leyli and Majnun” to the written literature, Nizami Ganjavi is undoubtedly the first poet in the literature of the East to create a positive image of a woman. In all poems of “Khamsa”, the leading figures are women. He gave the high value to the woman that she deserved when she was considered a second-class being. At that time, the woman was a silent slave, first in her father’s house and then in her husband’s house. Concubines and girls were sent as gifts from one city to another and from one palace to another.

The ruler of Derbent sends a gift to Nizami, a concubine named Aphag. But he admits Aphag not as a slave, concubine but as his wife, he loves her and marries her. Such a tragic situation, such a tragic



fate of a woman, made the humanist poet think, and he devotes more than half of his work to this issue. Nizami Ganjavi's twelfth-century depictions of society's view of women as second-class beings, women's dependence on men for rights and authority, as well as their social and economic status and other similar problems were written in "The Second Sex" (1949) by the French philosopher Simone de Beauvoir, the founder of feminism. Nizami's appreciation of women is so high that he sees them as brave, strong and capable: "*Çox gözəl arvad var mərdlikdə bir şir, Çox ipək içində şirlər gizləninir.*" [Nizami, 2012, 73] – Translation: There is a very beautiful lady, like a brave lion; Many lions hide a lot of silk inside themselves.

Nizami's oeuvre is especially important for gender studies because Nizami Ganjavi is not satisfied to depict a woman, just as a symbol of purity, nobility and divine love. He raises a woman to the highest ruling class, to a position of power, to the administration. We can see examples of this point in characters like Nushaba, Mehinbanu, Shirin. The women described by Nizami are both beautiful, attractive, and intelligent, determined, capable, businesslike:

Nushaba is the character of the highest position and ideal woman created by Nizami. The ancient land of Barda, ruled by a woman named Nushaba, became a beautiful and prosperous place in the shadow of the justice of female ruling. Its inhabitants do not know the meaning of suffering and sorrow: "*Nothing to be found there except joy,*" [Nizami, 2012, 75] because there is justice and equality in that country.

In another play, "Khosrov and Shirin" (1180), Nizami describes Shirin from Shapur's speech with such beauty and artistic mastery that Khosrov falls in love with Shirin without seeing him. Khosrov was a lustful, unjust, treacherous, far-fetched king. Later, Shirin manages to change Khosrov spiritually, to idealize him. It shows the power of the woman. Shirin's description: Her eyes are dark black but shines like moon at night, her height is like palm tree, her teeth are more brighter than pearl, even the stars can not be equal to her, she is more beautiful than the Sun and the Moon – original version in Azerbaijani:

*Dirilik suyudur gözü, qapqara, Gecəni qər q edir aytək nurlara. Hündür boyu – gümüş xurma ağacı, Xurma dərən bir cüt zəncidir saçı. Dışləri sədəfdən daha parlaqdır, Dışindən nur alan sədəf də ağdır. Ulduzlar da olmaz hüsnünün tayı, Ötmüş gözəllikdə günəşi, ayı...* [Nizami, 2012, 79].

Nizami criticizes the rotten moral criteria and old traditions

to show Majnun's rights and oppression during the rule of darkness and ignorance. As a woman, Leyli is a victim of such a society. Leyli has no rights and entitlements. Nizami's "Leyli" can be compared to the female character in the works of Thomas Hardy, a nineteenth-century Victorian writer. While Nizami was able to describe Leyli's inner anguish, love, passion, and desire to be reunited with her lover in the 12th century, in the 19th century Hardy was criticized by critics for describing Tess of the d'Urbervilles' love, passion, and inner sufferings as a woman...

We see that Nizami not only reveals the shortcomings and problems of his time, but also his work remains an important source for modern gender research. Compared to the works of both Eastern and Western writers and women of the time, it is clear that Nizami not only praised the beauty and charm of women but also presented women with a revolutionary mindset as the most important beings in dominant positions, administrations and in making decisions.

### **Representation of Female Characters in the Medieval Azerbaijani Literary Context**

Another prominent figure of the 12th century is Khagani Shirvani. Khagani who was famous for his epos, gasidas and the poem titled "Tohfatul-Iraqeyn" mostly depicted humanism, beauty and humanity. Khagani, like his contemporaries, presented women as a positive character and felt sorry for the life of a woman who is considered to be a slave and concubine. In his poem "Tohfatul-Iraqeyn", thinking about his mother he described the miserable life of women, their hard work, care and self-sacrifice for their children. Khagani wrote that his mother was in captivity, taken away from her parents and homeland, sold as a slave and even was obliged to change her religion. He considers himself "a relic" of a woman whose veil was like a shield to protect him [Kerimi 2014, 63].

Both in Khagani's and Nizami's works we can see the complaints about enslaved life and the tragic fate of women in a patriarchal society. Nasimi has a special place among the great masters of the 14th century in Azerbaijan. Of course, the purpose of our research does not allow us to investigate the other fields of Nasimi's oeuvre – his protest against the greed, oppression and injustice of the time and authority, but we aim to analyse his depiction of woman, love his adoration of human beauty.

Nasimi considers the description of the woman and her beauty to be much more worthy than the praise of the oppressive ruling

forces and administration. According to him, the love of beautiful ladies is the food of the human soul, and he criticizes those who hide this love, considering them ignorant. While praising his lover, he says that “the real way to get your lover is to pass through love” [Kerimi 2014, 74]. In Nasimi’s works, women are depicted as the most beautiful, the highest creature and the symbol of the beauties of life. According to the poet, the charm and beauty of a woman are the beauty of the sky, and this beauty was created for man, love and happiness. He says that the face of a beautiful woman is similar to paradise and her lips are like springs, and he considers her equal to the Sun and the Moon:

*“Cənnəti-ədn imiş üzün, üştə ləbin də kövsəri, Qədrü bərat imiş saçın, xalü xətin mələkləri. Hüsnü cəməli-surətin qıblədir, uş bu mə’nidən, Surətinə sücud edər ay ilə şəmsi-xavəri”* [Azerbaijan classic literature 1985, 250].

The metaphors and metonyms that Nasimi uses to describe women in his work are interesting. The beautiful woman that he describes has neither defect nor equal. Her face is sometimes a rose, sometimes a bright moon, her lips are honey-sugar, her every word is sweet, her eyes are enchanting, the ground that her feet touch is saint, her teeth are pearls, her statue is like cypress or plane tree, and he depicts himself like burning candle for that lady.

It should also be noted that the brave women figure of the hurufi movement were together with men, defeated their ideas and fought bravely. An example of such a woman was Fatima, the daughter of Fazlullah Naimi, Nasimi’s teacher. Fatima was educated, capable, and courageous. She was among the protestors together with her father Naimi and Nasimi, was who rebelled against the cruelty of the time and the oppression of the people. Fatima, was involved with literature, as well, she was also a poet, and her ghazals depicted motives such as humanity, love, equality, and freedom.

It is considerable, in terms of gender research, to investigate the oeuvre of Molla Panah Vagif, the prominent figure of Azerbaijani literature in the 18th century. Because Vagif describes a woman with a charming aesthetic taste and special sexism. The factor of beauty, which is the main theme of classical literature, takes a new direction in Vagif’s plays. The first examples of realist poetry are associated with the name of Vagif. The main part of his poems is dedicated to the description of beauty. The women depicted in these works with such sexism as “cypress slender”, “sugar-tailed”, “zulfu amber”, etc. are real people. He says that such beautiful women feed the human

spirit with their good manners, pleasant speech, and tender gait. [Vagif 2004, 7] He prefers natural beauty in women, finding no need for cosmetics and depicts a woman in such professional manner like an artist drawing a portrait of a woman.

However, it should be noted that the limited features of his time and the general view of society do not go beyond Vagif, who sometimes does not differ from his contemporaries looking at women as submissive creatures entertaining her lover. In such approaches and poems, he sees a woman as a mistress who thinks only about her physical appearance, adorns herself, excluding from all other activities. Of course, these features, influenced by society and his contemporaries, are the limited boundaries of his works. However, while describing female beauty, he depicts positive qualities, such as fidelity, loyalty, purity, etc. as an integral part of female beauty, and prefers and praises educated women. From this point, it is understood that he wants to see women not only beautiful, but also dignified, shy and intelligent, paying attention not only to their appearance but also to their inner qualities.

Although Vagif's goshmas where he depicted beautiful women, were dominated by realist tendencies, but actually he was entirely influenced by Romanticism. Probably from all of Vagif's attachments, he was against the woman wearing a headscarf or a veil. He thought that the person with a defect might cover himself, but there is no need to cover and hide the beauty of an innocent woman. [Vagif 2017, 35] However, it was the poet's personal prism, not the view and approach of the society at that time. He did not fight against the headscarf or veil in general. It was impossible to discuss this issue at that time. Vagif was the prime minister of the Karabakh khanate, the largest political force in Azerbaijan, and as a representative of the ruling class, he acted in the interests of his class [Olaylar 2014, 10].

### **Conclusion**

Influenced by Fuzuli, Vagif described women perfectly and ideally, without any defect. However, Vagif's beauty was real; Vagif describes his imaginary romantic beauty dressing her up in a national Azerbaijani cloth, in this way he brings her from the imaginary world to the real world. If we compare the parallel period with the English literature, we can see that in the same period in Azerbaijani literature the Azerbaijani women were described in more positive shades, especially by male poets, writers. Nizami's heartbreaking approach to the life of concubines in the 12th century, raising the

women to the highest position, or Nasimi's perfect description of a beautiful woman, the metaphors and metonymies that he used could not be found in English literature of female characters at the same time. In addition, if writers of Victorian literature, such as Charlotte Bronte, Emily Bronte, etc. in the 19th century, fearing that they would not be well-received in society wrote under the pseudonyms of men to hide their femininity in the 12th-14th century in Azerbaijani literature Mahsati Ganjavi, Raziya Ganjavi, and Fatima Naimi wrote with their own names. Furthermore, Mahsati, who was an educated girl and good chess player, courageously depicted even female passion, the emotions and feelings of women about men.

We would like to stress that in Azerbaijani literature Mahsati Ganjavi lived in the same period as Nizami Ganjavi in the 12th century, and was famous with her poetry, freedom and speech, and most importantly with her rubai and other plays. She and her oeuvre is still the object of a lot of researches.

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## O'rta asr Ozarbayjon mumtoz adiblari asarlarida gender o'ziga xosligikni tekshirish

Vusala Aghabayli<sup>1</sup>

### Abstrakt

Ushbu tadqiqot o'rta asrlar Ozarbayjon adabiyotida gender o'ziga xoslikni o'rganishga qaratilgan bo'lib, jamiyat normalari va o'sha davrning madaniy taraqqiyotiga oid istiqbollarni ochishga qaratilgan. Aniq metodologiyadan foydalangan holda, o'sha davrdagi tanlangan adabiy asarlar gender rollari, ifodalari va o'ziga xosligi bilan bog'liq mavzularni aniqlash uchun tahlil qilindi. Tadqiqotda turli kontekstlarda gender rollari bilan bog'liq asosiy masalalar ko'rib chiqildi va O'rta asrlardagi Ozarbayjon jamiyati genderni qanday konsepsiyalashtirgani va tasvirlangani haqida atroflicha yoritildi. Kutilayotgan natijalar nafaqat gender tadqiqotlari sohasiga hissa qo'shadi, balki tarixiy Ozarbayjon kontekstining kengroq madaniy va ijtimoiy muhitini yoritadi. Ushbu tadqiqot orqali tadqiqot o'rta asrlar Ozarbayjon adabiyotida gender dinamikasini yanada chuqurroq tushunishga yordam berib, mavjud bo'shliqlarni to'ldirishga xizmat qiladi.

**Kalit so'zlar:** *gender o'ziga xosligi, o'rta asr ozarbayjon yozuvchilari, ayol, adabiyot, jamiyat.*

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