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# Elements of Folklore as Vehicles in the Works of Nizami Ganjavi

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**Abstract:** Folklore is an essential element in cultural anthropology. Poets of different periods, including Nizami Ganjavi of the 6<sup>th</sup> century, have used elements of folklore in their works that represented the history and culture of that period. The masterful verbalist of Ganja City, Nizami reflected in his poetry much of the beliefs and customs of his time. By employing elements of folklore as vehicle, he created new, unique images despite the variety in his stories and poems. This essay tries to examine different elements of folklore as vehicle in the poems of Nizami.

**Keywords:** Folklore, the sixth century, vehicle, imagery, Nizami

## INTRODUCTION

The study of folklore, or folkloristics, is a new scientific field that was developed in the nineteenth century to study the folklore that dates back to the early human societies. Folklore is a part of the literary heritage of a culture, reflecting the developments since it of the society to which it is intimately linked (Morrison, 1981).

Folklore refers to traditions that have passed through time and space through culture and literature. Many literary works have made mention of the customs, beliefs, and traditions of a particular culture. One of the significant aspects of folklore in Persian narratives and poems, especially in the sixth century, is its appearance in rhetorical figures. Many of the poets of the *Khorasani* style who lived in the courts of kings and seldom socialized with the people of their time have scant folklore elements in their works. This, however, was of prime importance to sixth-century poets, especially those living in Azerbaijan, who repeatedly used cultural elements in their poetry.

One way to identify the style of a poet is to examine its different elements, including folklore which often finds its way into the work through figures of speech. Indeed, in such an approach the relationship between these elements and the role of each element can be discussed. That is, a simile, metaphor, metonymy, or personification can be examined by the elements that constitute it or by its cultural, political, and historical implications. For instance, one can examine whether the elements of nature that are used as figures of speech in a poem are representations of the poet's environment or have been passed down by tradition (Shafiei Kadkani, 1993).

Rhetoricians study metaphors from different aspects, including form, color, sound, taste, and roughness/smoothness. There are different types of metaphor, including absolute, active, complex, compound, dead, extended, and implicit metaphor. Simile is a special kind of metaphor and is examined from the grammatical perspective (Jurjani, 1995). Persian literati have also approached similes grammatically (Farshidvard, 1999).

Poets are affected by the social and cultural conditions in which they live, and thus the images used in their poetry are often associated with these conditions. When observing objects or landscapes, those things that come to mind as a vehicle in a simile are associations based on the mentality of the person. There is a famous Persian tale of a shepherd, a soldier, a goldsmith, a lover, and a teacher travelling together. The night came on with a full moon. The travellers started to describe it from their point of view. The goldsmith described it as molten gold coming out of a furnace, the shepherd said that it looked like a block of cheese, the teacher said that it looked like a loaf of bread, the soldier described it as a shield, and the lover said that it resembled the face of his beloved (Zarrinkoub, 1993).

Nizami Ganjavi was an independent poet who lived among the people of his time and his poetry teems with elements of folklore, especially as vehicles. With his powerful imagination, Nizami created wonderful images from elements of nature as well as folklore. This article tries to pay more attention to these subtleties and to discover the folklore elements present in Nizami's works, especially when they are used in similes.

There are several books and articles that have addressed different aspects of Nizami's works, including the book "Imagery in Nizami's Quinary (Khamsa)" by Zanjani, "Use of Simile in Khosrow and Shirin" by Tajlil, "Instances

of Simile and Metaphor in Nizami's Poetry" by Emiko Okada, "Imagery in Nizami's Khosrow and Shirin" by Sabaghian, and "Nizami's Innovation in Imagery" by Sadeghian.

### **Everyday observations and experiences**

The feature that distinguishes poets is how they use rhetorical figures, and a good poet can create a tangible link between the tenor and the vehicle.

*Like a child leaving the school and free  
He merrily galloped toward the enemy (Sharafnama: 448).*

Most readers have experienced this association and for that reason Nizami uses it as the vehicle.

Sometimes he describes his experiences that may have been common in his time, but now seem unfamiliar. In the following verse, the sharpness of an arrow for Nizami is like the cuboid bone of a wolf (Dastgerdi, 1999).

*The petty are scheming  
The cuboid of a wolf at the end of an arrow (Sharafnama: 344).*

Moin (1985) has a different interpretation. He argues that the word "*peykan*" is the plural form of "*peyk*" which means a messenger, and cuboid of a wolf is a relic that messengers tied to their feet, believing that anyone wearing it would be able to run like a wolf and would never get tired. However, considering the first stanza of this verse, the interpretation of Dastgerdi (1999) is more accurate.

At times, Nizami uses auditory images as the vehicle and reports everyday life events. In this verse he describes the sound of pouring wine from a pitcher as the laughter of a Caspian snowcock:

*The pitcher has become the voice of the gathering  
The laughter of a Caspian snowcock (Sharafnama: 302).*

To describe his passion, Nizami once again uses everyday life images and describes himself, the lover, as a donkey seeing barley straw and as an epileptic looking at the moon. The second simile is based on folklore:

*I am in love  
Like a donkey seeing barley straw  
Like an epileptic looking at the full moon (Seven Beauties: 174).*

There are many instances of such applications in Nizami's works:

*For how long will thou be cold as ice?  
Like a dead rat in the sewer? (Leyla and Majnun: 52).*

*She mesmerized him  
Like a magnet attracting metal (Khosrow and Shirin: 381).*

*Like a slaughtered sheep he fell  
And struggled in vein (Ibid: 170).*

*The conqueror smiled out of the gold mine  
Like a child who sees gold for the first time (Iqbalnama: 181).*

### **Ethnic relationships**

In Old Persian texts we encounter ethnic groups, tribes and clans that were well-known for specific characteristics. The same thing applies to Arab literature for certain tribe leaders: *Samaw'al* famous for loyalty, *Hatem* for generosity, *Ahnaf* for tolerance, *Sahban* for oratory, *Qus* for eloquence, and *Luqman* for wisdom (Al-Askari, 1993).

Nizami was familiar with the characteristics of the tribes of his time and managed to masterfully incorporate them in his poetry, especially as the vehicle of similes.

*So captivated was he by the Chinese maid*

*That Indian sorrow robbed him of his braid (Iqbalnama: 56).*

In this verse, Indian sorrow is a metaphor, suggesting that at the time of the poet Indians were infamous for thievery. Such associations can be seen in other poems of Nizami as well.

*This crown is like the story  
Of an Indian stealing from another (Sharafnama: 345).*

*That crow, that Indian crow  
Its thievery was no surprise (Seven Beauties: 132).*

Of course in Nizami's work and in his cultural age, Indians were not just known for thievery, but were also well-known for their use of magic.

*From the melancholy of her love  
He wandered the streets like an Indian witch (Sharafnama: 369).*

Acrobatic skills of Indians at the time were also not overlooked by Nizami, and the description of such skills appears in his poetry when he describes an Indian warrior swinging his sword as an Indian acrobat:

*Swiftly like an Indian acrobat  
The Indian warrior swung his sword (Sharafnama: 120).*

*The burning incense, the smoke  
Rose likeworshipping Indians (Seven Beauties: 137).*

*The rose has come to the altar  
Like Indian magi to worship (Treasury of Secrets: 55).*

Other characteristics for which Indians were known at that time were reflected in Nizami's poetry:

*Be indulgent like the King  
Not like the Hindu who revel and sing (Seven Beauties: 309).*

*Crazed by thy love,  
Like an Indian guard,  
I scream on the rooftops (Ibid: 307).*

Romans and Africans were also known among the people of the time for certain characteristics which were reflected in Nizami's poems as vehicle:

*Butler! Bring the Roman wine!  
Bring it to me! For like a Negro I am Bacchanalian (Sharafnama: 98).*

In the first stanza, the redness of wine is compared to Romans, which is probably a reference to Roman celebration of their triumphs where the emperor possibly had his face painted red. The ground (redness) is not mentioned due to the common use of red wine. The Bacchanalian spirit of Africans has been reflected in the second stanza, as in much of Nizami's poetry:

*Armenian coal,  
Burning on fire like reveling Africans (Khosrow and Shirin: 96).*

Other characteristics of Africans have been described in Nizami's poetry:

*His eyelids, wet like a dampclay bowl  
Twisted, like the hair of a Negro (Khosrow and Shirin: 108).*

*Ask me for poetry, not for gold  
For I embellish words with Egyptian gold (Sharafnama: 158).*

*The Roman King saw the bride,  
His heart trembled like Russian bell, he cried (Sharafnama: 252).*

### **Beliefs and customs**

One of the pre-Islamic customs among Persians was the belief in fairies (Doostkhah, 1995). This belief was used in Nizami's poetry as vehicle. Poets before Nizami used imaginary creatures such as ghouls, demons, and fairies, but they often overlooked their characteristics which were based on folklore. Nizami, however, used these features as vehicle in his similes:

*I am like a faerie, invisible to eye  
Wherever I desire I can fly (Iqbalnama: 275).*

*He left his kingdom secretly  
Vanished in the air like a faerie (Seven Beauties: 65).*

*A faerie has come, drunk and bright  
Lying in my arms, she has come at night (Sharafnama: 467).*

*In my heart, a faerie has her mansion  
My heart is burning with her passion (Khosrow and Shirin: 367).*

Knowing the customs and traditions of his time, Nizami creates novel images and thus unique poems. He knew well that using elements of nature in his similes would make his poetry monotonous like his predecessors. His poetry may even have verged on banality. Therefore, he observed the rules of rhetoric and created wonderful, dynamic images.

*Heavy rain in the summer foretold  
Of weather like Old Hag's Cold (Iqbalnama: 21).*

This verserefers to an Old Persian story of an old woman who had eight sons. She asked them to find her a husband, much to their dismay. So they decided to kill her. To avoid any trouble, they came up with a plan. They asked their mother to spend eight nights in the desert, and if she believed she is still young and if she survived, they would find her a husband. It was winter, and through blistering cold the old woman set out to the desert. However, she could not tolerate the cold and died on the seventh night (Shamisa, 2008).

Old Persians also believed in devas (demons) as evil and scary creatures. This was often used as the ground of a simile, but Nizami used it as the vehicle:

*I moved around the sacred ruins  
Ran around like a deva (Iqbalnama: 76).*

*In the eyes of the King, her beauty tread  
Like a full moon against a possessed (Khosrow and Shirin: 392).*

*From friend and foe, he ran away  
Like demons that run from the light of day (Khosrow and Shirin: 223).*

Nizami considers his prayer for the opponents of the king as charms that ward off *evil eye*—the belief that some people can curse their victims with a gaze:

*The amulets and charms of the foes of king  
Are but Nizami's prayers in the morning (Sharafnama: 67).*

Ruta, or rue, is a shrub with a strong scent that was also used in Old Persia to ward off magic and sorcery.

*The magic, the ruta in the pot  
Protects the house from evil sprite (Sharafnama: 67).*

The old belief that cotton fabric is worn out when exposed to light had a rhetorical application for Nizami:

*Like the face of the moon, glittering was she  
Like cotton he was in front of Leyli (Leyla and Majnun: 69).*

*My love, staring at me like the moon  
Shredding my heart like cotton soon (Treasury of Secrets: 66).*

In ancient beliefs, lions use their urine to mark their territory. Nizami uses this belief beautifully as he describes who human beings' negligence can jeopardize their life:

*This road reeketh with a lion's waste  
Why did thou wander to thy death with haste? (Treasury of Secrets: 113).*

Saffron is often cited in Persian poetry because of its color, but Nizami looks at it from another perspective:

*Gold became intoxicating like wine  
It became euphoriant like saffron (Sharafnama: 226).*

The Christians of Nizami's age celebrated a Marian Feast—here called the Feast of Maryam—which commemorated the day she received heavenly food. This is reflected in his poetry as the vehicle:

*Like Maryam who abandoned earthly pleasure  
The world became like the Feast of Maryam to the King (Khosrow & Shirin: 272).*

Many old customs have been reflected in Nizami's poetry as the vehicle of a simile, thus creating novel images:

*As he approached the throne, he whined in sorrow  
Like a convict rolling in dirt of the fear of morrow (Khosrow and Shirin: 46).*

*He lay calmly in the nurse's bosom,  
Like musk in silk and pearl in cotton (Khosrow and Shirin: 40).*

#### *Medical beliefs*

Knowing medicine and medical treatments is necessary for the survival of human beings. Nizami had a general understanding of the sciences of his time and managed to use the medical beliefs of his time as a means for creating innovative figures of speech.

*To see his father, the gallant man was impatient  
Like a sickly prying for apple's scent (Sharafnama: 504).*

This verse compares the impatience of a sick person and their eagerness to smell the scent of apple (with its calming effect) to the impatience of the gallant man to see his father.

*The old rooster cried at night  
Like a delirious crying from the light,  
Or an epileptic from evil sprite (Sharafnama: 473).*

Delirious patients' aversion to light and epileptic patient's illusions are compared to the cry of a rooster at night.

*The name of the Prophet was to him*

*Like water to a dog-bitten grim (Khosrow and Shirin: 436).*

A person with rabies has fear of water; therefore, Nizami uses this concept to show the fear of King Anushirwan by seeing the name of Prophet Mohammad on the letter sent to him.

*Impatient was he  
Struggle was in vain  
He was like a thirsty man  
With no water or rain  
Or an epileptic bound to swoon  
By looking at the moon (Seven Beauties: 301).*

*The lock of her hair, that flirting curl  
Her lips like ruby, her teeth like pearl  
From that smiling ruby and pearl she did concoct  
A euphoriant for my depressed heart (Khosrow and Shirin: 52).*

Nizami compares the lips and teeth of his beloved to ruby and pearl, but goes on to use these images from a medical perspective. At his time, it was a common belief that ruby and pearl are used to create antidepressant medicine.

*Live in this world, in this prison gloom  
Like a febrile in a catacomb (Treasury of Secrets: 124).*

It was commonly believed that a person with extreme fever must be kept in a cool place with no light, and Nizami compares it to the human condition in this world.

### **Astronomical images**

Astronomical images also find their way in Nizami's masterful imagery, especially as the vehicle.

*He bid farewell to his daughter dreary  
His only Venus left with Mercury (Seven Beauties: 284).*

Venus is the only planet named after a female figure—the Roman goddess Venus—and Mercury is named after the Roman God of merchandise. Mercury is often associated with travel, making the imagery of Nizami even more incredible.

*One born under Sagittarius, one under Cancer  
Ferdowsi the generous, Mahmud the miser (Seven Beauties: 19).*

In astrology, one born under the sign of Cancer is believed to be parsimonious (Amoli, 2001). Thus, Nizami has associated the parsimony of Mahmud of Ghazni to this zodiac sign. On the other hand, one born under Sagittarius is thought to be amicable, generous, artless, and moderate in lust (Amoli, 2001), thus the association of Ferdowsi with the sign of Sagittarius.

### **Clothing**

The reflection of certain characteristics such as clothing, food, and drinks in a poet's works can reveal a lot about them. For instance, in the works of Nizami who lived in the cold regions of Azerbaijan there are many instances where he mentions clothes made from animal skin and fur, often as the vehicle of a simile. In his poetry one often encounters animals such as salamanders, stoats, beavers, squirrels, and foxes as well as their fur and skin:

*I am the stoat mountain, the earth is weasels  
The sky carries on its shoulders sundry squirrels (Seven Beauties: 136).*

*Her face is shining, shining like the moon  
Her skin soft like the fur of a raccoon (Ibid: 116).*

### **Mythological images**

Mythology has a special place in the works of the poet of Ganja. Nizami uses Persian, Semite, and religious myths in his similes. Any mythological figure whose name is associated with certain characteristics is highlighted in his poetry. Thus he gives life to a simple event with a mythological image. Sraosha, Antichrist, Gabriel's wings, Israfil's trumpet, Siavash's blood, Kafkuh, Khidr, Zahhak, Kai Khosrow, Korah, Simurgh (Angha), and Fountain of Life are myths that are masterfully exploited by Nizami to create wonderful images. What follows are instances of such applications of mythology:

*A prophet has come, fearless and wise  
A messenger, like Sraosha in disguise (Sharafnama: 282).*

*Young and old, man and woman marched  
To the drum and voice of the Antichrist (Iqbalnama: 219).*

*He banged the drum, a voice was heard  
Like that of Gabriel's wings, it whispered (Ibid: 212).*

*The drum sang along with the accompaniment  
Like Israfil's trumpet on the Day of Judgment (Sharafnama: 460).*

*Think not that the rebels' blood  
Will be forgotten like Siavash in the mud (Ibid: 267).*

*Like Kafkuh Mountain, his army was strong  
Ready to tear metal with the sound of gong (Ibid: 161).*

*Long live thee, our undying King of truth  
Like Khidr who drank from the Fountain of Youth (Leyla and Majnun: 40).*

*Spears in the hands of the soldiers were like  
The snakes on the shoulders of Zahhak (Ibid: 113).*

*If he is the moon, I am the shining sun  
If he is Kai Khosrow, I am Afrasiab (Khosrow and Shirin: 120).*

*Like a parrot I am, used to this metal cage  
Like Simurgh I am on this lonely stage (Khosrow and Shirin: 309).*

### **CONCLUSION**

Elements of folklore have extensively been used in Persian literature. Examining such elements not only informs us of the culture, customs, and beliefs of different ages, but also reveals the beauty of the images. By using elements of folklore, poets free their poetry of banality and cliché. Although this is not exclusive to Nizami, he, more than anyone else in Persian literature, has made use of cultural elements, and this is one of the reasons that make his works outstanding.

Any poet uses certain elements that correspond to their artistic approach and their worldview. Ferdowsi employs epic elements, while NasirKhosrow focuses on religious elements. Attention to these elements in a poet's work can give us a better insight into the style and background of the poet.

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