

Mahsati's Ganja, or the Echo of the Cultural Legacy of Colonialism

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The screening of the film *Mahsati*, which was scheduled to be shown as part of the 16th International Film Festival held in Baku, was banned by the Azerbaijani Ministry of Culture's Artistic Council. According to Azerbaijani national media, the Artistic Council felt that the world-famous poet Mahsati Ganjavi was portrayed in the film as an "immoral woman." Although the film was first screened in May 2025 in the United States within the framework of the Mammoth Lakes Film Festival, it has not been presented to the Azerbaijani public. However, media reports imply that the film contains some erotic scenes. On this basis, the media declared that the public had taken a "strong position" regarding a film it had not been able to see and that the public did not accept such a distortion of its historical figure.^[i] In response to these accusations, the film's director Suad Gara initially stated that the film was based on a contemporary approach to the image of Mahsati. She said that there was an attempt to show Mahsati as a free-thinking intellectual of her time and to give voice to women who were confined within various frameworks and limitations. A few days later, Gara publicly apologized for the film.^[ii]

After this controversy, one might have expected the media to present the opinions of literary scholars who study Mahsati's work, or at least historians who research the period in which the poet lived, in order to substantiate its position. However, instead of scholars, the media preferred the opinions of "well-known figures" and "celebrities." These celebrities have no connection whatsoever with scholarship, history, or

Persian literature. Is it really the case that in a country that has presented Mahsati Ganjavi to the whole world as an Azerbaijani poet, there are no literary scholars who study her work or historians who research the period in which she lived?

The speculations circulating around the image of Mahsati Ganjavi require clarification of several issues. First, who was Mahsati Ganjavi, and was she Azerbaijani? Second, what kind of city was 12th-century Ganja? Third, to what extent do the moral values of Mahsati Ganjavi's time coincide with the moral values of the modern Azerbaijani nation? Before answering these questions, we must note that Mahsati Ganjavi, like Nizami Ganjavi, is a product of the colonial cultural legacy of the Soviet empire. Both of them are figures who were Azerbaijaniized by Soviet scholars but could not be fully accepted by Azerbaijani society as its own. There is a simple reason for this – language. Since the Azerbaijani people does not speak the language of Mahsati and Nizami and therefore is deprived of the opportunity to read and understand their poetry in the original, they have been unable to truly make them its own.

Mahsati's Ganja

Sources that provide information about the life of Mahsati Ganjavi are extremely scarce. Even at the beginning of the twentieth century, scholars questioned whether she existed.^[iii] However, later research and comparative analysis of new sources introduced into scholarly circulation strengthened the view that Mahsati was a historical figure who lived approximately in the late 11th and 12th centuries. In order to clarify Mahsati's way of life, we must have an understanding of the population, language, and social life of Ganja in the 11th and the 12th centuries.

The earliest information about Ganja is found in Arabic sources. Vladimir Minorsky, referring to the work *Tarikh Bab*

al Abwab by an unknown author of the 11th century, notes that the city was founded in 859 under Arab rule.^[iv] The geographer al Istakhri, who lived in the 10th century, states in his book *Routes and Realms* that Ganja was a small city located between Barda and Tiflis.^[v] The rise of Ganja begins in the tenth century with the fall of Barda. In 951–952, Ganja became the capital city of the Shaddadid dynasty of Kurdish origin. At the end of the eleventh century, the Shaddadids lost control over the city. After Ganja was conquered by the Seljuk sultan Malik Shah, it was granted as an *iqta* (a land granted to members of the royal family in the Seljuk period) to his son Muhammad. The most productive period of Mahsati's life likely coincided precisely with the Seljuk era, that is, the period of the reigns of Sultan Mahmud II and Sultan Ahmad Sanjar.^[vi] On the eve of the Arab conquests, the population in the territory of modern Ganja and its surroundings spoke many languages. Persian served as a means of interethnic communication, and the city's population consisted of Muslims and Christians.^[vii] These pieces of information allow us to draw several conclusions.

First of all, Mahsati did not live in a state called Azerbaijan. During her lifetime, Ganja was first the capital of the Shaddadid state and later a city of the Arran province within the Seljuk Empire. The population of Ganja did not consist of Turkic Azerbaijanis. It was made up of Caucasian language groups (mainly Udins), Armenians, Persian speaking groups, and Turkic speaking groups. The influx of Turkic speaking groups into Ganja dates to the 11th century and the Seljuk invasions, but the invading Turks were not the dominant group in the city. This means that it is difficult to assume that the population of Ganja spoke Turkic during Mahsati's lifetime. Even after the Seljuk invasions, Turkic did not become the dominant language. Ordinary people spoke their own languages, and Persian was spoken in Seljuk courts. Diplomatic

correspondence issued from the courts of Seljuk sultans, reports and documents prepared by state officials, and the works of cultural figures who lived at court can be cited as evidence. The fact that works written in honor of the sultans and panegyrics were in Persian can be explained by the sultans' understanding and use of this language. In general, there is no doubt that the official languages of the Seljuk Empire were Persian and Arabic. [\[viii\]](#)

As for religion, although Arabs appeared in the territory of modern Azerbaijan from the 7th century onward, the complete Islamization of the population was a long and painful process. Sources do not confirm that Arran was fully Islamized even in the 10th century. The Seljuks themselves began to adopt Islam only at the end of the 10th century. Turkish historiography claims that all Turkmens who participated in Caucasian campaigns at the beginning of the 11th century were Muslims. Despite this, it is not possible to claim that nomadic Turkmens fully accepted and observed all Islamic religious rules within a short period or that they strictly adhered to Islamic prohibitions.

Thus, the multinational and multilingual Ganja in which Mahsati lived was also a multi-confessional city where Islamic and Christian religious institutions coexisted side by side. In this city, each group lived according to its own customs and traditions. If we take into account that the Seljuk Empire was governed by distributing lands as *iqta* among members of the ruling dynasty under an appanage system, we can also understand why there were many autonomous provinces within the Empire and why each province was governed according to local rules.

Mahsati as an Individual

While it is relatively easy to find information about the period and city in which Mahsati Ganjavi lived, obtaining

information about her person is much more difficult. Usually, the person and moral values of writers are revealed through their works. The possibilities of Mahsati's poetry in determining her person are quite limited. There are several reasons for this. First, Mahsati was a master of the ruba'i and did not write epics or long poems. This did not allow her to include important moments of her life in short poems. Second, the conditions of the time did not allow Mahsati's ruba'is to be published collectively and compiled into a single book. As a result, some of her poems circulated under the names of other authors, and many poems that did not belong to her were attributed to her. Third, the sources available for analyzing Mahsati's work are scattered across libraries, archives, and museums in different countries. This makes the study of her work difficult.

Mahsati's name is first encountered in historical sources in the 13th century. Her work first attracted the attention of scholars at the beginning of the 20th century. The first study devoted to her poetry was published in Iran in 1956 by Shahab Tahiri. However, a few years earlier in Baku, Mahsati Ganjavi's poems were published in Azerbaijani in translation by Nigar Rafibeyli. In 1963, the German orientalist Fritz Meier's book *The Beautiful Mahsati* was published. This book is currently considered the most comprehensive work devoted to Mahsati's poetry. It collects and provides detailed commentary on 279 ruba'is attributed to Mahsati. The analysis of these ruba'is allowed Meier to clarify information about Mahsati's life, work, and profession.^[ix] Among the most recent studies of Mahsati's work is the book by Dihqan Mahdi, published in Tehran in 2015, which includes information from newly discovered sources.^[x]

In modern Azerbaijan, two notable publications devoted to Mahsati's work can be mentioned. In 2004, *The Ruba'is of Mahsati Ganjavi* was published. The first part of the book

includes translations of poems found in the works of Meier and Tahiri, while the second part contains the translation of the epic *Mahsati and Amir Ahmad* by Nigar Rafibeyli from the Soviet period.^[xi] In 2005, a book by Rafael Huseynov devoted to Mahsati's work was published in Baku.^[xii]

The analysis of Mahsati's work has given scholars grounds to state that she lived in Ganja in the 12th century and that her profession was *khatib* or scribe and poet. Mahsati participated in gatherings organized at the courts of Seljuk sultans. She received large gifts for her poems and panegyrics and at times was even punished. The reasons for her invitations to courts included her ability to play a musical instrument, her beautiful voice, and her talent for improvising poetry. Mahsati also knew how to play chess. These abilities indicate that she did not fit the image of an average Muslim woman of her time and that she was an educated, broad-minded, and free-thinking individual. Mahsati was also close to the *Akhi (Javanmardi)* or *Futuwwa* Sufi orders, which began to spread in Persia during the pre-Islamic Sasanian period and flourished in the 11th and 12th centuries. Akhism was a Sufi order in Islam.^[xiii] It promoted certain ideological and philosophical values in the spiritual realm, encouraged helping others and generosity, and mainly united young craftsmen and urban guild members.

Mahsati was married to Amir Ahmad, the son of the *khatib* of the Ganja court. She was also distinguished by a lifestyle that did not conform to traditional Islamic rules. She participated in feasting gatherings organized at courts, drank wine, danced, and wrote poetry not about Allah or divine forces but about love for human beings. The attention of Soviet literature to Mahsati's poetry is explained precisely by this aspect. Because Mahsati promoted secular feelings, humanism, and spiritual freedom rather than religion, she was permissible within Soviet ideology and was therefore studied

and published.

Because the reason for this article is Mahsati's behavior and moral principles as depicted in the film about her, I will consider the attitude of researchers toward this issue. All scholars who study Mahsati's work accept that some of her poems are erotic, sexual, and vulgar in nature. The love described in her poetry is not abstract but concerns specific people. She depicted love and passion in all their shades through poetic language. For example, one of the translations of Mahsati's work by both Meier and Mihrabi states:[\[xiv\]](#)

من مهستی ام بر همه خوبان شده طاق

مشهور بحسن در خراسان و عراق

ای پور خطیب گنجه کونت چو رواق

نان باید و گوشت و کیر ورنه سه طلاق

I'm Mahsati, the fairest of the flock,

For beauty famed from Mashhad to Iraq;

O preacher's boy, you good-for-nothing bum,

We're through if I've no bread or meat or cock!

The fact that a 12th-century Muslim woman wrote such poems was one of the important factors that attracted the attention of Western scholars studying Mahsati and has led to debates. Researchers explain this style in Mahsati's work in different ways. One group claims that ideas about Mahsati's non-Islamic lifestyle began to form around the 14th century. This group of scholars believes that such views arose because preachers deliberately replaced certain words in her poems with obscene terms. In other words, these researchers argue that those words did not originally belong to Mahsati.[\[xv\]](#) According to them, Mahsati's lifestyle, which did not conform to religious

rules, was unacceptable to fourteenth century authors, and they attempted to discredit her in this way. Another group of researchers, including Meier, accepts that these ruba'is do indeed belong to Mahsati.^[xvi] For example, in his article *The Description of the Body in Persian Literature*, Jalal Khaleghi Motlagh speaks of Mahsati as a woman inclined toward sex with multiple partners.^[xvii]

The attitude of Azerbaijani researchers toward the erotic aspect of Mahsati's work has not been uniform. During the Soviet period, Mahsati's erotic poems were not included in publications. Her translations published in the period of independence were also censored. In the preface to the book *Ruba'is*, Khalil Yusifli writes that when the ruba'is were included in the book, they were sorted and those deemed vulgar were excluded. The reason given was that the content of some ruba'is was defective.^[xviii] In other words, the researcher who translated the ruba'is effectively states that he censored Mahsati and excluded poems written by a twelfth-century poet because he considered them defective and flawed for twenty-first-century society. At the same time, Yusifli does not deny that these poems belong to Mahsati. Rafael Huseynov also draws attention to the abundance of erotic poems in Mahsati's work, but he expresses a contradictory attitude toward this verse.^[xix] At first, Huseynov connects Mahsati's praise of young men of various professions and her declarations of love to them with the shahrashub genre. The shahrashub genre, or guild epigram, is devoted to depicting the inner world of people of different professions. He explains Mahsati's use of this genre with the spread of Akhism in her time and with the connection of both Mahsati and her husband Amir Ahmad to Akhism.^[xx] Then Huseynov denies that these ruba'is belong to Mahsati and explains their attribution to her name by the spread of rumors about her immorality.^[xxi] In the end, however, he accepts that Mahsati was the author of erotic, vulgar, and indecent poems and links

this to the socio-economic development of twelfth-century Ganja. ^[xxii] Huseynov wrongly believes that economic development led to an increase in the number of free professions in the city, the emergence of many Akhi organizations, and the flourishing of Futuwwa.

Thus, researchers of Mahsati's work do not deny the existence of her vulgar and pornographically erotic ruba'is. They accept this to some extent as a feature of the period and a demand of the then social life. They emphasize that Mahsati was a free-thinking poet who valued spiritual freedom and celebrated real life. The Azerbaijani media, however, claim that the realities of the 21st-century Azerbaijani society cannot differ from those of the 12th century, that Azerbaijani society has lived with the same moral and spiritual values for ten centuries, and that therefore the film devoted to Mahsati insults the great poet and falsifies her image. This position cannot be an objection to the falsification of scholarly research because the historical Mahsati does not contradict the Mahsati presented in the film. So, what is the rationale behind this position?

The territory of the present-day Republic of Azerbaijan lived under colonial rule for nearly two hundred years. Both the Russian Empire and the Soviet Empire left undeniable marks on the formation of the social, ethnic, cultural, and spiritual identity of the people living in this territory. The cultural heritage of colonial history presents the Azerbaijani woman as a closed, head-covered, ignorant Muslim woman isolated from the cultural world and far from science and education. Naturally, the image of a free-thinking 12th-century Mahsati, holding a cup of wine, participating in gatherings at sultans' courts, playing musical instruments, singing, improvising poetry, and engaging in verbal duels with sultans and poets does not fit the image of a Muslim woman created by colonial power.

The second important trace left by colonial policy in the life of Azerbaijani society is the history it created. The Soviet Empire built a state with defined borders for Azerbaijani society, called those living within these borders Azerbaijanis, and described a history and historical figures for these Azerbaijanis. In this depiction, thinkers like Mahsati were Azerbaijaniized, and their heritage was presented within the framework of Azerbaijani culture. However, Azerbaijani society was unable to fully appropriate these Azerbaijaniized thinkers. The average Azerbaijani cannot read and understand Mahsati or Nizami in the original, and for this reason cannot recite their poetry from memory in the way one might recite the poems of Samad Vurgun. One may ask what forces the modern Azerbaijani media to promote a colonial vision of their heritage. Why do the Azerbaijani media, now independent, try to reimpose on society under the name of moral norms the image of an oppressed, uneducated, voiceless Azerbaijani woman that colonial power once made society accept? The answer to this question lies in the government that controls both history and media.

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[xx] Hüseynov, 134.

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[xxii] Ibid.,, 305, 323-323.