

Sovietizing Sayat-Nova: The Migration of Ashiq Poetry

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Previous scholarship on Sayat-Nova, including Soviet scholarship, tended to undermine the poet's role within the bardic tradition by viewing him as part of Armenian national literature.^[1] Since the early *ashiqs* belonged to local schools, their identification with a specific nation came with the collection of bards from different regions under the umbrella of the same nation based on their ethnic identity. Early attempts by the Armenian intellectuals of Tiflis to nationalize Sayat-Nova followed the same pattern. Soviet literary critics continued the pre-revolutionary tendency of romanticizing the poet, albeit with a Soviet accent. The Sovietization of Sayat-Nova involved the reconstruction of *ashiq* poetry according to romantic nationalism combined with Marxist-Leninist principles. Despite his critique of Soviet scholarship, the author of the most comprehensive work on the *ashiq* in English, Charles Dowsett too saw Sayat-Nova's poems as a mirror of the bard's inner world. Soviet critics went one step further by *deciphering* the socio-economic basis of that world.

Situating Sayat-Nova's *oeuvre* within the conventional boundaries of *ashiq* poetry, this article will take a formalist approach towards the bard's reception in order to refrain from the psychologism that has dominated scholarship on Sayat-Nova. The textual analysis of his poems as interpreted by Soviet literary scholars/critics will shed light on the functional interaction between the elements of *ashiq* poetry and the Socialist Realist canon. It will examine how specific features of the *ashiq* tradition engendered ideologically driven interpretations in Thaw-era literary criticism.

Conceptualizing the poet's reception

The role of Sayat-Nova's poems within the system of *ashiq* poetry changed as a result of their incorporation into the Armenian and Soviet literary systems. His songs in the interpretations of Soviet literary scholars can be better understood with reference to the respective literary system within which they were reinvented. In this regard, the concepts of *function* and *orientation*[\[2\]](#) coined by Russian literary scholar Yuri Tynianov are particularly useful. He introduced the latter term to resolve the problem of *creative intent*, which presupposes a teleological nature to literature, and to provide a more solid foundation for linking literary evolution to its non-literary (historical) context:

If a literary work is torn from the context of one literary system and moved to another, it will take on a different coloring, accumulate different traits, become part of a different genre, and lose its own genre; in other words, its function will migrate.

This, in turn, leads to a migration of functions within the work; in a given time period, a factor that was once subordinated can end up becoming the dominant.[\[3\]](#)

Eighteenth-century *ashiq* poetry was oriented towards performativity and musicality. Its meaning was generated via the mastery of fixed forms rather than semantic integrity. This dominant function was later subordinated in the national and Soviet representations of Sayat-Nova. As a result, the lyrical effect of his poems created by their first-person point of view (*emotive or expressive function*)[\[4\]](#) came to the foreground. The emotive function, which was less important in Sayat-Nova's times, predisposed the *ashiq's* literary persona to be identified with his personality, which became an orientation connected to the bard's posthumous nationalization. Similarly, the elements that carried out a *poetic function*[\[5\]](#) gained a referential quality conveying biographical information about Sayat-Nova.

Thaw-era Literary Criticism

Khrushchev's Secret Speech in 1956 complicated the relationship between the Party and Soviet writers. From then until the mid-60s, the Soviet literary sphere was underpinned by a back-and-forth movement between the Party's relative tolerance towards artistic freedom and its offensive against literary cadres. Khrushchev's shifting attitude was driven by a desire to distance himself from Stalinist repression and a fear of long-term repercussions of full-scale de-Stalinization respectively.[\[6\]](#) The protagonists of this tension were liberal intellectuals who demanded full-scale de-Stalinization and old conservative cadres personally concerned with the implications of such a radical demand. While the public sphere for literary debates broadened and the repressive measures gained a more indirect form, the role of the Communist Party as an ultimate arbiter of the arts remained unquestionable.

Changes in the political environment impacted the canonical status of Socialist Realism the orthodoxy of which was questioned with the emergence of new genres.[\[7\]](#) Nonetheless, literary criticism did not break away from the principles of Socialist Realism functioning as "an educator of both the writer and the reader, and a branch of the system of censorship."[\[8\]](#) This didactic function linked with the principle of *narodnost* (orientation towards the people) favored the accessibility of a literary work to the common people. *Narodnost* had served as a basis for continued attacks on formalism since the mid-1930s. The formalism that was targeted did not specifically refer to the Russian formalist school of the 1920s. It rather connoted any form of artistic novelty considered ideologically dangerous.

At meetings of party leaders with Soviet artists and writers in 1962 and 1963, Khrushchev's spokesman on the arts and ideology, L.F. Ilyichev made it clear that there could be no *peaceful coexistence* in the arts and no alternative to Socialist Realism.[\[9\]](#) He denounced formalism and

abstractionism as alien tendencies that did not correspond to the truth of Soviet life. Conservative literary cadres could not conceive of art outside ideology. For them, formalism reflected a distorted picture of the world and could not spring out of Soviet reality; any artwork that did not mirror that reality was unavoidably contrived. Although liberals championed diversity in literature, they still appealed to the same principles as their rivals since “they have been trained to regard social organization and political institutions as the source of all good and all bad in human life.”[\[10\]](#) They too saw the aesthetic value of a literary work as an epiphenomenon of its ideological significance.[\[11\]](#)

Tackling formalisms

Sayat-Nova’s songs adhered to the conventions of *ashiq* poetry prioritizing form over content. In some instances, the formality of the poems and the lack of a coherent theme resulted in their untranslatability. Such aspects of Sayat-Nova’s work were usually downplayed by late Soviet critics, who neutralized the possibility of interpreting his poems from a merely aesthetic point of view. They insisted that the bard’s use of *ashiq* prosodies came neither at the expense of the content nor stemmed from the poet’s desire for experimentation.

In the preface to the 1961 Russian publication of Sayat-Nova’s songs, Moscow-based Armenian literary critic Suren Gaisarian discussed the prevalence of “Eastern” prosody in Sayat-Nova’s poetry and commented on the comparison of the bard with European and Russian decadent poets. These analogies validated the *high culture* status of the poet by linking him to the Western canon. Feeding Armenian national pride, such claims were, at the same time, ambivalent on ideological grounds. Hence, Gaisarian drew an explicit line between bourgeois poetic movements and *ashiq* poetry based on the pragmatic value of the latter:

There is a substantial difference between the application of such poetic means in the Western decadent schools and old Eastern or folk poetry. The problem is not the means but the aim of their employment. It should be noted that one and the same means of poetic impression and expression can be used for organizing the world of human senses, for approaching concrete reality and for an indispensable synthesis, and they can also serve to fragment and split the senses, to isolate from reality, to depart from synthesis – to create indeterminacy and chaos. In the latter case, these means become distorted from within and transform into their opposites.[\[12\]](#)

This distinction implied that the acceptability of a particular poetic device was determined by the ideological ends it served rather than its autonomous aesthetic function. Formalism was not an evil per se, but its extra-literary implication rendered the term an anathema. Since a literary work could not create its own reality, the poeticity of Sayat-Nova's verses was not the main concern of Soviet criticism. The ability of poetic language to refer back to itself was suppressed while its mimetic function, that is, its imitation of the extra-literary world, became dominant. This approach was informed not so much by theoretical considerations as by the demands of the historical circumstances in which its proponents found themselves.

Towards referentiality and emotivity

The chronology of the poet's early life and training has been drawn from his Azeri *vujudnama*, a quasi-biographical poem. Conventionally, such poems depict the lives of bards from conception until the age of 100. Sayat-Nova's *vujudnama* narrates the poet's embodiment in the world rather than accurately illustrating the milestones of his life. Furthermore, the rhyming scheme and meter of the poem predetermine the range of morphemes that can be used in each line. These restraints imply that in *ashiq* poetry, preference for certain expressions was not primarily guided by semantic

considerations. The rhythm or sound of *ashiq* verse was more important because it was created during or for performances.

Although the *vujudnama* is unlikely to narrate Sayat-Nova's actual biography, it still bears verisimilitude to external reality in terms of evoking the events that could have possibly occurred outside the text. This lifelikeness accommodated the referential function of the poem in outweighing its other poetic counterparts. Based on the *vujudnama*, Gaisarian and other Soviet scholars concluded that Sayat-Nova worked as a weaver before becoming an *ashiq*.[\[13\]](#) This conjecture reinforced the working-class background of the bard boosting his image as a people's poet. There is another hypothesis claiming Sayat-Nova's profession to be a dyer based on the frequent use of colors in his poems. It might well be true that the bard had a side job as a weaver or dyer. Nonetheless, references to textiles and colors were typical conventions of *ashiq* poetry.

Sayat-Nova's love songs praising the beauty of the beloved (*gozallama*) and complaining about the suffering she inflicts upon the lover (*shikayatnama*) account for the majority of his surviving *oeuvre*. Yet, one can argue that it was mostly his moralistic poems (*oyudlama*) or the element of admonition that fueled Soviet interpretations of the bard's alleged political beliefs. These poems depict various life circumstances and deduce moral lessons from them, which was appealing to the didacticism of Socialist Realism. One of the most quoted stanzas to demonstrate Sayat-Nova's appreciation of the working class was taken from an Azeri *oyudlama*:

Mercy on the old master, on the builder of a bridge

The passer-by will add a stone to its foundation.

I worked myself to death for the sake of the people

A brother will set up a rock to mark my grave.[\[14\]](#)

It is difficult to pin down the main theme of the song because it touches on various topics from the legacy of good deeds and heroic qualities to the betrayal of friends and volatility of life. The poem also exemplifies how the literary evaluation of Sayat-Nova was influenced by Russian *mistranslations*. Russian poet Arseny Tarkovsky translated the first line as “Blagosloven stroitel, vozvedshii most” (“Mercy on the constructor erecting a bridge”). The poem gained a novel meaning in Russian reflecting Sayat-Nova’s high regard for workers. Similarly, Tarkovsky interpreted the speaker’s plea for God’s redemption and protection from traitors in the second stanza of the poem as the bard’s call to God to separate good from evil and guard people against a cruel despot. This rendition can be regarded as a poem in its own right with its Manichean rhetoric that belonged to the translator’s own milieu. While Tarkovsky preserved the element of entreaty in the poem, its content was replaced with a more abstract message unusual for Sayat-Nova.

“National in form, socialist in content”

Another characteristic of the Socialist Realist canon was its orientation towards monumentalism. In terms of poetry, it implied the grand genre status of the narrative poem with a heroic theme.[\[15\]](#) In contrast, Sayat-Nova’s love poems narrated in the first person had a rather personal tone which could have posed an obstacle for the poet’s Sovietization. This issue was addressed with a historicist sleight of hand. On the one hand, according to Marxist-Leninist interpretation, the stage of socio-economic development determines the dominant modes of artistic creation. The predominance of lyricism reflected the historical reality of the 18th-century Caucasian peoples who suffered at the hands of domestic and foreign oppressors, and consequently, turned inwards, incapable of creating grand forms of art. Based on the same premise, Armenian literary critic Lev Arutiunov connected the overwhelming lyricism of Sayat-Nova’s poetry with the official

discourse: "Through love comes the comprehension of being. That is why a love drama turns into a social drama. If reality is the opposite of love, it means that reality is vicious, lyricism becomes tragic concentrating in itself the dramatic collision of an individual and society, the feeling of dissatisfaction and discord with the world." [16] This kind of reading could incorporate even the love songs of the *ashiq* into the prevailing discourse as their socio-economic undertone could be read between the lines.

On the other hand, locating Sayat-Nova completely within a feudalistic system would be incongruent with the bard's nationalization, which required highlighting his uniqueness. To this end, the element of complaint in *ashiq* poetry was instrumentalized to accentuate Sayat-Nova's discontent with the establishment. Yet, the bard's dissatisfaction was not a self-conscious one. Such an understanding was manifest in Mirali Seyidov's argument: "Sayat-Nova did not understand the real historical causes of the people's tragedy and as a result he did not know how to prevent it. He could not find a solution to the situation and sometimes fell into melancholy." [17] According to Seyidov, the poet himself could not be aware of the deep historical forces that found their expression in his poetry. The bard's supposed melancholy was an inadequate reaction to the injustice brought about by the feudalistic class division because the necessary conditions had not ripened for him to be able to articulate the social dynamics of his time. Hence, the Marxist-Leninist ideology was reconciled with the romantic portrayal of the poet's uniqueness through subtle historicism: Sayat-Nova's life and poetry were contingent on socio-economic factors, whereas the bard's misfortune in an oppressive system symbolized by his expulsion from the Georgian court and the sense of indignation he expressed at that which he could not fully grasp reaffirmed his image as an outlier.

In some cases, the national representation of Sayat-Nova could contradict the norms of Socialist Realism. The following

tristich from his Armenian poem beginning with “Dun en glkhen imastun is” (“You are profoundly wise”) contains the element of boasting typical of *ashiq* contests,[\[18\]](#) while the speaker seems to address not a rival but someone in power. Because of that, the poem is usually referred to as Sayat-Nova’s plea to the Georgian king Irakli II.[\[19\]](#) Soviet critics used this excerpt frequently to substantiate the giftedness of the *ashiq*:

Not everyone can drink my water: my water has a special taste!

Not everyone can read my writings: my words have a special meaning!

Do not think it is easy to knock me down! My foundation is solid like granite![\[20\]](#)

Although these lines support the romantic depiction of the bard as a poet-genius, they also have an elitist connotation. Limiting the accessibility of Sayat-Nova, the tristich could potentially go against the *narodnost* principle of Socialist Realism. Therefore, after quoting the same lines, Joseph Grishashvili remarked that “they did not mean that he [Sayat-Nova] was the poet of the chosen ones.”[\[21\]](#) It was equally vital to emphasize that Sayat-Nova enjoyed popularity among the common people. Accordingly, the exclusive understanding of his verse could only be interpreted as stemming from the inability of the ruling class to appreciate genuine art.

The depictions of Sayat-Nova’s purported patron Irakli II merit particular attention. While Marxist-Leninist ideology encouraged a dark image of the 18th-century Transcaucasia, the parallel Georgian project of nationalization required Irakli II to be portrayed as a unifier of his nation under whom Georgia experienced relative prosperity.[\[22\]](#) According to Grishashvili, the *ashiq* spent the best days of his life at the court of Irakli II, who was a great appreciator of the arts.[\[23\]](#) Likewise, Gaisarian portrayed Irakli II as an

enlightened leader whose attempts to civilize the nobility were in vain.[\[24\]](#) Despite the king's decency, there was still a class difference between him and Sayat-Nova, which resulted in the bitter lot of the poet. Gaisarian argued that moments of realization of this simple truth are expressed through the oscillating feelings towards Irakli II in the bard's songs. The speaker of the abovementioned entreaty poem acknowledges that his destiny is in the hands of a powerful person for whose mercy he's pleading. At the same time, there is a tone of pride and superiority in the speaker's voice. To prove Sayat-Nova's defiance against authority, Gaisarian quotes two lines from another Georgian love poem the Russian translation of which replaced Jesus with king.[\[25\]](#) Here, the lover declares to the beloved that he would neither leave her nor endure humiliation. He rebukes her in a rather friendly manner for not even worshipping Jesus, which hints at her mercilessness. The theme of a lover under the spell of a pitiless beloved bears functional parallelism to the poet's assumed address to the king. They both convey a sense of submission while maintaining a dignified tone. In the case of the Georgian poem, the (self)-censorship of religious language in the Russian translation led to romantic interpretations regarding the poet's individuality.

Conclusion

By employing a formalist framework, this article has demonstrated how the dominant discursive practices of the Thaw "colored" Sayat-Nova's verse and the ways in which *ashiq* poetry enabled such revaluation. It focused on the interrelation between the poetic and the historical, instead of reducing the poet's reception to a mere symptom of the period. The image of Sayat-Nova was not invented from scratch. Specific elements of the bard's songs, which adhere to the conventions of *ashiq* poetry, contributed to the range of interpretations made by Soviet literary critics. Yet, those elements changed their function after being assimilated into a new literary system. This process was underpinned by the

simultaneous nationalization and Sovietization of Sayat-Nova. Reconciling the romantic view of the poet with the politically correct image of him was not an invariably smooth endeavor. As seen from Thaw-era literary criticism of Sayat-Nova, these coexisting tendencies foregrounded the emotive and referential (mimetic) functions of *ashiq* poetry. Despite the relative freedom of expression, conservative and liberal literary criticism did not abandon the key formulations of Socialist Realism.

References and notes:

[1] One exception is American-trained scholar Xi Yang's dissertation, which analyzes Sayat-Nova's poetry with reference to the common tropes and prosodies of *ashiq* poetry. Xi Yang, "Sayat`-Nova: Within the Near Eastern Bardic Tradition and Posthumous" (PhD diss., University of California, 2016), <https://www.proquest.com/dissertations-theses/sayat-nova-within-near-eastern-bardic-tradition/docview/1757267786/se-2?accountid=15607>.

[2] Yuri Tynianov, "On Literary Evolution (1927)," in *Permanent Evolution: Selected Essays on Literature, Theory and Film* eds. Ainsley Morse and Philip Redko (Boston: Academic Studies Press, 2019), 267-282; Yuri Tynianov, "The Ode as an Oratorical Genre (1922)," 77-113.

[3] Yuri Tynianov, "The Ode as an Oratorical Genre (1922)," 77-78.

[4] "The emotive or 'expressive' function, focused on the addresser, aims a direct expression of the speaker's attitude toward what he is speaking about." Roman Jakobson, "Linguistics and Poetics," in *Language in Literature* eds. Krystyna Pomorska and Stephen Rudy (Cambridge: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1987), 66.

[5] *Poeticity or poetic function* is “present when the word is felt as a word and not a mere representation of the object being named or an outburst of emotion, when words and their composition, their meaning and their external and inner form, acquire a weight and value of their own instead of referring indifferently to reality.” Roman Jakobson, “What is Poetry?” in *Language in Literature*, 378.

[6] Priscilla Johnson, “The Politics of Soviet Culture, 1962-1964,” in *Khrushchev and the Arts: The Politics of Soviet Culture, 1962-1964* eds. Priscilla Johnson and Leopold Labedz (Cambridge: The M.I.T. Press, 1965), 1-89.

[7] Evgeny Dobrenko and Ilya Kalinin, “Literary Criticism during the Thaw,” in *A History of Russian Literary Theory and Criticism: The Soviet Age and Beyond* eds. Evgeny Dobrenko and Galin Tihanov (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2011), 198.

[8] Hans Günther, “Soviet Literary Criticism and the Formulation of the Aesthetics of Socialist Realism,” 91.

[9] Priscilla Johnson, *Khrushchev and the Arts*, 105-120, 137-147.

[10] Dina R. Spechler, *Permitted dissent in the USSR: Novy mir and the Soviet regime* (New York: Praeger Publishers, 1982), xix.

[11] Evgeny Dobrenko and Ilya Kalinin, “Literary Criticism during the Thaw,” 193.

[12] Suren Gaisarian, “Sayat-Nova. Vstupitelnaia statia,” in *Sayat-Nova: Stikhotvoreniia* (Leningrad: Sovetskii Pisatel, 1961), 54-55.

[13] This hypothesis was first proposed by Gevorg Akhverdian. Charles Dowsett, *Sayat-Nova: An 18th-century troubadour: A Biographical and Literary Study* (Louvain: Corpus Scriptorum

Christianorum Orientalium, 1997), 10.

[14] The English translation was borrowed from Charles Dowsett with slight amendments.

[15] Evgeny Dobrenko, "Socialist Realism," in *The Cambridge Companion to Twentieth-Century Russian Literature* eds. Evgeny Dobrenko and Marina Balina (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), 102.

[16] Lev Arutiunov, "Sayat-Nova. K 250-letiiu so dnia rozhdeniia," *Novy Mir* no. 10 (1963), 233.

[17] Mirali Seyidov, *Pevets Narodov Zakavkazia* (Baku: Izdatelstvo Akademii Nauk Azerbaidzhanskoi SSR, 1963), 82.

[18] Among the techniques that *ashiqs* used in competitions to defeat their rivals were ridicule and self-praise. Such tactics were part of the *ashiq* ritual and did not necessarily indicate personal rivalries. Feeding the binary nature of the class struggle discourse, the element of belittlement present in Sayat-Nova's poems contributed to the interpretations ranging from the poet's satirical attitude towards the 18th-century mercantile bourgeoisie and nobles to his supposed aesthetic reflections.

[19] Despite this consensus, it's still ambiguous whether the speaker of the poem is addressing the king or the beloved.

[20] This prerevolutionary Russian translation by Valery Briusov was recycled in Soviet publications.

[21] Joseph Grishashvili, "Sayat-Nova," *Literaturnaia Gruziiia* no. 10 (1963), 62.

[22] Irakli II famously united the kingdoms of Kartli and Kakheti. Along with his national significance, the king's attempts to centralize the government and build a close relationship with Russia and Europe appealed to the Soviet statism and modernization ethos of the time.

[23] Joseph Grishashvili, "Sayat-Nova," in *Lirika: Perevody s armianskogo, gruzinskogo, azerbaijanskogo* (Moscow: GIKhL, 1963), 9.

[24] Gaisarian, "Sayat-Nova," 31-35.

[25] The Azeri version by Georgian-Azerbaijani translator Aflatun Sarachli from the 1988 Azerbaijani publication *Gulag as sozume*:

Sayat-Nova would not allow humiliation, nor would forsake his beloved,

How to pray to holy Jesus, even that you do not know.

The Russian translation by Konstantin Lipskerov:

No, Sayat-Nova, you are not a slave with a timid gaze!

Even the king whom everyone bows to, you do not acknowledge!

[On Why Sayat-Nova Is Forgotten in Post-Soviet Azerbaijan](#)