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Conference review: The interpretation of
Nizami's cultural heritage in the modern
period

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Abstract – The Nizami Ganjavi International Centre and Azerbaijan Comparative Literature Association held an interdisciplinary conference in Baku, Azerbaijan, on 13-14th March 2018. The nineteen countries represented at the conference covered the geographical area from Canada to Brazil, Finland and Italy, Georgia and Kazakhstan, Iran and Azerbaijan, France and Germany, UK and Egypt. Presentations were based on the broad topic of the interpretation of cultural heritage in the recent stage(s) of history based on the example of Nizami's poetry. The topic encompassed questions of identity in cultural heritage, the interaction of new identities with existing identities or the change in the parameters of identity over time – from the criterion of ethnicity to that of the state, from religion to language. The conference aimed at the consideration of *irredenta* (term coined with relation to Nizami by Shnirel'man Viktor Aleksandrovich in his work *Who gets the past? Competition for ancestors among non-Russian intellectuals in Russia*) within the literary-cultural framework both from the point of view of the metropolis and the peripheries, including in post-socialist countries, and Canadian Quebec, Belgium, from local and global perspectives.

Parole chiave – Nizami; literary-cultural heritage; comparative analysis; regional motifs; Azerbaijani *ashug*.

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The conference, dedicated to the modern interpretation of Nizami and organized by Rahilya Geybullayeva, approached Nizami's heritage from two different points of view. The first was related to the philosophical content of Nizami's poetics, based on Sufi philosophy and addressing the role of women in society and principles social justice. Aim of this approach was to show of Nizami anticipates important stances on these issues which have become crucial nowadays. Secondly, the conference addressed the issue of *national identity*, a key question especially after the fall of the Soviet Union and the establishment of post-socialist countries, which changed the geopolitics of the worlds. The term that best describes the goal of the research behind the conference is *irredenta*, coined in relation to Nizami by Shnirel'man in *Who gets the past? Competition for ancestors among non-Russian intellectuals in Russia* (Baltimore and London: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1996). The West has usually considered the term *irredenta* from the point of view of the metropolis, without taking into consideration peripheries, which in fact applies to post-socialist countries.

The panels of the conference were the following:

- Panel 1. Archetypes as recycling cultures.
- Panel 2. Archetypes and regional motifs (Caucasus, Middle East, and Europe): Nizami and Rustaveli.
- Panel 3. Concepts, characters of Nizami: vision from modern-day.
- Panel 4. Nizami's heritage in the discourse of medieval symbols and regional concepts.
- Panel 5. Nizami's heritage in musical interpretation and applied arts.
- Panel 6. Nizami and theories of identity for literary-cultural heritage in discourse of collapsing identities
- Panel 7. National identity: shared past and its modern interpretation (panel focused on archetypes considered regional motifs through the Caucasus, Middle East and Europe).

Mehmet Kalpaklı (Bilkent University, Turkey) delivered a presentation on the archetypal plot "Layla, Beloved of the Whole World" from Nizami to Eric Clapton. Stefania Sini (Università del Piemonte Orientale, Italy) offered a comparative analysis of the character of Nizami's Iskander in the light of the similarities and divergences with the figure of Alexander as represented in the contemporary homonymous Alexandre de Bernay's *Romançe de Alexandre* and later in Dante Alighieri's *Convivio* (1303-1308) and *De Monarchia* (1310-1313). The Travel to the underground motif in the Nizami's Iskender Namah was analysed by Parvana Isayeva (Literary Institute, Azerbaijan National Academy of Sciences). Eva-Maria Auch's talk (Humboldt University-Berlin) was primarily focused on the role of Nizami in the formation of the Azerbaijanis national identity, but also addressed a more *classical theme*: the question of

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Nizami in the works of Johann Wolfgang von Goethe and in what manner both Nizami and Goethe can be regarded as representatives of an *idea of world literature* in order to approach the peculiarities of Goethe's *orientalism*. Christine van Ruymbeke (University of Cambridge, United Kingdom) focused on Nizami's choice of weaving his art, knowledge and message into existing stories, using famous, period-costume dramas and characters and transforming these according to his agenda. Irakli Kenchosvili (Tbilisi State University) addressed regional literary traditions from Nizami to Vagif, with a special focus on the genres and symbols of the Nizami epoch to Vagif milestones in exploration and transformation of Azerbaijani *ashug* songs in Georgian poetry. His talk dealt with the important meeting with a new partner in the history of Georgian poetry which took place in the middle of the eighteenth century, when the intensive influx of texts from Persian and Azerbaijani lyric poetry contributed to a radical transformation of the national literary ensemble. He highlighted that almost every Georgian poet of the second half of the eighteenth century paid tribute on different levels to the universal fascination with Azerbaijani *ashug* lyric poetry. Inkar Kuramayeva (doctoral student at the Université de Haute-Alsace, France) presented part of her thesis in a paper entitled "An unlikely representation of women in the poetry of Nizami" dealing with the poet's innovative emphasis on the role of female characters: every poem presents a female character – a moral guide – who leads the hero to the path of wisdom.

Archetypes from the Indian subcontinent were investigated by Indian scholars, among them by Brazilian-Indian Sudha Swarnakar (Universidade Estadual da Paraíba, Brazil). She discussed twentieth century Hindi films, *Laila and Majnu* based on Nizami's third major work *Layli and Majnun* and showed the role of culture and tradition in the preservation of the essence of Nizami Ganjavi's original work and, at the same time, in the assimilation of Nizami's work in a foreign land where his character Majnu is drops his classical the evergreen icon of a *crazy lover* in an unbelievable way in modern India: in this transformation he is no longer Nizami's Majnun from Azeri classic but a crazy lover who roams around the streets of Indian towns or villages as a familiar face even today. Naseem Ahmad Shah (University of Kashmir, Pakistan) brought into agenda a research with a special focus on Amir Khusraw and Mehmud Gami to investigate the poetic discourse of Nizami Ganjavi and its impact on Indian poetic tradition.

A special session was dedicated to regional archetypes with a focus on recycling motifs in Nizami's and Rustaveli's poetics. This section was the part of traditional for comparative literature conferences by AzCLA and GCLA for last decade. Prof. Irma Ratiani and Prof. Maka Elbakidze (Shota Rustaveli Institute of Georgian Literature, Tbilisi) presented their research focused on the revision of some poetical and aesthetical principles in Nizami's and Rustaveli's creativity. Prof. Gaga Lomidze (head of the GCLA, Tbilisi) talked about two stories from the Middle Ages and the Baroque Period on an example of Nizami and Guramishvili

The panel regarding Nizami's concepts, characters and values was opened by Kamran Talatoff (University of Arizona, USA) who, supporting the theory that Nizami's ethics and morality do not descend from religion or any metaethical notion, illustrated Nizami's system of ethics in terms of the highly allegorical works. Tahira Mammed (Azerbaijan) considered Turkic image in Nizami Ganjavi's *Khamsa*, dividing this into two typological groups: a) the belly as a Sufi symbol, who guides forward true love; b) secular image of Turkic xanum, who teaches to man-ruler a way to justice.

The panel on Nizami's heritage in the discourse of medieval symbols and regional concepts discovered alchemy as a science and metaphor in Nizami's poems (by Hamlet Isakhanli, Azerbaijan), parallels between literary images Macnun, Bahram, Hamlet created by Nizami and Shakespeare (by Teymur Kerimli, Azerbaijan), conflict between Iranian and Greek Discourses, considering Alexander's character in Nizami's *İsgöndərnamə* (by Nasrin Faghih Malek Mazban, Iran), experiences of prohibition and transgression in Nizami's portrayal of Khosrow and Shirin (by Emadeddin Nagipour, Canada).

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Nizami's heritage in musical interpretation and applied arts panel discovered Nizami Ganjavi's oeuvre a source of inspiration for contemporary art, dance and cinema and means of building successful cultural diplomacy (by Asli Samadova, Italy), Nezami Ganjavi's princess from the *Seven Beauties* poem and the Western art (by Maria Teresa Giaveri, Italy), modern musical interpretation (by Eila Tarasti, Finland), Nizami's *Khamsa* depiction in medieval Azerbaijani miniature arts (by Jamila Hasanzadeh, Azerbaijan).

National and cultural identity struggles regarded also the modern interpretation of Nizami's heritage's. So, special panel was on Nizami and theories of identity for literary-cultural heritage in discourse of collapsing identities. Key points were submitted by Rahilya Geybullayeva (Azerbaijan) to this panel talking about irredentism from the perspective of literary tradition in Nizami's creativity and national identity. Ilham Mamedzadeh's (Azerbaijan) talk focused on philosophical context of issues related to identity in the light of the attitude to Nizami. A postcolonial and existential semiotic method for different cases of irredentism in the oriental and Western cultures through their history was the approach to the panel question by Euro Tarasti (Finland). Anuar Galiyev concern was on cultural heritage of Nizami, Al-Farabi, Kashgari and its appropriation in the construction of nations. This panel also dealt with translation as a modern interpretation on an example of *Seven Beauties* in translation of *Yan Ripka* by Rafik Novruzov (Azerbaijan), on analyses of *Seven Beauties*'s interpretation by Maykl's Bern (presented by Khali Yusifli, Azerbaijan). Bella Musayeva's presentation was on Nizami's interpretation in content of modern multiculturalism.