

Alchemy in Eastern Literature

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Abstract

Alchemy, developing in Ancient Egypt and its environs, was formed during the Islamic age as the branch of science and technology. The transmutation of base metals into noble metals and attempts to achieve immortality or rejuvenation by elixir or philosopher's stone have been expansively reflected in Eastern literature and folklore.

This research discusses the endeavors of great rulers of the ancient East, alchemists of the pre-Islamic and, especially, Islamic periods, and prominent writers of the Islamic Golden Age and contemporary period who wrote various treatises devoted or related to alchemy and alchemists. Discussions here include the great Sumerian epic "Gilgamesh" and the legend of Alexander the Great's attempt to gain immortality, as well as the story of alchemist Mary of Copt. The last two are related in a poem by Nizami, prominent representative of the twelfth century Azerbaijani literary school that wrote in Persian. Distinct images of alchemy were rendered in his poems, moreover, he created multi-faceted alchemical metaphors to describe transformations within humanity. Khagani Shirvani, Nizami's contemporary, and nineteenth century Azerbaijani thinker Mirza Akhundov, also addressed the topic of alchemy, as well as religious mysticism in Islam and alchemy.

Alchemical episodes in the works of great figures of Eastern Sufi literature like Al-Ghazali, Suhrawardy, Ibn Arabi and Rumi have been scrutinized.

Keywords: alchemy, metal transmutation, immortality, Sufi literature, Azerbaijani literary school, religious mysticism.

Introduction

Alchemy, as multicultural science, technology and art, nourishing the passion for changing life for the good, for wealth, happiness and immortality, not to mention its gleam of gold and silver and the mystery of an alchemist life, has been an appealing and popular theme in literature and art. It has ever been a favorite topic for poets, writers and playwrights, artists and musicians, film and media professionals, as well as historians of science and the arts. It has inspired many interesting works across

the genres. The ideas connected with alchemy, including obtaining gold and silver from other metals, the search for an elixir of immortality and the philosopher's stone are popular to this day in literary works, on television and in the cinema. In these modern times, they continue to be a source of inspiration for creative people.

Alchemical activities, the vibrant image of the alchemist, the symbolism used, and alchemy as metaphor have enriched the work of art and literature, and literature, in its turn, has played an important role in ingraining alchemy, and especially the alchemist, in cultural memory.

Attitudes towards alchemists and alchemy in literature have been mixed, ambiguous, all their inherent qualities and diversity have found their reflection in literature, which may be regarded as the mirror of life and hearsays. Considerable space in literature has been consumed by negative attitudes towards alchemists, who are portrayed either as swindlers or those who ruin their own lives with their passionate fixation on alchemy. This tendency has not disappeared; however, alchemy has gained new strength as a metaphor of spiritual refinement, and attractive images of alchemy and alchemists have been created.

Literary attitudes towards alchemy and alchemists, in both East and West have undergone changes from time to time. Thus, the alchemist sometimes appears as legend, someone who manages to obtain the elixir, or is the subject of sharp satire, and fine literature narrating alchemist life, is mostly full of fraudulence and trickery; then again, alchemy is the source of powerful metaphor in works that praise love and religion, purification and perfection. The lives of well-known people somehow bound to alchemy, but not necessarily alchemists themselves, sometimes even critics of the practice, have been magnified by legends that they had acquired the secret of the elixir. Stories circulated of their deaths and immortality, experiments they did not conduct, or works they did not write, were attributed to them.

Alchemy is one of the lexicon's multi-faceted words; the alchemy of happiness, alchemy of love, alchemy of beauty, alchemy of words... – such expressions are endless. When the essence of an event or notion is felt to be irrational, miraculous, mysterious, some degree unusual, if there is purgation and purification in the broad sense, ascension from a lower to a higher state, connection between the inner world and the universe, then reference to the word alchemy, or its use as a metaphor, clarifies that event or notion and gives it a certain enchantment; alchemy arrives to help as a bolt from the blue.

The word alchemy is understood as three kinds of effort made by humans in ancient times and the medieval period – mental activity, practical activity, and passionate search:

- 1) Attempts to achieve immortality or rejuvenation by preparing appropriate drugs or magic substances for this purpose.
- 2) Metal transmutation. The activity of transmuting base metal into noble metals: gold and silver.
- 3) Practical scientific alchemy, industrial alchemy, i.e. the preparation of vitally important and useful substances.

Ideas for realizing the desired transmutations via specifically prepared substance, i.e. al-ixir/elixir, “philosopher’s stone” or special, important matter – quintessence - ruled the mind. In its first and, partly, its second forms, alchemy was full of dark secrets and allegory. Science historians perceived it as legend or myth, in the best case a religious-ethical-mystical view system in its first form; however, in the second form of alchemy divided opinions.

The subject of alchemy has been studied widely in Western literature and art; many articles and books have been written about it, particularly by Eric J. Holmyard, John Read, Theodore Ziolkowski, Stanton J. Linden, Alexandra Lembert, Elmar Schenkel and Urszula Szulakowska among others.

From Dante (?1265–1321) and Geoffrey Chaucer (?1340–1400) in the fourteenth century to the present, alchemy has appeared repeatedly as a theme in European fiction. During the Islamic period, alchemy evolved seriously, and related images were widely prominent in Eastern literature, which, however, conducted no systematic (or even unsystematic) research on the subject.

In this article, the problem of alchemy and its reflection in Eastern literature has been investigated in a broader sense. Recognized works of 11th–13th century Sufi poets, mainly members of the Azerbaijani school of poets writing in Persian in the twelfth century, including Nizami Ganjavi and Khagani, have been analyzed. In respect of alchemy (and more generally), the rich and diverse creativity of Nizami receives special attention. The elixir of immortality and water of life feature in the Sumerian epic “Gilgamesh” and other folklore, as well as in the legend of Alexander the Great (according to Nizami’s “Iskendernameh”). The question of the embodiment of images like Mary of Copt, Hermes and Balinus (Apollonius of Tyana) in Eastern literature, who are considered the ancient founders of alchemy, have been discussed. Additionally, the occultism related to alchemy in Islam has been touched upon. Two literary works of the nineteenth century have been discussed and commented upon here – the alchemical language of religious mysticism in Islam, represented by Sheikh Ahmad Ahsa’i, the founder of the “Shaykhiyya” religious school, and a comedy by Azerbaijani thinker and writer Mirza Fatali Akhundov, satirising an alchemist and ignorant people.

Search for Immortality. Gilgamesh and Others

People accepted the immortality of gods but perceived it as a tragedy not to be immortal themselves; there were always complaints about the impermanence of life. Even though in Christianity and Islam, there is belief in an afterlife, an immaterial immortality of the soul after Judgment Day, humanity's desire for immortality did not diminish, the wish for bodily immortality or to avoid aging (i.e. potential biological immortality) still smoldered in people's hearts.

Different peoples or nations gave different names to substances sought for immortality and rejuvenation. For example, "Ab-i-hayat" (water of life), life-giving water and along with it "Jam-i Jamshid" (Jamshid's cup), which was full of an immortality-bestowing drink, also used in foretelling, and "Cheshme-i-Govhar", effervescent spring water from Paradise (a blessed spring) in the Middle East and Central Asia. Let us recall also the "nectar" and "ambrosia" of the ancient Greeks, the beverage and food of the immortals and the gods.

Folk literature depicts heroes drinking water from magic springs and consequently gaining not immortality, but strength and other abilities. The popular Turkic "Epic of Koroghlu", (there are versions of Koroghlu among other peoples that lived alongside Turkic neighbors), is an interesting paradigm. In its thematically rich Azerbaijani versions, two stars come closer and crash into each other once every seven years (astrology!) and this creates the spring called "Qoshabulaq" ("Twinspring") foam. The foam can heal blindness and whoever drinks it (in this case Koroghlu), gains physical and vocal strength, that person becomes a fighter and a master of poetry (Abbasli & Abdulla, 2005).

Probably the oldest and most brilliant work about the search for immortality and the failure to acquire it is "The Epic of Gilgamesh", a Sumerian epic poem.¹

The death of a friend Enkidu immerses Gilgamesh, King of Uruk in thoughts about death and life. Thoughts like "I can also die, as Enkidu did" disturb the brave ruler greatly, thus, he becomes afraid of death. Gilgamesh, embraced by a passion to understand the secret of life, to find eternal life and the elixir of life, embarks on a long and difficult journey, overcoming mountains, survives a sea crossing and a dangerous cave, and overcomes the dark and light paths...

In the end, Gilgamesh manages to find Utnapishtim, immortal survivor of the Great Flood, and speak to him. Utnapishtim tells Gilgamesh about a plant that grows under

¹ "The Epic of Gilgamesh", which is supposed to have been written in the third millennium BC by Sumerians and engraved on clay tablets in the eighteenth century BC, was systematized into a connected narrative by Akkadians who came to power after the Sumerians.

the sea and rejuvenates people. Gilgamesh dives into the water and finds the plant. He then returns to Uruk, his homeland, and decides to put the plant to test on an old man. When Gilgamesh bathes on his way home, a serpent attracted by the aroma of the plant eats it and sheds its skin, meaning that the serpent is rejuvenated. Gilgamesh returns home disappointed and finds solace in the fact that people will remember him for his deeds.

In the legends about immortality, the water of life, bestowing immortality, seems to be a blessing, previously created by God(s). Simply and solely it must be sought – though that is very difficult. The giver of immortality in Gilgamesh was a plant, however, in China and other regions, the extract giving immortality was sought in metals and minerals.

Sufis believed it was possible to gain immortality in the next world through the lifestyle adopted in this world, and through purification; they were fond of describing this way, this spiritual processes with symbolic, allegorical and alchemical terms. Alchemists also deemed it essential to progress from the bottom up, transform from the ordinary to the noble - purification - yet still they sought to make these transmutations in simulated fashion, with their own science and by means of an elixir, and to succeed in this world, dreaming of being enveloped in gold or rejuvenated. To succeed and to obtain immortality, if possible, in this world, no matter what, seemed more attractive than to wait for them in the next world.

Alchemy in Sufi Literature

In Sufi poetry or Sufi-like poetry in the Islamic world, glorifying the intrinsic purification of the person and the love of God was the way to reconcile to God the Sufi way - this way was regarded as the elixir.

Abu Hamid al-Ghazali (?1058–1111), prominent philosopher, theologian, and Sufi, called his book “Kimiya-yi Saadat” (The Alchemy of Happiness); it is devoted to moral and spiritual activity and practical-ethical perfection. This work, written in Persian, is regarded as a simplified, shortened version of his renowned encyclopedic book “Ehya-i ulum ad-Din” (The Revival of Religious Sciences), which was in Arabic, however, certain issues not been included in the previous book were scrutinized herein. He wrote:

‘The difference between copper and gold is only in the yellow color and weight, nothing more [...] It is difficult to refine copper and bronze as pure as gold by using chemistry, and not everyone knows how; it is also difficult

to take the essence of Adam from the low stage of savagery to angelic purity and elegance, bringing it to eternal happiness, and no one is able to do that [...] The purpose of writing this book is to explain the main components of the chemistry of happiness for humanity and, in reality, this is an eternal chemistry of happiness. For this reason, I called the book *The Alchemy of Happiness* [...].’ (Al-Ghazali, 2013: p.73).

Shahab ad-Din Suhrawardi (Sohrevardi, 1155–1191), the founder of the philosophy of illumination (*hikmat al-ishraq*), wrote the story “*Kissat al-Qurbet al-Qarbiyya*” (On Exile to the West) in which a hero goes on a dangerous journey in a ship, to a terrible island. There, he made the lunar elixir for producing silver and the solar elixir for producing gold. Thus, reunited with the divine music of the celestial bodies and bathed in light, the hero was able to acquire the secret of immortality, to rise from the dead ...

The great Andalusian Sufi poet and philosopher Ibn Arabi (1165–1240) set up the question of the perfect human (*al-insan al-kamil*) in his philosophical and poetic works and gave it a thorough examination. Using an alchemical metaphor, like Al-Ghazali, he interpreted the Sufi way leading to spiritual and moral perfection as the means to reach purification and sublimation by eliminating remnants and impurities; he regarded the Sufi way as a kind of matter for the elixir. His largest and most widely used work, called “*al-Futuhat al-Makkiyya*” (The Meccan Illuminations), is in 560 chapters. In chapter 167, named “The Alchemy of Perfect Happiness” the rational and mystical ways of acquiring knowledge are discussed, as well as introducing a definition of alchemy; alchemy is considered as both an exact science, a natural science, and as a spiritual and religious science, as theology. I quote here some of the definition: “Alchemy is the science of proportions and measures...Its sovereign power lies in transmutation... Alchemy is a natural, spiritual and divine science...We declare it indeed a divine science because it brings stable harmony” (Al-Arabi, 1981).

Nizami’s contemporary, the Sufi poet Fariduddin Attar (?1145–?1121) in his book “*Mantiq ut-Tayr*” (The Conference of the Birds) a man conversing with Khizr emphasizes the indelible difference between them: “You will live forever, ‘the waters of immortal life are yours’ and I will die” (See: “A Story about Khizr” in Attar, 1984).

The great Sufi poet Mevlana Jalal ad-Din Rumi (1207–1273) in the fifth prose preface of his famous “*Masnavi*”, refers to alchemy and medicine along with their main points and terminology for explaining the Sufi or *tasawwuf* way. Within a Sufi conception, the trio of “*sharia*”, “*tariqa*” and “*haqiqa*” are pre-eminent. Sharia (the

Muslim tradition of law) is a clear canon, intended to guide; tariqa (way) is an esoteric path of spiritual learning, it is an order, a charter and an instruction; haqiqa (truth) is the desired destination, station and the aim. “Sharia is like a candle, it indicates the way. If you start on the way, that way is tariqa. And if you reach your desire it is haqiqa”. “Owing to its consequence, sharia is like knowing chemistry; such as learning chemistry from a teacher or a book. Tariqa is like using medication (ixir, H. I.) and rubbing copper on a chemical. The haqiqa is transmutation of copper into gold by chemistry” (Gölpınarlı, 2003: p.3). Thus, sharia is knowledge, it is a theory, tariqa is the deed, application of the theory, proving the knowledge in practice, it is like an alchemical operation. In another place Rumi explains virtue: “Virtue is taking you from a low state to a high state, it is a changing of the essence... Bringing low copper into the higher state of gold” (Gölpınarlı, 2000: p.98).

Immortality. The Legend of Alexander of Macedonia (by Nizami Ganjavi)

Nizami Ganjavi (1141–1209), Azerbaijani thinker and poet, was born and lived most of his life in Ganja in the twelfth and early thirteenth centuries and wrote five voluminous narrative poems collectively known as the Khamsa (“Quintet” in Arabic) in Persian language; he also wrote lyrical poems. His tomb is in his hometown Ganja, in the present-day Republic of Azerbaijan. Nizami, who is among the giants not only of Persian literature, but of the world’s literature, became popular as the author of poems written in the form of masnavi (distiches): “The Treasure House of Mysteries”, “Khosrow and Shirin”, “Leyli and Majnun”, “The Seven Beauties” (or The Book of Bahram), “Iskendernameh” (The Book of Alexander) which consists of two parts: “Sherefnameh” and “Iqbalnameh”. These poems became a source of inspiration for Nizami’s successor poets, including famous writers in Persian, Urdu and various Turkic languages, who produced numerous ample works with the same or similar titles. Nizami is one of the seven great poets mentioned by Johann Wolfgang von Goethe in his “West - Östlicher Divan” (West-East Divan), according to Goethe “...he chose the most charming exchanges of intimate love as subject matter for his poems” (Goethe, 2010: p.200). “A gentle, highly gifted spirit ... chose for the material of his poems the sweetest encounters of the deepest love” (Ibid.).

Being among the educated of his time, Nizami knew the main principles of mathematics and nature studies, he studied mystical knowledge, history and philosophy, as well as Greek, Indian and Islamic philosophy and the cultures of Eastern and Western societies. He was recalled as “sage Nizami” and discussed the scientific and philosophical problems of ancient times and of his own era in his

works. Nizami is recognized as the foremost representative of the Azerbaijani school of poetry written in Persian and was distinguished for his philosophical mind and strong skill in metaphor. Outstanding for a poetic technique replete with allegory, aphorism and homonym, Nizami made room for unique historical facts and events on the one hand and, on the other, focused an artistic-historical eye into his own era and recent past by deliberately employing historical anachronisms.

Great heroes, warlords and kings who conquered and achieved their wild dreams, began also to dream of immortality. The idea of leaving the conquered world behind as a holder of great power and then vanishing forever seemed terrible. The legends about Alexander the Great (356–323 BC) depict his search for immortality. Nizami Ganjavi in his *Iskendernameh* (to the end of its first part - *Sherefnameh* – The Book of Glory) tells the story of Alexander going to the “Land of Darkness” to find the water of life, following the advice of an “Old Man”:

Under the North Pole is the black hijab
 There flows a spring with protein water
 Under a black hijab, called darkness
 In the silence, living water flows.
 (Nizami, 1983a: d.6446, 6447) ^{2 3}

Thus, Alexander with his group follows in the footsteps of “Greenstep/Greenpace Khizr (transcribed also as Khizir, Khidr, Khezzr, etc.)” (Ibid: d.6566) and arrives in “Bolghar”. Then:

Exactly one month they walked towards the north (Ibid: d.6478)
 [...] Reached a place
 where you can only dream about the Sun (Ibid: d.6481)
 [...] On the one hand, everything was in darkness
 The clarity suddenly disappeared (Ibid: d.6484)
 The darkness covered the road [...] (Ibid: d.6487-6488)
 Khizr the Prophet walking ahead was his guide (Ibid: d.6558).
 Finally, Khizr saw a sparkling spring.

Then:

² Here and in the rest of this article, the excerpts are given in word-for-word or literal translation and are identified by the sequence number of the distiches quoted, a practice inherent in classical literature written in the form of *masnavi* (distich).

³ Nizami used the stories blowing in the Middle East about Alexander. Callisthenes (?360–328 BC), the grandson of Aristotle’s sister, took part in Alexander’s campaigns and left certain description of those campaigns. The legends about Alexander spread more widely from the third century BC (the Alexander Romance) and the author of these hearsays is known as Pseudo-Callisthenes.

If it was a spring, then it was a spring of light (Ibid: d.6571)
 [...] It was a fire as well as the flame (Ibid: d.6576)
 [...] He drank plenty of the spring's water
 And thus, acquired immortality (Ibid: d.6579).
 And ... the spring disappeared ... Khizr was upset and avoided meeting Alexander:
 Khizr was quick-witted, understood quickly,
 Alexander was deprived of this water.
 Caused not by his anger, but by his deprivation
 He disappeared as soon as the spring did [...] (Ibid: d.6584-6585).

Alexander's desire to find the living water was not fulfilled; it is said: "Who seeks shall find", but it did not happen, found the one who did not seek the living water:

Alexander was looking for the living water, but failed,
 Khizr found the living water, not seeking it (Ibid: d.6624).

There is another story about the search for immortality, says Nizami, and begins its narration (6586-6602). Two prophets – Ilyas (Elijah) and Khizr came together and set about their repast near the spring. Accidentally, one of them dropped a salted dried fish into the water, and the fish became alive. They both then drank from the magic spring and became immortal. Ilyas helped those who lost their ways at sea and Khizr – on land.

Nizami's Character of the Alchemist Mary of Copt

The information about the alchemist Mary of Copt given by Nizami is also curious. Al-Nadim (second half of the tenth century), in his celebrated book "Kitab al-Fikhris" represents the alchemist Mary as Maria al-Qibtiyya, i.e. Mary of Copt, and tells of her works. However, this name may confuse the reader. The Prophet Muhammad (?570–632) had a beautiful Coptic wife named Maria Al-Qibtiyya and they had a son Ibrahim, who died at the age of five; Mary died in the year 637 (Al-Tabari, 1997: p.191).

In "Iqbalnameh", the second part of his "Iskendernameh" (The Book of Alexander) Nizami Ganjavi wrote a story about Mary the alchemist: "Mary of Copt and Her Chemical Preparations" (Nizami, 1983a: pp.463-471). In his account Mary, heir to a Syrian Emir ("There was a Copt woman in Damascus" – Ibid: d.678) had suffered hardship, she was, "worn out by the oppression of ill-wishers (Ibid: d.679-680)" but, later, escaped to find shelter under Alexander's (Alexander the Great) rule. Attracted

to Aristotle, Mary put everything else aside and “began to learn science” from Aristotle (Ibid: d.686).

Thus, woman saw the master was far from lust
Did not show relish for her white body (Ibid: d.691)
[...] So, she engaged her proclivity for science (Ibid: d.693).

Aristotle wanted to give a “treasure” to Mary, who had decided to return to her own country, and thus taught her the secrets of kimia (chemistry) and the ixir (elixir). Mary, returning to her homeland and regaining her strength:

Was so eloquent in the art of obtaining ixir
That took pure gold from raw silver (Ibid: d.707)

The gossipers spread the idea that Mary, who possessed unique wealth, was a threat to Alexander’s throne and consequently Alexander became furious. Witnessing all this, Aristotle healed the soured relationship between Mary and Alexander.

Hermes, Balinus ... and Nizami

The Greco-Roman-Syrian, Neo-Pythagorean philosopher Balinus (Pseudo-Apollonius of Tyana), who lived most of his life in the first century (between 40 and 120?) was regarded as one of the influential philosophers by the Islamic world. A work called “Sirr al-Khaliga” (“The Secret of Creation” or “The Mystery of Creation”), is attributed to him. Jabir, “the father of alchemy”, who used this book, also holds to the idea (same way as Balinus borrows idea from Hermes) that metals are formed based on sulphur-mercury couple (Kraus, 1986: p.282; Newman, 2013).

Apollonius of Tyana (now Kemerhisar, Turkey), is sometimes equated to Hermes and Hermes in his turn, according to the Islamic tradition, is identified with prophet Idris – Biblical Enoch/Enoch. Idris is one of the prophets also accepted by the Qur’an: “And mention in the Scripture, Enoch (Idris). He was a man of truth and a Prophet” (The Quran, 2012: 19:56), “We raised him to a high position” (Ibid: 19:57). Jabir did not believe in the magic attributed to Balinus; he considered those stories as inventions and indicated that Balinus was a man of science (Brown, 1997: pp.153-187).

In the “Iqbalnameh”, Nizami assembles seven philosophers of the ancient world around Iskender (for sure, this anachronism – bringing together philosophers of different ages in one meeting - is a deliberate illusion by the poet). Nizami appears

to give pre-eminence to Hermes who “has a sharp mind” (Nizami, 1983a: d.955) and “is in the seventh layer” (Ibid: d.1468), in other words, in the highest position:

Before whomever he gave a proof,
His words became stronger

.....

The Greeks envied him
(Iqbalnameh, 956-957).

Abú Ma`shar al-Balkhí (787–886), who was known as the greatest astronomer and astrologist in the Islamic world, also became famous, as Albumazar or Albuzar, in Europe in the first half of the twelfth century when his works were translated into Latin. According to his “Kitāb al-Ulūf” (Book of Thousands), traditionally there have been three different Hermes. The first – the Egyptian Hermes, who founded the sciences of the stars and medicine, was a poet, constructed the first pyramids and temples, laid the foundations of cities and anticipated Earthly disasters - he predicted the Great Flood. The Persians called him Hóshang, which means righteous (in Persian there are various spellings and attributes, see: Bladel, 2009). In Hebrew he is named Akhnukh/Enoch and in Arabic Idris. The second Hermes was Babylonian; he knew well medicine, philosophy and the nature of numbers; Pythagoras was his disciple. And the third Hermes lived in Egypt, he was a philosopher and physician, wrote a book about poisonous animals and was much travelled. He wrote an exquisite and valuable book on alchemy – on the combination of precious stones, glass, glass objects and making fixative; he had a Syrian student called Asclepius (Bladel, 2009: pp.125-127). Hermes the thrice great, that is Hermes Trismegistus, was probably a combination of these three Hermes.

Evidently, Nizami took some information about Hermes from Abu Mashar’s “Kitab al-Uluf”; while on the subject of Iskender’s horn and long ear, he indicates:

World philosopher Abu Mashar

In his book “Üluf” says in a different way (Nizami, 1983a: d.446).

Nizami presents Hermes and Balinus as two separate philosophers. He recalls Balinus’ performance of various miracles and refers to the abilities that he claimed for himself, such as being able to fly, to be invisible and other powers:

I can cross the deserts and the seas

I am both Ilyas in the sea and Khidr in the desert (Ibid: d.3477).

When Alexander asks his vizier about a fire-breathing dragon, “what is the secret of this mysterious chemistry?” (Ibid: d.2857), the vizier answers briefly:

Such secrets Balinus may know
He is a master of spells and sorcery (Ibid: d.2858).

Balinus was able to tame this dragon who was a beautiful “moon-faced” sorceress:

He learned all the spells from the girl
That is why he was named Balinus the sorcerer (Ibid: d.2892).

Nizami describes the quest for immortality by his favorite hero, who also praises Balinus’ great magical powers and sorcery. Aware of the astrologists’ skills and viewing the world realistically, Nizami finally passes judgment on the problem of immortality:

No matter what you be, magician or astronomer
You will not turn death away from you! (Ibid: d.2893).

Alchemical Metaphor in Nizami

Nizami Ganjavi (1141–1209) and the theme of alchemy were mentioned above in connection with Maria of Copt, the alchemist. Herein Nizami pointed out that alchemists used trickery:

Kimya (chemistry) should be in the grip of such a man
Who is not deceived by alchemists (Nizami, 1983a: d.743).

In addition, (in the same chapter about Mary of Copt), he tells a story on the same theme. He begins the story of the alchemist of Khorasan with an allusion to intercity relations: “The Khorasanis ... Easily deceive the Baghdadis” (Nizami, 1983a: d.746).⁴

The alchemist, from Khorasan, “showed distinct briskness” in his swindling in Baghdad (Ibid: d.770), “proving” the transmutation of ordinary gold into pure gold in an experiment, “obtaining ruby red-colored gold” (Ibid: d.772). The Caliph sends a lot of gold for purification, the alchemist who has prepared in advance, takes the gold and disappears. Nizami indicates the use of a medicinal plant “ginseng” (or rather “panax ginseng”) in the preparation of an elixir (Ibid: d.737), this plant, which

⁴ Nizami’s meaning is interpreted by researchers either as Khorasan rulers skilfully deceiving Baghdad’s caliphs (Akram Jafar), or as deception by enchantment of the Baghdadis by Khorasanis (Vahid Dastgardi) (Iqbalnameh, “Comments and notes”). In my opinion, it’s simply about cheating in trade and commercial dealings, the narration itself mentions that.

is used in folk medicine, and whose root is reminiscent of a human body, is seen as a very useful, exceptional plant.

Moreover, Nizami expressly emphasizes that chemistry is connected to science, knowledge and pen:

[...] If the essence of chemistry (here: elixir-H.I.) is in herbs,
The herb of the pen is the essence of chemistry (Ibid: d.741).

Nizami created numerous colorful and poetic metaphors using alchemical symbolism in each of the five great poetical works collectively called the Khamsa. I believe that it is hardly possible to find a poet or writer in the East or the West comparable with Nizami for his passion on the subject of alchemy, references to alchemist stories and creating alchemical metaphors.

When Nizami urges himself and others to be communicative and simple in human relationships, he refers to red sulphur and white ruby as being among the most valuable, inaccessible ingredients that possess the characteristics of an elixir:

You are neither red sulphur nor white ruby,
For the seeker to return without hope of you
(Sherefnameh, 319).

In general, in poetry, including that by Nizami, words such as red sulphur, smelt gold, mercury, chemistry and elixir are, sometimes unconsciously, used interchangeably to refer to very precious substances:

Cupbearer! Bring the smelt gold,
Wherefrom red sulphur is made,
Give it to me to prepare a medicine
and apply chemistry to my copper (Nizami, 1983a: d.4355-4356).

Alexander, arriving in Azerbaijan's Barda province, befriends the ruler of "the lucky country, whose water and flora is more precious than any essence or elixir" (Ibid: d.3416, 3379) and Nushaba, "who is like a peacock in beauty and is strong-minded, openhearted and sweet in language" (Ibid: d.3367-3368), and orders men to "start a bonfire at the convocation" (Ibid: d.3716), as if an alchemical operation is being performed:

As the alchemist threw iron into his sphere,
And extracted gold,
The sparks that generate the golden elixir
Plenty of gold was scattered on all sides (Ibid: d.3733-3734)

Nizami writes about his *Khamsa* in the introduction to the last poem *Iskendernameh* (in the section “About Nizami’s disposition towards this epic”), recalling that he was working on *Iskendernameh*, that Alexander was searching for the water of life while alive and could not find it, but that great literature may grant immortality to his hero (Nizami knew well that his works belonged to great literature; he sometimes hinted at it):

Now in this word-poetry festivity
 I'm beating Alexander's fate
 I'm telling of his happiness and knowledge
 And I praise his throne and crown.
 After so much time
 I bring him back to life with my water of life (Nizami, 1983a: d.807-809).

[...] He searched so long for the fountain of life
 But he has now found what he searched for then (Ibid: d.812).

In the “Treasure House of Mysteries” (d. 926-928), the first book of the *Khamsa*, when stating that commitments to God and religion are superior to temporal values, Nizami measures the value of this commitment by means of an elixir (Nizami, 1981a). The poet, who wrote of the honor of living a simple life and earning a livelihood by his/her own labor, emphasizing that the body is temporal and that soul and spirit are essential, that one must be the servant of soul, not body, also recalls the alchemical process of turning copper into silver and gold by stating that “Chemistry is the dyer of copper’s clothing” (Ibid: d.1214), and recommends paying heed not to the “black rug of the body” (Ibid: d.1215), which shall become “a handful of land that crumbles into dust”, but to the “radiant soul” (Ibid: d.1213);

Only soul, again soul, because the word is in the soul
 Be the servant of your soul to become a sultan (Ibid: d.1216).

Nizami likens the idea “purify, if you are not dignified and courageous” to the heat treatment of metals:

If you are mixed ore, be halal (give in – H.I.) to fire
 If you are gold and ruby, do not be afraid of fire (Ibid: d.1882).

The Byzantine (“Rum”) gold coin was also used in the Islamic world for some time. Nizami also states this and says that Greek gold coin is weighed “even on the scales of love with Damascus stone”, that is with precious Islamic stone. However, Nizami emphasizes that this “bright and elegant” (Ibid: d.1696) gold can deceive a man and advises steering clear of it:

Is there a man whose hat was not been stolen by this thief?
Or was not misled by this devil's charm? (Ibid: d.1697).

In his “Leyli and Majnun” Nizami explains the reason for Majnun losing his mind to a love for Leyli, over which he moans (in Arabic “Majnun” means a weird, crazy man who becomes furious). It is Layla’s extraordinary nature compared with his own. In a wordplay Leyli is likened to a gold, while he is arsenic (in Persian *zer* and *zernikh* respectively):

How can arsenic ⁵ be as precious as gold?
A “batman” of that is equal to “mithqal” of this.
(Nizami, 1981b: d.65).

In a “qasida” (ode), which is thought by some to belong to Nizami, although other specialists dispute that (Nizami, 1983a: pp.95-97), there is a complaint that “nation and religion are lost” and only the words “like chemistry” remain (here chemistry refers to elixir):

Simiyager, tricky, enchanter fortune
Has created a few bodies with human appearance

And “because of these immoral people” (in fact, because of this “simiyager” fortune):

The nation is gone, religion is lost

“Their mere names have remained, like Chemistry and Felix.”

Digression:

Occultism in the Islamic world

If some among those reading this are seeing the word simiyager (simiyaist, a person who is engaged in Simiya) for the first time, (Nizami’s “Simiyager felek” mentioned above), they might think, “probably, when writing kimyager (which means chemist) the letter ‘k’ was replaced by ‘s’ and it was mistakenly written as simiyager”.

The knowledge of objects and occurrences perceived as mystical - occult science - was widespread in the Islamic world, many movements operated in this sphere and

⁵ Arsenic refers in Persian to a gold coloured mineral (*zer*), Arsenic 3-Sulfide (As₂S₃) and it assumed that this word came to Persian from the word alzarniga in Syriac (in Turkish: zirnik). Arsenicon in Greek, arsenicum in Latin and arsenic in European languages are of the same origin. Used in painting and medicine. A batman was equal to several kilograms (1kg - 7kg) depending on the geographical-political location, while a mithqal is equal to 4.25 grams.

many books were written. Pythagoreanism and Hermetism emanating from the Egyptian-Greek world, alongside Neoplatonist views on soul purification and Ismailism, Batinism and some Sufi movements generated within Islam, strengthened tendencies towards mysticism and magic: particularly, ilm al-ada (number mysticism), abjad and jafr (numbers assigned to letters), nujum (astrology) and other irrational knowledge, al-ulum al-khafiyya (secret sciences) occupied inquisitive minds. The Sufi doctrine of Hurufism was based on teaching the comprehension of truth and interpreting the Qur`an with the help of numbers.

Even though alchemy, in general, is the science of metals and industrial chemistry, and resolved such important problems as refining gold and silver from admixtures, its connection to the occult is indisputable. Apart from partly occult-oriented Kimiya, there were also occult branches of science like Simiya, Limiya, Himiya and Rumiya. Simiya - is the science of influencing physical objects by willpower, accessing the ideas and dreams of others; casting spells and sorcery; it was regarded as the purest of the magical sciences. Some authors prominent in the field of occult sciences within Islam and most renowned from their works include: Jabir ibn Hayyan, the “father of alchemy”; Abu Mashar al-Balkhi, known as the great astrologer in the Islamic world and Europe; “Ikhwan al-Safa” (Brethren of Purity), members of a secret Muslim society, and their famous “Rasa'il Ikhwan al-safa” (Encyclopaedia of the Brethren of Purity), with a number of chapters dedicated to occult sciences; Al-Majriti's (or Pseudo-al Majriti) book of miracles and astrology, “Ghayat al- Hakim” (Aim of the Sage or The Goals of The Wise) became famous in Europe under the name of “Picatrix”; and Ibn Wahshiyya, author of works on the mystical aspects of alchemy...

All this occult thought was commonly reflected in Islamic poetry, Sufi literature and philosophy. At the same time, thinkers like Al-Kindi, Ibn Sina and especially Ibn Khaldun (1332–1406), criticized the mystical aspects of alchemy, including attempts to transmute metals into gold and silver.

Nizami, Alchemical Mercury and Colors

Creating metaphors through colors when touching on a variety of topics was one of Nizami's favorite tropes. Alchemy is connected to colors both in their symbolism and the chemistry of color. “Khosrow and Shirin”, Nizami's inspirational epic-lyrical love poem, is the second book of his Khamsa. Highlighting the fact of green turning to black and black turning to red in the question “Why the green willow turns red, after first turning black”, the poet deliberates on coal and its combustion. He counterposes black, in this case the blackness of coal, with the darkness of a

mountain crow, an eagle, black snake, Negro, Hindu and Habash, then he compares reddening during combustion with the flames of Zoroaster (indicating fire-worship), a flint stone and with a compound made by a black Habash secretary from cinnabar and containing mercury (Nizami, 1981c: d.1400–1401).

The blood-red colour of the fiery furnace in “The Seven Beauties” was “like the Zoroastrian reddish sulphur”, as if it was “shangarf with beaten mercury” (Nizami, 1983b: d.1883, 1885), shangarf or cinnabar is the red-colored mineral, mercury-sulfide (note that there is also black cinnabar or metacinnabar, depending on the type of crystallization).

Nizami describes freezing and a silver-colored layer of ice over water in winter, like liquid mercury transforming into a solid silver body:

Mercury of the water glass
Bit by bit turned into pure silver (Ibid: d.1878).

Nizami makes extensive use of the mysterious nature of mercury, a central element in alchemy, to create a unique metaphor. He suggests that the “Great Creator” “first created mind” (Nizami, 1983a: d.1601-1602), and he further contemplates the return of the dead, devoured, “stolen” by the soil, a remedy for their entanglement there with the help of mind, and here he recalls the alchemists' process of extracting gold from alloys with the help of mercury:

No matter how the golden powder is crumbled
A skillful man brings it together with mercury (Ibid: d.1633).

During the battle between the armies of Khosrow and Bahram the noise was deafening. Nizami reflects this idea in the way that mercury spilled into an ear makes the Earth and a man deaf:

From the neighing of the Arab fire-breathing horses
Mercury has flown to the Earth's ear (Nizami, 1981c: d.2190).

To some young man who is worried, thinking, “when I get old, my lady-love will run away from me”, the wise old man gives solace to him, saying, “in your old age, you yourself will run from your lady-love” (Ibid: d.5202-5204) and thus skillfully embellishes this idea with mercury, reminiscent of both grey hair and escape:

To this head fate would rain mercury
And run away from silver bodied beauties like mercury (Ibid: d.5204-5205).

Nizami's Ferdowsi and Alchemy

Nizami acknowledged the magnificence of Ferdowsi, the great writer of classical Persian literature; he praised him and openly made extensive use of his "Shahnameh", its heroes and events. However, he also maintained that it was pointless to repeat Ferdowsi or any other poet and noted that his works were different from the "Shahnameh" in various ways. For example, Nizami's "Khosrow and Shirin" is a great story of love, a significantly different work ("It is no good repeating what has been said before", Nizami, 1981c: d.476); his praise for love is strong and skillful ("There is nothing more beautiful than love in my world/I wish never to live without love", Ibid: d.478). For Nizami, Ferdowsi did not address love sufficiently in his "Khosrow and Shirin", part of the "Shahnameh", due to his predecessor's age at the time of writing ("His arrow had fallen from the bow of youth", Ibid: d.474).

Nizami's comparative alchemical analysis of his own and Ferdowsi's works cannot leave one indifferent. In the "Iskendernameh", Nizami set himself the particular task of saying what Ferdowsi "the former master of words, ruler of Tus" (Sherefnameh, Nizami, 1983a: d.493) did not say. Here, in my opinion, it is worth noting not only the significantly greater length of the "Iskendernameh" (10500 verses) than the story about Alexander in the "Shahnameh" (1261 verses), but also its philosophical character and its idea of a just ruler. Nizami also promised to correct mistakes, including those made by Ferdowsi:

That venerable decorator

Who erred in the essence

I have amended the wrongly written (Nizami, 1983a: d.6783-6784).

Finally, Nizami states the outcome: a beautiful transformation will take place:

I cherish roses from yellow soil

and fill the treasury with gems prepared by my inspiration (Ibid: d.6789).

Of course, Nizami is aware that originality is not easily achieved, and requires work:

It is not possible to find a precious stone easily

The silver extracted from the mine surely needs to be processed (Ibid: d.518)

Nizami emphasizes in the Seven Beauties the difference between his poem and the way the story is related in the Shahnameh: "I have told the untold half of this [book]" (193). The Seven Beauties holds the most beautiful and alchemical comparison. Claiming that he is preparing to say the unsaid, Nizami also notes, above all, that it is impossible to avoid repetition in the "Bahramnameh" because it is a historical theme:

But because there is only one way to the treasure

[And] Although the arrows are two, the target is one (Nizami, 1983b: d.1057).

And he immediately characterizes the process of transformation from Ferdowsi to Nizami, saying that a rug is good, but silk is more beautiful, that two masters working with the alchemy of the word, forged similar coins that are different in quality; where one (Ferdowsi) transformed copper into silver the other (Nizami) transformed silver into pure gold:

Although there is no way but to repeat [some things]
 I know how to weave silk from rug
 The alchemy of word is made up of two decorators (two manners)
 Have renewed the old themes -
 He made silver from copper, pure silver
 And this turned silver into pure gold.
 If you see copper changing its quality into silver
 Do not be surprised when silver turns into gold (Nizami, 1983b: d.1058-1061).

Nizami does not forget to forewarn his reader about being exposed to a reverse, top-down transformation, to master something new, the old should be put aside:

If you want to hear this symbol in another way from me
 Then pull out the old cotton from your ears
 Not to cover this new silk with a dust sheet (Nizami, 1983a: d.2824-2825).

As a result, Nizami creates a treasure by “chemistry rich in secrets”:
 I gathered the selected treasures together
 Also, those sheets that are in disorder.
 From chemistry filled with mystery
 I piled a wonderful treasure trove (Ibid: d.2828-2829).

It is appropriate to mention here that Nizami, while expressing some of his own views, loves to set up metaphors on the alchemical transformation process the other way round – from top to bottom. For example, he wants a ruler to be generous to a poet, he recalls the story of how Ferdowsi’s work was not given the respect it was due, and he wants a proper reception for his own work:

If we disagree with you
 If we make injustice as in Ferdowsi’s work
 You may put an ice seal on the gold
 And give it to the brewer (Nizami, 1981c: d.193-194).

Or fear may cause big to become small, fire turn to water, while “if the word were gold, it would turn into mercury” (Ibid: d.2483).

The renowned orientalist E. E. Bertels, specifically made a comparative analysis of Ferdowsi's and Nizami's creative works (Bertels, 1981: pp.127-176), contemplated the literary subject and its usage in relatively broad manner.⁶

Ferdowsi and Nizami are both great poets who, without doubt, enriched world literature. However, the subsequent development of the poetic genre did not follow by the "Shahnameh", it was led by Nizami's Khamsa; narrative love poems, including participation by shahs, rather than glorifications of the shahs, became the leading poetic trends.

Khagani and Alchemy

Khagani Shirvani (?1121/26–1199), a poet from Shirvan in Azerbaijan, who was a contemporary of Nizami and who also wrote in Persian, did not believe in alchemists, and wrote an interesting poem about alchemy and alchemists, "Reproach to False Alchemists and the Elixir" (Khagani, 2004: pp.408-409). He, like Nizami, recalling ginseng, said that Alexander the Great learned about the elixir from Aristotle, but he included a very important note: "They did not reach the goal and they tired of this affair". Khagani did not believe in artificial transmutations: "how can soil become gold by trickery!?" He claimed that only the Sun was capable of this (probably following Ibn Sina): "Know, the Sun is the only skillful alchemist in the world". A similar opinion is found in Nizami:

The world was transformed into a precious cultural heritage
It was re-transformed to perfection by the rays of the Sun (Nizami, 1983a: d.612).

Khagani believed that the elixir was an issue for despicable and ill-fated people, avaricious people became bankrupt, he ranked poets and astrologers among the wretched, because "their business is either philosophy or the search for an elixir", the first (i.e. philosophy) is "blasphemy", and the second is "hollow message".

Khagani, if gold is whitened with mercury,
Then see how it will turn red if you throw it into the fire.

Khagani's familiarity with the alchemical symbol – ouroboros - is also interesting. "The dragon, which brings its head to its tail and gnaws it, amuses onlookers".

⁶ While Bertels translated the "alchemical" transformation from the Seven Beauties into Russian, in a line by line literal translation, his version of "The alchemy of word is made up of two decorators (two manners)" was: "Two decorators of word with a philosopher's stone". Nizami uses and writes "chemistry", there is no mention of "philosopher's stone" in his works.

Religious Mysticism in Islam and Alchemy

In the Muslim Orient, the topic of alchemy was popular not only in mediaeval times, but also in later periods it found a place in religious-mystical, philosophical, and poetic works; Muslim mysticism, too, was enriched by alchemical motifs. Meanwhile, Muslim mysticism was accompanied by deliberate uncertainty, metaphysics, strange puns and incompleteness of idea, and required knowledge, experience and imagination for the revelation of issues. Here, I will discuss the alchemical image of a special and selected religious mysticism.

The language and ideas of alchemy were used in discussions of the concept of resurrection in Shiite theology and mysticism, as well as in Shiite theosophy. The names of Huseyin Vaiz Kashif (?1436/37–1504/5), Mir Fendereski/Findiriski (?1562/63–1640/41), Agha Muhammad Bidabadi (?–1783/84), Sheikh Ahmad Ahsa'i (?1753–1826) and others relative to this topic can be remembered. These and other writers saw alchemy as a subject with spiritual meaning.

Sheikh Ahmad Ahsa'i, considered to be the founder of Sheikhi or Shaykhiyya religious school, and his followers were keen to explain relations between soul and body by alchemical processes. Sheikh Ahmad compared the process of transformation of a simple body into a spiritual and immortal, resurrected body, i.e. he compared the physiology of “resurrection” with the sequence of an alchemical transformation. We can see this in Henry Corbin's French translation of sections of original works by representatives of the Sheikhi school (these also were translated into English).

Here I will be satisfied with a brief analysis using Sheikh Ahmad's concept of the resurrected body and the alchemical language he applied, without touching upon religious subtleties: the *jism-jasad* divisions of the body and their natures, Seraphiel's Trumpet and comparisons of light and religion (Corbin, 1977: p.179).

When quartz or silica and potassium-based substances,⁷ which are the most widespread minerals in the Earth's crust, are melted, mixtures, dust and impurities disappear and then a clear transparent substance – glass - is formed.

Two opaque substances are united and transformed into a new transparent substance, so that the visible face and appearance of this new substance allows a view of its interior, it is also possible to see outside from inside. Silica and potassium are solid substances, terrestrial bodies, they transform into glass when they unite. As the result

⁷ The reference to quartz and potassium-based substances implies, respectively, substances like SiO₂ and KCl, KNO₃, K₂CO₃, K₂SO₄, KOH

of the process of melting and unification, the gloominess or opacity of the initial matter disappears. Thus, gloominess is not a property of soil, it is the result of a clash between elements. Although water, one of the four fundamental elements, is transparent, most of the substances in which it is found are non-transparent (clash of elements!). On the one hand, glass is composed of those two constituent substances, on the other hand, it is a new substance, with properties different from the previous ones.

Sheikh Ahmad continues: it is possible to clean glass more effectively with the help of chemical substances. This time, the white elixir, light, a “sunny” lens glass, that is to say, a completely purified substance – crystal - can be obtained by applying and re-melting the philosopher’s chemical. This crystal is a place that the soul is looking for, this body is the companion of the soul, departure from this life - exitus, in other words, the soul that leaves a body, finds a nest in this cleanest of bodies, it is that body which accompanies the soul. The body full of soul is a real body, real human, and “real jism” (“jismi haqiqi”).

Sheikh Ahmad comes closer to the target: finally, by applying elixir once again, it is possible to transmute crystal into diamond. Like bodies of believers, diamond was free of crystal, glass and stone. Diamond reached the deep essence of minerals, it was hiding in there; i.e. there was soul in the body, it hid or apparent body was an abode where the soul was imprisoned (in my view, we can use a more peaceful expression like where the soul is a tenant, rather than the popular expression that the soul is imprisoned). The soul needs a purified and perfect body. An alchemical process is like the “Wise Men’s Mirror”; on this mirror the resurrection of bodies seems like the resurrection of souls. The resurrection, revival of a dead body is based on the existence of soul.

Nor does Sheikh Ahmad forget the mercury-sulphur basis of alchemy: a diamond was obtained from mercury and sulphur; however, it is neither mercury nor sulphur. It seems that there were those who still relied on the mercury-sulphur theory in the early nineteenth century...

Sheikh Ahmad also included in his analysis the purification and transmutation of metals, which stands at the center of alchemy. He classified seven main metals into three classes as incomplete or deficient (iron, lead, tin, copper), medium (silver, mercury), and perfect, i.e. gold. Metals... “inanimate bodies without spirit, the spirit being for them the elixir”. Stone can be transmuted into live and spiritual mineral, a tin-based metal, this metal can be transformed into silver via white elixir and silver, in its turn, can be transmuted into gold with the help of red elixir (by applying these elixirs at certain times). These transmutations are also analyzed from the view point

of the body-soul relationship and the resurrection of a body; silver is a body accompanying soul. The final perfect matter – diamond and gold - are astral bodies, they are indications of relations between microcosm and macrocosm; as a drop of water returns to the sea, so the human soul returns to the Soul, which moves sky spheres, i.e. goes back to its birthplace.

Every metal is potential gold, and every human is potentially a perfect person. It only needs a proper transformation – human help. Alchemy is the art of transformation everywhere – in the Islamic world, China and Europe, transforming darkness into light, evil into good and metal into gold, it is a movement towards perfection.

New Age Comedy on Alchemy

Mirza Fatali Akhundov (1812–1878) or Akhundzade,⁸ apart from being the first dramatist in the Islamic world, also put his imprint on philology, literary criticism, religious criticism and philosophical ideas; he made commitments for alphabetical reform and was an Azerbaijani thinker in search of a “Protestant Revolution in Islam”. “Hekayati-Molla Ibrahimkhalil kimyager” (The Story of Molla Ibrahimkhalil the Alchemist) was his first comedy, written in 1850 and published in 1851. So, the first play-drama of the East was directly related to the theme of alchemy.

In his comedy, M. F. Akhundov demonstrated skillfully that the idea of transmuting ordinary metals into precious metals had not died and that it could be a means of deceiving ignorant people, growing rich at their expense. The alchemist deploys an original tactic, “don’t think about the monkey”. This swindler alchemist gives instructions to the inhabitants of Nukha,⁹ who had brought money to buy silver from Molla Ibrahimkhalil, “it is necessary that you do not think about a monkey and try not to imagine a monkey”. The Nukhans, of course, fail to comply, and the “ixir” (elixir), intended to transmute copper into silver, explodes and loses its effect (Akhundov, 1987: pp.37-51).

The subject of the work was taken from a real event, from which the author created a beautifully artistic incarnation (Ibid: pp.266-268).

⁸ He used the surname Akhundzade in Azerbaijani and Persian works and Akhundov in Russian writings.

⁹ Nukha is the old name of Sheki city in the north of the Republic of Azerbaijan

Conclusion

This article's particularity is in being the first research presentation on Eastern literature and alchemy. The focal point of alchemy – the transmutation of base metals into gold and silver, as well as problems like obtaining an elixir of immortality have widely been highlighted in literature throughout history, and literature in its turn did not remain indebted, but played an important role in ingraining mystical alchemical activity and the image of alchemist in folk memory.

In literature, particularly in folklore, attempts to obtain medication endowing immortality have been manifest since ancient times. Considered to be one of the earliest masterpieces of world literature, the Sumerian "Epic of Gilgamesh" is a brilliant example. The legend of a quest of immortality, Alexander the Great's water of life, is narrated by the great twelfth century poet Nizami in his "Iskendernameh". While stating that physical immortality is impossible and Alexander's effort to find the water of immortality failed, Nizami says that Alexander found immortality in his work, that is, in the "Book of Alexander". In addition, alchemy and the image of the alchemist engaged in the transmutation of base metals into noble metals, has an important role in Eastern literature.

Since Dante and Chaucer in Western literature, the alchemist's image was primarily painted in negative shades, machinations and frauds committed by alchemists were brought to the fore and well-known writers of successive eras, like Erasmus and Ben Jonson, added new tinges to this negative image. Poets like John Donne and George Herbert approached alchemy as a source of strong metaphor. No such periodical changes of attitudes towards alchemy, from negative to positive, have been encountered in Eastern literature. The creative life of Nizami is a good example. On the one hand, he created a talented and diligent image of an alchemist (Mary of Copt), while he also took up the swindler alchemist from Khorasan. In each of the *Khamsa* poems, Nizami employed various alchemical analogies and produced extraordinarily wonderful metaphors. Writing on different themes, whether communication, a nice feast, the purification of soul, the threat behind the allure of glittering gold, the clash of colors, senility and activity, or the power of poets, he embellished them with alchemical metaphors. Nizami's contemporary Khagani also wrote about alchemy; he did not believe in metal transmutation and listed alchemists among the wretched.

Islamic era Sufi literature is rich in alchemical symbols. Sufis claimed to be on a path commingling with God in the transformation process ascending from a lower to a higher state, and they repeatedly compared this process in different ways with the transmutation of base metals into noble ones. Yet alchemists craved the

realization of this transformation in this world, during their lifetimes. On questions concerning the creation of the perfect human and embarking on the way of sharia-tariqa-haqiqa, the 11th-13th century Sufi writers Al-Ghazali, illuminationist philosopher Suhrawardi, Ibn Arabi and Jalal ad-Din Rumi, often resorted to alchemical metaphor.

And it was not only Persian-writing members of the Azerbaijani school (Nizami, Khagani...), but the nineteenth century thinker, writer and dramatist M. F. Akhundov also dedicated one of his well-known comedies, written in Azerbaijani Turkish, to the swindler alchemist and the ignoramuses who believed in him.

The creative work of Sheikh Ahmad Ahsa'i, founder of the Shaykhiyya theological school, is also of exceptional interest with respect to the use of alchemical metaphor in works related to religious mysticism in Islam.

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