

## Starting points of national literature and culture

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### Abstract

This is a report of the international conference on Comparative Literature and Culture, organized by the Azerbaijan Comparative Literature Association and the Azerbaijani Literature Department of the Baku Slavic University.

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### Keywords

Comparative literature, national literature, national culture

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On November 27-28, 2015, the Azerbaijan Comparative Literature Association and the Azerbaijani Literature Department of the Baku Slavic University hold the VI international conference on Comparative Literature and Culture, with the topic *Starting points of national literature and culture*. The conference covered a wide spectrum of issues, which could be considered criteria for the «nationality» of the literary production and culture.

Any national literature or culture assumes two terms: what is a «nation»? And what are the «criteria» that give start to the «nationality» of literary production or to a sample of cultural heritage? Likewise, the seemingly settled and well-established terms of «nation» and «national culture» are more questionable than they appear at first sight, as they are exposed to a transformation that occurs during various transitional periods of history. Moreover, the definition of «nation» and «identity» has been repeatedly reconsidered in the last two decades of the post-socialist transition. At this turning point, discussions of national identity and national culture became a central problem, whose investigation calls for an interdisciplinary approach. The *perception of nation and national culture* thus became a sensitive and aggravated matter.

Changing frontiers and the advent of new countries gave rise to new problems, which replaced the initial euphoria of freedom that followed the collapse of the Soviet Union. Naturally, these alterations had serious consequences, as does any divorce case, problems involving not only the academic circles in charge of drawing up concepts to make sense of them, but also citizens who are perforce involved in political interests. The research of the criteria of national literature through textbooks and encyclopedias brought to retrieving this data on the definition of the national attribution of literary works in different cultures, and has resulted with an elective course by Prof. Rahilya Geybullayeva – “Criteria and Concept of National Literature” – as a part of the Comparative Literature degree, since 2004 year at Baku Slavic University and since 2012 at ADA University (Baku).

The conference consisted of four sessions and three keynote speeches: Stefania Sini (Professor of Comparative Literature at the Università del Piemonte Orientale, Italy) submitted her lecture *Italian classic and folk epic: language, plot, style, between the divine and comedy* during a plenary session. The other two keynote lectures have been submitted as video lectures during Nizami and Rustaveli's session at ADA University: by Gregory Nagy (Professor of Comparative Literature, Director of the Center for Hellenic Studies, Harvard University), about the "Lives of Homer", and by Olga Davidson (Professor at the Institute for the Study of Muslim Societies and Civilizations, Boston University) about the "Lives of Ferdowsi".

The first of the sessions was focused on how [national] literature and culture begin, and was entitled "Starting points of national literature and culture" and devoted to the criteria of such starting points, which are different in various encyclopaedias. The sessions was organized in the following panels:

- Panel 1. Folklore, religious factor
- Panel 2. Epic
- Panel 3. Written literature
- Panel 4. State factor
- Panel 5. Criteria of national literature and culture
- Panel 6. Ethnicity of the author as factor

The second session was more specific and it was based on language and state factors, and was devoted to the comparative analysis of Nizami ("Leyli and Mejnoun") and Shota Rustaveli ("The Knight in the Panther's Skin"). This session was proposed by the Azerbaijan Comparative Literature Association, the Literary Institute of ANAS (Azerbaijan National Academy of Sciences), the Department of Rustaveli Studies of the Shota Rustaveli Institute of Georgian Literature and the GCLA (Georgian Comparative Literature Association). The dominating focus was on the cultural space, the predecessors and the subsequent plots and images of the aforementioned texts. Two of the panels were held one at the Library of Literary Institute named after Nizami, a thte Azerbaijan National Academy of Sciences and the other at the ADA University Library.

The third session addressed the approximation of modern day realities of nation building in literary studies, taking as example the "Theory of Literature: stages of development and changing problems", and was based on the presentation of the project of The Science Foundation, Azerbaijan (Project number: EIF-2013-9(15)-46/35/5-M-28). Each historical chain plays a role in the formation and development of the next cycle of literature and culture. In the same way, the literature of an age is not only a sample of literature, but also an invaluable source for the history, philosophy and knowledge concerning the society of that period.

In the fourth session was a roundtable devoted to matters concerning the alphabet and language of national literature and was started with a talk by Prof. Irakli Kenchoshvili (Georgia) on the text of Azerbaijani songs in the Georgian alphabet n XVIII century.

The conference gathered the presentations of more than 80 participants, including 31 participants form Azerbaijan, Italy, United Kingdom, Germany, Turkey, Russia, Ukraine, and Georgia. A conclusion drawn from these contributions is that all nations consist of various ethnicities as a result of historical development, wars, occupation, trade or

connections, or great resettlements and migrations of peoples. History abounds in similar stories surrounding the formation of a multiethnic population.



