

**THE NIGHTINGALE SINGS IN THE THAW: SOVIET CANONIZATION  
OF THE 18<sup>TH</sup>- CENTURY TBILISI *ASHIQ* SAYAT-NOVA**

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Submitted to  
Central European University  
Department of History  
Tokyo University of Foreign Studies

In partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of  
Master of Arts

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Budapest, Hungary – Tokyo, Japan

2022

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## Abstract

The current thesis examines the nationalization and Sovietization of the 18<sup>th</sup>-century Tbilisi *ashiq* Sayat-Nova. The bard's ethnic background and multilingual oeuvre consisting of Armenian, Azeri and Georgian poems rendered him an ideal figure for being molded into an Armenian national poet and a symbol of the Transcaucasian friendship. This process was underpinned by relocating Sayat-Nova from the Near Eastern bardic tradition to the Armenian literary canon and universalizing the poet's significance both of which had their origins in the prerevolutionary representations of the poet. The thesis will elucidate how Soviet nationality policy combined with the rise in Soviet internationalism made the Thaw a decisive moment in canonizing the bard as part of Armenian national and Soviet multinational literature.

This work marks a departure from the previous scholarship on Sayat-Nova dominated by Romanticist assumptions about the poet's individuality. Without attempting to construct the extraliterary details of the poet's life, it contextualizes his poems within the corpus of *ashiq* poetry while analyzing their evaluation in Soviet literary criticism from the vantage point of Russian formalism. The thesis also provides a comparative analysis of the prerevolutionary and Soviet translations of Sayat-Nova's poetry suggesting continuity between the two.

## **Acknowledgement**

I thank my supervisors Charles Shaw and Marsha Siefert and my second reader José Neves for their invaluable guidance throughout this project and for teaching me how to think historically.

I thank Anastasia Felcher at Open Society Archives for her extremely helpful suggestions regarding the archival aspect of my project and László Kontler whose class on intellectual history has influenced the methodology of this thesis.

I thank CEU librarians who assisted me despite the challenges the pandemic introduced to our lives.

I am grateful to Monika Horvath at CEU Medical Centre and Pedro Cardim at NOVA University who were kind and compassionate to me.

I thank my mother Gulustan Huseynova and my heavenly cats for their existence.

And I thank poetry for making life more bearable.

## **Note on Transliteration**

The transliteration of the Cyrillic alphabet is based on a modified Library of Congress system except for the names with a commonly accepted spelling such as “Sayat-Nova” instead of “Saiat-Nova”, “Arseny Tarkovsky” instead of “Arsenii Tarkovskii” and “Joseph” instead of “Iosif”.

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## Introduction

On November 28, 1962, the Secretariat of the Soviet Writers' Union established a jubilee committee by the decision of the World Peace Council to commemorate the 250<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the 18<sup>th</sup>-century Armenian *ashiq*<sup>1</sup> Sayat-Nova. It was followed by All-Union celebrations of the poet in October 1963 which were unprecedented in scale, especially in Moscow, Soviet Armenia, Azerbaijan, and Georgia. The anniversary of the poet was emblematic of special interest in the poet's legacy during the Thaw era. As Soviet internationalism gained momentum in the post-war period, the Soviet authorities capitalized on Sayat-Nova not only to fix his place as an Armenian national poet but also to reinforce the idea of the friendship of the Soviet people, one of the urgent tasks of the time. The bard came to epitomize the Transcaucasian<sup>2</sup> friendship justified by his multilingual corpus in Armenian, Azerbaijani<sup>3</sup> and Georgian.

The current thesis aims at showing how the “double assimilation”<sup>4</sup> of Sayat-Nova worked both on textual and extratextual levels. Firstly, situating the canonization of the *ashiq* within the context of Soviet nationality policy, it will outline the historical development of the poet's

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<sup>1</sup> Before its nationalization in Turkey and Soviet Azerbaijan, the *ashiq* tradition covered a wide geographical expanse in the Near East. The performance of *ashiqs* combined rhymed songs and storytelling (*dastan*) accompanied by a string instrument, usually *saz*. The performers and/or composers of *ashiq* songs are called *ashiqs*. The tradition started to gradually die out after the modern cultural forms arrived in the region. However, the preservation of *ashiq* art proved more persistent in Azerbaijan as a result of which it is enlisted in the UNESCO's Representative List of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity as part of Azerbaijani culture. UNESCO Intangible Cultural Heritage, “Art of Azerbaijani Ashiq,” UNESCO, <https://ich.unesco.org/en/RL/art-of-azerbaijani-ashiq-00253> (accessed April 19, 2022).

<sup>2</sup> The name Transcaucasia (*Zakavkazie* - beyond the Caucasus (mountains)) was given to the region following the Russian invasion of the (Northern) Caucasus in the 18th century. Its use in this thesis is limited to the period when the region became part of the Russian imperial formations. Any historical account before that will refer to the region as the Caucasus while the contemporary toponym South Caucasus will be used for the post-Soviet era.

<sup>3</sup> When referring to the official language of Azerbaijan, the author of the thesis will use Azerbaijani and Azeri interchangeably for the sake of convenience.

<sup>4</sup> It is originally defined by Francine Hirsch as “the assimilation of a diverse population into nationality categories and, simultaneously, the assimilation of those nationally categorized groups into the Soviet state and society.” Here, it refers to the simultaneous nationalization and Sovietization of Sayat-Nova that combined the poet's national-Romanticist representation with his portrayal according to Marxist-Leninist ideals. Francine Hirsch, *Empire of Nations: Ethnographic Knowledge and the Making of the Soviet Union* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 2005), 14.



reception and its main characteristics. Secondly, the textual analysis of the bard's poetry as interpreted by the Soviet literary scholars and critics will explore the functional interaction between the elements of *ashiq* poetry and the Socialist Realist and Marxist-Leninist canon. Finally, the thesis will offer an alternative perspective to the Soviet translation studies by shedding light on the foreignizing tradition in the Soviet translations of Sayat-Nova's poems.

The previous scholarship on Sayat-Nova, including the Soviet one, tended to undermine the bard's role within the bardic tradition viewing him as part of Armenian national literature. One of the exceptions is the dissertation by Xi Yang which provides a historical and literary overview of the *ashiq* tradition with close attention to its Armenian representatives. Unlike previous scholars, Yang analyses Sayat-Nova's poetry with reference to the common tropes and prosodies of *ashiq* poetry. Since the early *ashiqs* belonged to "local schools", their identification with a specific nation came along with the recollection of bards from different regions under the umbrella of the same nation based on their ethnic identity. Early attempts of nationalization by prerevolutionary Armenian intellectuals who rediscovered Sayat-Nova followed the same direction. However, the literary criticism and scholarship of the time could engage in more plural and open-ended discussions. It was the Stalinist nationality policy that brought about the full-scale nationalization of the poet leading to the homogenization of his scholarly representation. The Soviet literary critics and scholars continued the pre-revolutionary tendency of romanticizing the poet, albeit with a Soviet accent. "The national in form, socialist in context", this appraisal involved the reconstruction of the *ashiq* according to Romantic expressivism combined with Marxist-Leninist principles.

The English-language scholarship on Sayat-Nova is scarce and rarely goes beyond the national framework. Despite his critical attitude toward the Soviet scholars, the author of the most

comprehensive work on the bard in English Charles Dowsett did not eschew comparisons between Sayat-Nova and European poets hinting at the “lower” artistic standards of the 18<sup>th</sup>-century Caucasus compared to Europe.<sup>5</sup> Like the Soviet literary scholars, he approached the bard’s poems as a means for describing the inner workings of his psyche. In Dowsett’s opinion, Sayat-Nova’s poems function as a mirror of the poet’s mood shifts while the Soviet critics went one step further by deciphering the social content behind his purported emotional state. This thesis, on the other hand, will take a structural and formal approach to contextualize the bard’s poems in the 18<sup>th</sup> century *ashiq* tradition and the Soviet literary sphere respectively. The structural method implies situating Sayat-Nova’s oeuvre within the conventional boundaries of *ashiq* poetry. The formal approach will emphasize the self-contained aspect of the bard’s poems and how they functioned within the Soviet literary system to refrain from psychologisms that have been dominating the scholarship on Sayat-Nova.

While the previous studies have mainly focused on analyzing the literary merit of Sayat-Nova’s poetry, this thesis aims to provide a descriptive analysis of the poet’s reception in the Soviet context with special attention paid to the Thaw period. It will shed light on the emergence of Azeri interest in Sayat-Nova as part of the Thaw-era enthusiasm surrounding the bard that marked a brief episode of full-scale promotion of the poet’s “internationalist” image and show how it was paralleled by the growing celebrations of the Transcaucasian friendship against the backdrop of the internationalist upsurge in the post-war Soviet Union.

Another objective of the thesis is to contribute to the discussions around the Soviet translation theory and practice which have mainly dealt with the Western literature in Russian translation, reproducing the results that reaffirmed the domesticating nature of Soviet translation.

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<sup>5</sup> Charles Dowsett, *Sayat-Nova: An 18th-century troubadour: A Biographical and Literary Study* (Louvain: Corpus Scriptorum Christianorum Orientalium, 1997), 234.

Looking into the translations of Sayat-Nova's poems into Russian draws a different picture of Soviet translators who strived to remain faithful to the foreign text like their prerevolutionary counterparts.

The thesis is divided into three chapters. Chapter 1 will trace the development of Sayat-Nova's nationalization showing the process by which he migrated from the *ashiq* tradition to the Armenian national literature. It will argue that the poet's recontextualization and the national ambition for his international recognition had their roots in the works of prerevolutionary intellectuals while they fully developed only as a result of the Stalinist nationality policy. Chapter 2 will examine how the Sovietization of the bard led to his homogenized representation and how specific genres and poetic elements of the *ashiq* tradition engendered ideologically oriented interpretations in the Thaw-era literary criticism. Chapter 3 will look at Soviet translations of Sayat-Nova's poems suggesting continuity between the prerevolutionary and Soviet practices in terms of their commitment to the source language.

## Theoretical Framework

Drawing upon Yang's argument on the importance of contextualizing Sayat-Nova within the Near Eastern bardic tradition, this thesis will approach his poetry from a structural point of view. Since the rules of inclusion and exclusion in the *ashiq* tradition are considerably fixed, it will be viewed as a *langue* that determined the *parole* of Sayat-Nova's poems. The theoretical pair of *langue* (language) and *parole* (speech acts) originally coined by Ferdinand de Saussure refers to the pre-givenness of language as a collective system of sound-images in relation to individual speeches that instantiate the former heterogeneously.<sup>6</sup> This framework proves particularly fertile in the studies of folk traditions due to their rigid conventionality.<sup>7</sup> In this thesis, the choice of such methodology is informed by the dominance of conventional language over individual utterances in the *ashiq* poetry. It should be noted that the metaphor of *langue* and *parole* will be loosely applied to the analysis of Sayat-Nova's songs since by the language of *ashiq* poetry, the author implies not only its compositional patterns but also common prosodies. Rather than overlooking the synchronic and diachronic dynamism of the inferred structure, it will be used as an analytical tool to situate Sayat-Nova's poetry within the system of rules in which it most likely operated.<sup>8</sup>

This framework conforms to the criteria put forward by J.G.A. Pocock to verify "that the proposed *langue* is not fabricated by a historian."<sup>9</sup> First of all, *ashiq* tradition can be regarded as a

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<sup>6</sup> Ferdinand de Saussure, *Course in general linguistics* trans. Wade Buskin (New York: Philosophical Library, 1959), 7-20.

<sup>7</sup> The most influential example is Vladimir Propp's *The Morphology of the Folktale* (1928) where the author analyzed Russian folktales based on the linear development of their composition.

<sup>8</sup> Here, "structure" implies "a *simulacrum* of the object" that plays an explanatory function. The author follows Roland Barthes' definition of structuralism which seeks "to link to history not only certain contents but also certain forms, not only the material but also the intelligible, not only ideological but also the aesthetic." Roland Barthes, "The Structuralist Activity," in *Critical Essays* trans. Richard Howard (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1972), 213-220.

<sup>9</sup> J.G.A. Pocock, "The concept of language and the *métier d'historien*: some considerations on practice," in *The languages of political theory in early modern Europe*, ed. Anthony Pagden (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987), 26-27.

self-defined language in which other *ashiqs* performed “speech acts” along with Sayat-Nova and were in conversation with each other both through bardic contests and intertextual references. Secondly, the conventions of specific genres and prosodies allow us to predict the structure of individual poems that purposefully adhered to them. This awareness is evident in Sayat-Nova’s manuscript where his poems are named according to their prosody. Finally, analysis of the bard’s songs shows the elements of divergence from the common practices of the early *ashiqs* either improving or rearranging the existing conventions from within.<sup>10</sup>

The story of artistic creation, nevertheless, is different from that of its reception. The role of the bard’s poems within the system of *ashiq* poetry changed as a result of their incorporation into the Armenian and Soviet literary systems. His songs as interpreted by the Soviet literary scholars can no longer be understood with reference to the poetic output of other 18<sup>th</sup>-century *ashiqs* but to the respective literary system within which they were reinvented. In this regard, the concepts of *function* and *orientation* coined by Russian literary critic Yuri Tynianov are particularly useful. *Function* refers to “the interrelation of formal elements within the same system (*syn-function*) or with the elements of other systems (*auto-function*).”<sup>11</sup> *Orientation* (*ustanovka*) was defined by Tynianov as “the dominant of a literary work (or genre), which functionally colors the subordinated factors as well as the function of a work (or genre) vis-à-vis the closest extra-literary series.”<sup>12</sup> He introduced the term to resolve the problem of “creative intent” which presupposes a teleological nature of literature and to provide a more solid concept for linking literary series to their non-literary context:

<sup>10</sup> Xi Yang, "Sayat'-Nova: Within the Near Eastern Bardic Tradition and Posthumous" (PhD diss., University of California, 2016), 219, <https://www.proquest.com/dissertations-theses/sayat-nova-within-near-eastern-bardic-tradition/docview/1757267786/se-2?accountid=15607> (Accessed November 27, 2021).

<sup>11</sup> 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), 271.

<sup>12</sup> Yuri Tynianov, “The Ode as an Oratorical Genre (1922)” in *Permanent Evolution Selected Essays on Literature, Theory and Film* eds. Ainsley Morse and Philip Redko (Boston: Academic Studies Press, 2019), 78.

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.<sup>13</sup>

The 18<sup>th</sup>-century *ashiq* poetry was oriented towards performativity and musicality which entails that its meaning was engendered by formal means such as sound and rhythm rather than semiotic integrity. This dominant function was later subordinated in the Thaw-era representations of Sayat-Nova. The lyrical effect of his poems created by their first-person point of view which carried out an *emotive* or *expressive function*<sup>14</sup> came to the foreground. The emotive function less important in the poet's times predisposed his literary persona to be re-viewed in congruence with his individuality thereby rendering it an orientation for the posthumous life of his songs as part of the bard's nationalization. Consequently, the elements that played a *poetic function* gained a *referential* quality conveying biographical information about his life.<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> Ibid., 77-78.

<sup>14</sup> According to Roman Jakobson, "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* ed. Krystyna Pomorska and Stephen Rudy (Cambridge: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1987), 66.

<sup>15</sup> *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* ed. Krystyna Pomorska and Stephen Rudy (Cambridge: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1987), 378.

## Sources

The main sources consulted in this thesis are Soviet publications of Sayat-Nova's poems and Soviet literary journals and newspapers published in Azerbaijani and Russian. Since the thesis focuses on the Thaw-era representation of the poet, the sources related to it will be analyzed more in depth. The study of Armenian and Georgian journals is limited to those published in Russian with one exception of an Azeri almanac *Adabi Ermanistan* published in Yerevan in eight volumes between 1957 and 1967. In terms of the bard's poems, the thesis relies on Dowsett's transliterated version where possible as well as Azeri publications that are stylistically closer to the original compared to the Russian ones.<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> Dowsett's book does not provide a comprehensive list of the bard's verses since the scholar partially quotes poems in order to support his arguments.

## The Birth of the Author: From an *Ashiq* to an (Inter)national Poet

### 1.1. Sayat-Nova Within the *Ashiq* Tradition

*Ashiq* art can be approached as an *autochthonous tradition* with shared conventions and specific rules of inclusion and exclusion, which a historian can, to a large extent, take for granted.<sup>17</sup> It is “associated with a composite performing art, a unity of narration and song to instrumental accompaniment with the appropriate use of gesture.”<sup>18</sup> Despite historical and regional variations in some practices, both performative aspects and poetic conventions of *ashiq* art allow us to assume its unity as a self-defined tradition. Those conventions defined the boundaries of what can be uttered by individual bards including Sayat-Nova. Therefore, the analysis of Sayat-Nova’s oeuvre is bound to focus on his poems as a way of looking for conformities to and deviations from the common rules of *ashiq* poetry.

To become a qualified *ashiq*, one had to learn the *ashiq* language through an apprenticeship which involved memorizing the stories (*hikaye*) and lyrical songs, and learning to play instruments.<sup>19</sup> Saussure’s metaphor of “apprenticeship through which an individual learns the functioning of language”<sup>20</sup> comes in handy to explain the stage of apprenticeship in the *ashiq* tradition since the preexisting rules of *ashiq* language were passed down from masters to disciples without the “anxiety of influence”<sup>21</sup> on the part of the latter. The apprentice’s success rested in his ability to assimilate the prosodies and tropes of *ashiq* poetry striving to achieve the mastery of the

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<sup>17</sup> Conal Condren’s division of *autochthonous* and *synthetic traditions* is used to distinguish self-defined traditions from the ones constructed by a historian’s post-factum speculation. Conal Condren, “Political Theory and the Faith in a Tradition of Classical Texts,” in *The Status and Appraisal of Classic Texts: An Essay on Political Theory, Its Inheritance, and the History of Ideas* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1985), 65.

<sup>18</sup> Xi Yang, 41.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, 64.

<sup>20</sup> Ferdinand de Saussure, “Object of Linguistics,” in *Course in general linguistics* trans. Wade Buskin (New York: Philosophical Library, 1959), 14.

<sup>21</sup> “Anxiety of influence” refers to the struggle of poets to surpass their strong precursors. Harold Bloom, *The Anxiety of Influence: A Theory of Poetry* 2nd ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), 57-58.



bardic language rather than to challenge it. After a period of study, the newcomers would begin performing existing songs of the master or other popular *ashiqs*.<sup>22</sup> The transition to masterhood was granted following an examination where the disciples had to showcase their knowledge and performing skills.<sup>23</sup> Following successful graduation, they could finally go about performing without supervision, composing verses and teaching apprentices.<sup>24</sup> Not all bards ended up writing new poems. Some of them composed their own verses while others only performed the songs of previous *ashiqs*.

The conditions of Sayat-Nova's training are unknown, but his pseudo-autobiographical poem has led to different hypotheses among scholars. Although the poem might provide clues about the rituals of the *ashiq* enterprise in the 18<sup>th</sup> century, it cannot be relied upon as an accurate chronology of the poet's ascend to the level of a master. From what we know about Sayat-Nova, his *ashiq* activities were not limited to performing as he composed rhymed songs as well. Some of the melodies of his Armenian poems survived through oral transmission and were notated at different times in the Soviet Union but it is not possible to establish their authenticity due to the improvisational nature of *ashiq* music. Some Armenian musicologists have claimed that the tunes were likely composed by the bard himself as they "bear common stylistic characters"<sup>25</sup> which does not rule out the possibility that they belong to someone else. *Ashiqs* were more likely to use well-known *ashiq* motifs and *maqams* to accompany the verses. In fact, Sayat-Nova indicated the air (*hava*) in which his poems should be sung by referring to certain *ashiq* Dosti<sup>26</sup> and an Ottoman *maqam* in his remarks on the *davtar*.<sup>27</sup>

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<sup>22</sup> Xi Yang, 65.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid., 66.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid., 65.

<sup>25</sup> Hasmig Injejikian, "Sayat Nova and Armenian 'ashoogh' musical tradition" (PhD diss., McGill University, 1990), 22-23.

<sup>26</sup> The "national identity" of *ashiq* Dosti was contested by Soviet Armenian and Azerbaijani scholars.

<sup>27</sup> Charles Dowsett, 286-287.

As the main locus of *ashiq* tradition, performance needs special attention. *Ashiq* songs were composed either for or during performances. In both cases, the bards adhered to specific conventions composing or improvising within the range of rules they internalized during the careful study of the art. Contests constituted a crucial element of the bardic performances. Following specific rituals, they functioned both as a rite of passage for beginners and a form of entertainment. During competitions, the bards had to improvise responding to challenging riddles and questions posed by their rivals. They used various strategies to win the contest, boasting about their own achievements and belittling the opponent. Some of Sayat-Nova's songs in which he praised himself and those demonstrating the command of heavily formal techniques, e.g. puns, homonymy (*jinas*), alliteration and *dodagdeymez*<sup>28</sup> were likely composed in such contests.<sup>29</sup> In some cases, the use of those poetic devices could come at the expense of content while proving the level of mastery the *ashiq* had reached.

Since the scholarship on *ashiqs* emerged only in the 19<sup>th</sup> century and the documentary sources attesting to their lives are rare, attempts to reconstruct the development of the 16-18<sup>th</sup> *ashiq* tradition are generally based on either the existing scholarship or the bards' extant songs and *shairname*, a specific genre in which the *ashiqs* paid homage to their local predecessors. It is commonly accepted that the *ashiq* tradition established itself in the 16th century with its centre in Tabriz, Iranian Azerbaijan. There are several hypotheses as to where it originated from. Some scholars trace its origins back to the Central Asian epic traditions while others prefer to contextualize it within the Near Eastern bardic traditions as the thematic and performative

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<sup>28</sup> It can be literally translated as "lips don't touch". This poetic device required to avoid labial sounds (m, b, p, v, f) throughout the poem. For the sake of convenience, the author uses the Azeri version of the terms related to versification. Maharram Gasimli and Mahmud Allahmanli, *Ashiq Sheirinin Poetik Bichimlari va Cheshidlari* (Baku: Elm ve Tehsil, 2018), 95.

<sup>29</sup> Xi Yang, 94-95.

conventions of *ashiq* tradition differ from those of mainly heroic Kazakh and Kyrgyz *aqyns*.<sup>30</sup> Furthermore, the Near Eastern context takes into consideration the diversity of the *ashiq* performers that stretched from the Caucasus and Northern Iran to Anatolia, instead of essentializing it as a Turkic tradition. Mostly practiced in the dialects of Oghuz Turks, *ashiq* art was also widespread among Alevis and Armenians.

The 18<sup>th</sup> century is considered to be the “golden age” of Armenian bards whose main performance centers were multicultural cities like Constantinople, Isfahan and Tbilisi. The latter was likely the place where Sayat-Nova learned the *ashiq* craft.<sup>31</sup> The period was characterized by the increasing influence of Persian high literature on *ashiq* poetry. This tendency manifested itself in Sayat-Nova’s poetry through intertextual references to the protagonists of classical poems such as *Leili and Mejnun*, *Farhad and Shirin* and *Shahnameh* as well as the employment of its tropes. Among distinguished features of the 18<sup>th</sup>-century Armenian *ashiqs* were the extant multilingual oeuvre and the relatively high number of written records they left behind as a result of their affinity with the Armenian church.

The number of Sayat-Nova’s poems that survived the challenges of time is impressive. Furthermore, his oeuvre contains a high number of Azeri verses unparalleled among other Armenian *ashiqs*. There are two manuscripts of the bard’s songs. The first one (*davtar*) dates back to the mid-18<sup>th</sup> century and was likely scripted by the poet himself. Keeping notebooks was a common practice among more literate *ashiqs*. They were mostly used for writing down rhymed songs while longer narrative poems were passed down orally from the master to his disciple.<sup>32</sup>

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<sup>30</sup> The main theme of *ashiq* poems is love as the etymology of the word suggests. *Ashiq* means “lover” in Arabic. Furthermore, *ashiq* performances involved narrative storytelling absent in Central Asian *aqyn*. Xi Yang, 44-45.

<sup>31</sup> The place of Sayat-Nova’s birth and *ashiq* activities is not definitive because the main source of such hypotheses is his songs.

<sup>32</sup> Xi Yang, 87.

Sayat-Nova's *davtar* is unique because it occasionally indicates the recital dates of poems according to the chronicon.<sup>33</sup> The second manuscript that includes the Georgian poems non-existent in the former was written by his younger son Ioane in the early 19<sup>th</sup> century. There are also two colophons of ecclesiastics copied by the then monk Sayat-Nova (Stepanos)<sup>34</sup> that include his autobiographical notes.<sup>35</sup>

Sayat-Nova composed his verses using the common prosodies and tropes of *ashiq* poetry. Even in his most masterful poems, he never ceases to conform to the latter's conventional boundaries. Inventive features that distinguished Sayat-Nova's poetry from his Armenian "predecessors" included the "use of diverse prosodies, creation of composite prosodies, adoption of foreign words to render the songs more melodic and, occasional employment of feminine and masculine rhymes in succession."<sup>36</sup> The *ashiq* tended to write his poems in the *mukhammas*<sup>37</sup> prosody with long lines whereas the frequency and elaboration of his metaphors were above average. However, the distinctive features of his poems did not challenge the limits of *ashiq* poetry. Originality in the bard's case was less of a breakthrough and more of a masterful rearrangement. He managed to enrich the bardic poetry by reassembling the existing conventions offered by the *ashiq* language.

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<sup>33</sup> Charles Dowsett, 22.

<sup>34</sup> After being expelled from the Georgian court, Sayat-Nova serves as a married parish monk and changed his baptismal name Arutiun to Stepanos.

<sup>35</sup> Charles Dowsett, 25.

<sup>36</sup> Xi Yang, 145-146.

<sup>37</sup> *Mukhammas* (quintain) is a poem containing 5-line stanzas with 16 syllables per line. Sayat-Nova introduced the prosody to Armenian and Georgian poetry. Xi Yang, 106.

## 1.2. National Poet in the Making (1800-1917)

It is difficult to gauge the bard's popularity until the advent of "print capitalism" in the Caucasus. Considering that "*ashiqs*' fame was ephemeral and usually small-scale prior to the arrival of modern technologies in the region it might be regarded as a remarkable achievement for Sayat-Nova's legacy to survive through oral transmission even before his manuscript was discovered."<sup>38</sup> In the early 19<sup>th</sup> century, he was mentioned in the semi-fictional encyclopedia of Georgian prince and writer Ioane Botanishvili called *Kalmasoba*. The prince also commissioned the manuscript written by the poet's son Ioane (Ivan Seidov) in Saint Peterburg in 1823. Apart from these two texts discovered later by Sayat-Nova enthusiasts, oral transmission was the only way through which the poet was known among the common people following his death.

The nationalization of Sayat-Nova began already in the second half of the 19th century with the emergence of the Armenian intelligentsia in Tbilisi. The economic life of Tbilisi had long been dominated by Armenian merchants, while local Georgians relied on the "traditional model of landed nobility."<sup>39</sup> The tsarist liberal reforms in the 1860s further strengthened the position of the Armenian bourgeoisie in the city.<sup>40</sup> The liberal nationalism despite having limited social support was particularly popular among Armenian intellectuals who gathered around the newspaper *Mshak* (Cultivator) established by Armenian publicist Grigor Artsruni.<sup>41</sup> Characterised with the return to the common people and growing interest in the folk tradition, the nationalist aspirations were brought to Tbilisi by Armenian intellectuals who received Russian or European education.

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<sup>38</sup> Xi Yang, 122.

<sup>39</sup> Ronald Grigor Suny, "The Emergence of Political Society in Georgia," in *Transcaucasia, Nationalism, and Social Change: Essays in the History of Armenia, Azerbaijan, and Georgia* ed. Ronald Grigor Suny (Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 1996), 116.

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*, 119.

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid.*, 131.

Sayat-Nova's nationalization unfolded in an imperial setting from its inception and was underpinned by distancing him from the *ashiq* tradition. For instance, the first media account of the poet appeared in 1851 in the Russian-language newspaper *Kavkaz*<sup>42</sup> operating in Tbilisi. It was written by Russian poet Yakov Polonsky who distinguished "Sayat-Nova's lyrical and personal verse from the Eastern and Caucasian poetry."<sup>43</sup> According to Polonsky, the bard's poems "full of sincere emotions lacked the tinsel of the former and the antagonism of the latter."<sup>44</sup> Sayat-Nova's individuality was further emphasized in his depiction as a "tortured artist" misunderstood by his contemporaries.

Polonsky's account of Sayat-Nova was indirect which became a general pattern of the Russian encounter with the poet. He was informed about the *ashiq* by Armenian intellectual Gevorg Akhverdian who at the time was working on the bard's *davtar*. After graduating from Moscow University and working in Saint Peterburg, Akhverdian returned to Tbilisi where he became preoccupied with collecting the songs of Armenian *ashiqs*.<sup>45</sup> The scholar published Sayat-Nova's 46 Armenian poems in 1852 after obtaining the poet's manuscript from his grandson. Akhverdian built a foundation for later studies on Sayat-Nova as his book provided commentaries on the poems taking into account the specificities of the Tbilisi dialect of Armenian. He also had the privilege of collecting oral testimonies from the last generation who lived in the bard's times.

Following Akhverdian's discovery of Sayat-Nova, no major work appeared until the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. During this period, several Armenian and Georgian intellectuals wrote articles on Sayat-Nova and his poems were included in Armenian anthologies. A new wave of interest in the

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<sup>42</sup> *Kavkaz* was a literary-political newspaper aimed at familiarizing the Russian people with the Caucasian culture. At the time, Polonsky was sent to Tbilisi to serve in the chancellery of the Caucasus viceroy where he also published his poetry book called *Sazandar* dedicated to the peoples of the Caucasus.

<sup>43</sup> Yakov Polonsky, "Sayat-Nova," *Kavkaz* no. 2 (1851), 6.

<sup>44</sup> Ibid.

<sup>45</sup> B. Ovakimian, "Istoria pervogo izdania pesen Sayat-Novi," *Literaturnaia Armenia* no 10 (1963), 79-80.

bard emerged in the 1910s among the Armenian intellectuals in Tbilisi. In 1912, *Mshak* published an article by Armenian painter Gevorg Bashinjagian criticizing the neglect of Sayat-Nova's legacy and calling to erect a monument under the walls of the St. George church where the poet was allegedly murdered by the troops of Persian Agha Mohammad Shah Gajar. Another article appeared in the same newspaper by Armenian poet Hovanes Tumanian in support of Bashinjagian's appeal. It drew the attention of Armenian intelligentsia and living *ashiqs* of Tbilisi who joined the initiative of the society of Armenian writers that established a committee to organize the building of the memorial through donations and *ashiq* concerts dedicated to Sayat-Nova.<sup>46</sup> The inauguration of the monument took place on May 15, 1914. Built in the style of an Armenian cross-stone (*khachkar*), it was inscribed with a tristich from Sayat-Nova's entreaty poem to Georgian king Irakli II. The opening ceremony was accompanied by *ashiq* performances and people laying roses on the poet's tombstone which began the tradition of *Vardaton* (Feast of Roses) celebrated to this day.

Among the attendants of the ceremony was Georgian poet Joseph Grishashvili who, inspired by the event, decided to collect the bard's Georgian songs. As mentioned earlier, Sayat-Nova's manuscript consisted of only Armenian and Azeri poems while the "originals" of Georgian poems did not exist in a written form and could only be collected from the works of other *ashiqs*. The manuscript of Ioane found by Georgian linguist Nikolai Marr in Saint-Petersburg became another reference for Grishashvili's work published in 1918.

The construction of Armenian national literature went hand in hand with its display to other nations. The publication of the first Armenian anthology in Russian in 1916 which also included Sayat-Nova's poems served the same purpose. Edited by Russian symbolist poet Valery Briusov

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<sup>46</sup> S. Arutiunian, Z.G. *Bashinjagian: 30 let, otdannye Sayat-Nove* (Yerevan: Izdatelstvo Yerevanskogo Gosudarstvennogo Universiteta, 1963), 22-23.

and published with the support of the Armenian diaspora in Moscow, the anthology was organized based on artistic merits selecting the “great works” of each period which would familiarize the Russian readers with the best representatives of Armenian poetry.<sup>47</sup> The short introduction to Armenian literary history portrayed the continuous development of the national poetry from its simple to more sophisticated forms. In the pantheon of national poets and particularly among the Armenian *ashiqs*, Sayat-Nova was granted a special place thus deserving universal attention. The quote by Briusov that later traveled through the works of Soviet literary critics perfectly encapsulated such intertwining relationship between the national and the universal: “The genuine sublime was also created by the best *ashiqs*, whose epitome was the 18<sup>th</sup>-century poet Sayat-Nova, magnificent, protean, sensitive like Tiutchev and passionate like Musset: one of those first-class poets who through their genius cease to belong to a particular nation and become part of entire humanity.”<sup>48</sup> Validating the worth of Armenian national literature, Briusov called for its worldwide appreciation which was later partially realized with its inclusion in the Soviet multinational literature.

### 1.3. Sayat-Nova and Soviet Multinational Literature

While the prerevolutionary studies on Sayat-Nova played an important role in the poet’s canonization, they were primarily driven by the enthusiasm of Armenian and, to some degree, Georgian intellectuals. Soviet scholars usually emphasized that the bard received the public attention he deserved only after the establishment of the Soviet Union which was not far from being true. The nationalization orchestrated by the Soviet state definitively fixed Sayat-Nova’s

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<sup>47</sup> Valery Briusov, “Zadachi Izdaniia,” in *Poeziia Armenii s drevneishikh vremen do nashikh dnei* [Armenian poetry from ancient times to present] (Moscow: Izdanie Moskovskogo Armianskogo Komiteta, 1916), 11-12.

<sup>48</sup> Valery Briusev, “Ot redaktora,” 7.



place in the Armenian pantheon. However, it did not happen immediately after the Bolsheviks came to power. According to the Soviet sources, Bashinjagian continued to organize evenings dedicated to Sayat-Nova accompanied by *ashiq* competitions in the early 1920s.<sup>49</sup> Such events are reported to take place after the painter's death as well.<sup>50</sup> Yet, such sporadic attempts were not representative of the poet's status in the early Soviet period when there was no significant attempt to popularize him either in or outside Armenia.

During the NEP years (1921-1928), the Soviet nationality policy focused more on promoting the languages and elites of the non-Russian nationalities in order to redress the ethnic grievances caused by the great Russian chauvinism whereas the contemporary revolutionary literature was at the center of attention instead of the classics. In the early 1930s, the trajectory of Soviet nationality policy began to steer away from its initial "affirmative action" direction to the reimagination of the Soviet Union as a multinational state.<sup>51</sup> In his meeting with Central Asian workers in 1935, Stalin declared the end of the mistrust between the Russian and non-Russian and introduced the term "friendship of the people" which became a catchphrase symbolizing the shift in the nationality policy underpinned by the rehabilitation of the Russian culture. The new policy was further legitimized by the adoption of the new constitution in 1936 which officially reified the national differences that were initially envisaged to be transitional. This shift manifested in the simultaneous promotion of the national cultures and the Soviet multinational literature through an impressive translation project and Union-wide celebrations (*dekadas* and jubilees). Each titular nation turned to the past to reconstruct a unique history of national literature and to define its canons. At the same time, the friendship discourse put the national cultures on a display for the

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<sup>49</sup> S. Arutiunian, 69-70.

<sup>50</sup> Mirali Seidov, *Pevets Narodov Zakavkazia* (Baku: Izdatelstvo Akademii nauk Azerbajjanskoi SSR, 1963), 69.

<sup>51</sup> Terry Martin, "The Friendship of the Peoples" in *The Affirmative Action Empire: Nations and Nationalism in the Soviet Union, 1923-1939* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 2001), 432.

mutual gaze and praise of the fellow Soviet people. With the shift to primordialism, the national and the international became intertwined and reinforced one another.

On an institutional level, the transition manifested in the establishment of the Union of Soviet Writers to celebrate Soviet multinational literature as well as to assert state control over literature. In the First Congress of Soviet Writers that inaugurated the process, the major nationalities of Transcaucasia and Central Asia presented the development of their national literature tracing its origins back to antiquity. Among the nationalities, the Georgian representative M. Toroshelidze delivered the lengthiest speech elaborating on the monumentality of the 12<sup>th</sup>-century Georgian poet Shota Rustaveli's *The Knight in the Panther's Skin* claiming its superiority to Dante's *Divine Comedy* explained by "the lack of the elements of Christian ideology in the former."<sup>52</sup> The speeches by Armenian and Azerbaijani delegates were relatively modest compared to their Georgian counterpart but demonstrated the same ambition to prove the historical depth of their national literature.

Sayat-Nova was included in the accounts of both Armenian and Georgian representatives as part of their 18<sup>th</sup>-century literary tradition while the Azerbaijani delegate to the Congress did not mention the bard in his speech. According to Toreshelidze, "being ethnically Armenian but connected to Georgia in terms of culture, language, and the place of activity (Tbilisi) and at the same time, having adopted the motifs of Eastern folk music, Sayat-Nova is an international poet of the Caucasus."<sup>53</sup> The cultural belonging of the poet to Georgia was later reaffirmed by the inclusion of his poems in the Georgian anthology published in Russian in 1948.<sup>54</sup> On the other hand, the Armenian delegate D.A. Simonian capitalized on the bard's ethnic identity. He also

<sup>52</sup> *Pervyi vsesoiuznii sezd sovetskikh pisatelei: Stenograficheskii otchet* [First Congress of Soviet Writers: Stenographical report] (Moscow: Khudozhestvennaia literatura, 1934), 77.

<sup>53</sup> *Ibid.*, 81.

<sup>54</sup> "Antologiiia Gruzinskoi poezii," *Literaturnaia Gazeta* no. 54 (1948), 1.

characterized the 19<sup>th</sup>-century Armenian *ashiq* Jivani as contrived and lofty as opposed to Sayat-Nova's simplicity and authenticity.<sup>55</sup>

Along with union-wide translations, The Soviet multinational literature was enacted through the jubilees of national poets or epics when the author of a literary work could not be established. The 1930s and 40s experienced a boom in jubilees following the All-Union Pushkin Centennial in 1937 which set the precedence for later jubilees. It indicated the start of a new phase in Soviet history which finally allowed the Russian to come forth embracing their national culture. As Yuri Slezkine maintained, Pushkin was “celebrated as a great Russian, not a great revolutionary.”<sup>56</sup> However, the all-Union commemoration of a Russian poet also encouraged the non-Russian nationalities to initiate the jubilees of their own national poets “where they stood alongside Pushkin, as well as cultural representatives of non-Soviet nations, as part of an international canon” which “served to keep Soviet Russocentrism in check.”<sup>57</sup>

The first nationality to leverage the opportunities opened by the Pushkin Centennial was Georgia. The country celebrated the 750<sup>th</sup> anniversary of its national poet Rustaveli in late 1937, shortly after the Pushkin celebrations commenced. Since the tumultuous years of the Revolution, the Georgian diaspora managed to successfully navigate the Soviet multinational empire because of their “familiar strangeness”.<sup>58</sup> In this regard, Stalin's support for Georgian culture played an important role in the canonization of Rustaveli. His already highly appraised *The Knight in the*

<sup>55</sup> *Pervyi vsesoiuznii sezd sovetskikh pisatelei: Stenograficheskii otchet*, 106.

<sup>56</sup> Yuri Slezkine, “The USSR as a Communal Apartment, or How a Socialist State Promoted Ethnic Particularism,” *Slavic Review* 53, no. 2 (1994): 443.

<sup>57</sup> Isabelle Ruth Kaplan, “The Art of Nation-building: National Culture and Soviet Politics in Stalin-era Azerbaijan and Other Minority Republics” (PhD diss., Georgetown University, 2017), 225, <http://hdl.handle.net/10822/1047813> (Accessed June 6, 2022).

<sup>58</sup> According to Eric R. Scott, while some nationalities were too familiar (Slavs) or too strange (Central Asians) to the host (Soviet) culture, Georgians had the privilege of being familiar and strange at once since they were eager to integrate to the Soviet empire while possessing distinctive ethnic features. Eric R. Scott, *Familiar Strangers: The Georgian Diaspora and the Evolution of Soviet Empire* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016), 28-29.

*Panther's Skin* became “even more central to Georgian national mythology after Rustaveli was placed alongside Pushkin in the pantheon of Soviet high culture with Stalin’s endorsement.”<sup>59</sup>

The Georgian celebrations also inspired Soviet Azerbaijan to launch a jubilee initiative for its recently appointed national poet Nizami Ganjavi highlighting the poet’s personification of the Azerbaijani cultural synthesis of the East and West.<sup>60</sup> Since it was vital to emphasize the ancientness of the national literature, the fact that Nizami composed his poems in Persian did not prevent Azerbaijani intellectuals from claiming him. In the case of Soviet Armenia which boasted the antiquity of its literature in the First Congress, it was not a national poet but a folk epic that was designated as a principal poetic representative. The epic *David of Sassoun* had almost 60 versions that were transformed into a uniform text before its purported 1000<sup>th</sup> anniversary in 1939.<sup>61</sup> Overall, the nationalization of Rustaveli, *David of Sassoun* and Nizami went along with minimizing the Persianate context of the region’s poetry, especially in the Armenian and Georgian cases.<sup>62</sup> The jubilees were also underpinned by monumentalizing the poets or epics that embedded them into the material culture of a respective nationality.<sup>63</sup>

In 1935, an article by Georgian poet Titsian Tabidze in *Literaturnaia Gazeta* drew attention to the internationalism in Sayat-Nova’s oeuvre calling for complete publication of his poems in all three Transcaucasian languages as well as their translation to other Soviet languages.”<sup>64</sup> By that time, the bard’s published Armenian and Georgian songs had been dispersed in various books and

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<sup>59</sup> Ibid., 77.

<sup>60</sup> Isabelle Ruth Kaplan, 270.

<sup>61</sup> Dickran Kouymjian, “The History and Enigma of the Armenian Epic,” in *David of Sassoun: Critical Studies on the Armenian Epic* (Fresno: Press at California State University, 2013), 3.

<sup>62</sup> Nina G. Garsoïan, “Iran and Caucasia,” in *Transcaucasia, Nationalism, and Social Change: Essays in the History of Armenia, Azerbaijan, and Georgia* ed. Ronald Grigor Suny (Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 1996), 20-21.

<sup>63</sup> Sergei Rumianstev, “Sovetskaia natsionalnaia politika v Zakavkazie: konstruirovaniie natsionalnykh granits, istorii i kultur,” *Neprikosnovennyi zapas*, no. 4 (2011), <https://magazines.gorky.media/nz/2011/4/sovetskaya-natsionalnaya-politika-v-zakavkaze-konstruirovaniie-natsionalnyh-granicz-istorij-i-kultur.html> (Accessed March 30, 2022).

<sup>64</sup> Titsian Tabidze, “Sayat-Nova,” *Literaturnaia Gazeta* no. 16 (1935), 2.

anthologies whereas his Azeri verses remained unstudied. It was not until 1945 when Soviet Armenia was celebrating the 150th anniversary of the poet's death that the complete collection by Armenian philologist Morus Hasratian was published.<sup>65</sup> The jubilee year was also marked by the Russian translation of Sayat-Nova's poetry which, for the first time, included his Azeri songs. The 1945 jubilee was mainly celebrated in Soviet Armenia while the Union of Georgian Writers also established a jubilee committee to commemorate the poet. In Soviet Azerbaijan, the translations of few Armenian songs of the poet and articles on him were published in the main literary periodicals. Also, Azerbaijani literary critic Hamid Arasli participated and gave a speech in a meeting dedicated to the bard together with Grishahvili. Nonetheless, there was not a noticeable effort to commemorate Sayat-Nova in Azerbaijan.

#### **1.4. The Thaw as a Decisive Moment in the Poet's Canonization**

The Thaw was a unique moment in the "double assimilation" of Sayat-Nova. Many aspects of the poet's representation in the post-war era were continuous with the Stalinist nationality policy which strengthened his role as an Armenian national poet and the symbol of the Transcaucasian friendship. However, these two facets accelerated during the Thaw. The process reached its climax with the 250<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the poet's birth which took place in October 1963. Organized upon the decision of the World Peace Council,<sup>66</sup> the jubilee was celebrated on an unparalleled scale,

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<sup>65</sup> Along with being the first comprehensive publication of Sayat-Nova's poetry, the book also provided the translations of the Azerbaijani and Georgian poems into the Tbilisi Armenian dialect with a thorough explanation. Xi Yang, 16.

<sup>66</sup> Established in the late 1940s, the World Peace Council was a leading organization of the world peace movement and had close ties with the Soviet Union. The name of the organization was also involved in the jubilees of other Soviet poets and writers. From the Writers' Union documents concerning the jubilee preparations, it seems more likely that the WPC's decision to celebrate Sayat-Nova's anniversary was suggested by the Soviet Peace Committee. RGALI 631/42/274/49.

especially in the Transcaucasian republics and Moscow.<sup>67</sup> The celebrations involved a wide range of events such as publications, academic conferences, concerts, and exhibitions, some of which were attended by international guests.<sup>68</sup> Along with seizing upon Sayat-Nova's internationalist potential, the 1963 commemorations further embedded the bard in Soviet Armenia by creating his *lieu de mémoire* in Yerevan. It included the building of his monument and naming one of Yerevan's central streets after him. In Tbilisi, the tradition of *Vardaton* was restored with the demonstration at the poet's tombstone visited by Armenian, Azerbaijani and Georgian representatives and followed by a concert.

We can loosely apply the concept of "eventfulness" proposed by Denis Kozlov and Eleonory Gilburd to explicate the Thaw-era boom in the Sayat-Nova studies and his celebration. This approach views the Thaw as a unique moment in Soviet history that gave rise to "new trends of thought, patterns of behavior, material life, and language."<sup>69</sup> However, although the upsurge in the celebrations of Sayat-Nova was an exceptional phenomenon, it did not outlive the Thaw. This rise in the bard's popularity coincided with the revival of Soviet internationalism which manifested in "the opening of cultural exchange between the Soviet Union and the West"<sup>70</sup> and the Soviet attempt to spearhead the Third-Worldist movement through the representatives of non-Russian nationalities.<sup>71</sup>

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<sup>67</sup> The Soviet press claimed that the poet was celebrated all over the world. While the author of this thesis could not verify the accuracy of such exaggerated claims, one particular evening was reported to take place in Prague where Czech artists recited the bard's poems translated into the Czech language. "Na iazikakh narodov mira," *Zaria Vostoka* no. 253 (27 October 1963), 3.

<sup>68</sup> John Steinbeck attended a theatrical evening dedicated to Sayat-Nova in Yerevan during his visit to the Soviet Union in 1963. Interestingly, the writer did not discuss his experience in Soviet Armenia in *A Russian Journal* which detailed the journey. Peter Bridges, "A Note on Steinbeck's 1963 Visit to the Soviet Union," *Steinbeck Review* 4, no. 1 (2007), 84-85.

<sup>69</sup> Eleonory Gilburd and Denis Kozlov, "The Thaw as an Event in Russian History," in *The Thaw: Soviet Society and Culture During the 1950s and 1960s* eds. Denis Kozlov and Eleonory Gilburd (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2013), 30-32.

<sup>70</sup> Eleonory Gilburd, "The Revival of Soviet Internationalism in the Mid to Late 1950s," 363.

<sup>71</sup> Misha Kirasirova, "'Sons of Muslims' in Moscow: Soviet Central Asian Mediators to the Foreign East, 1955-1962," *Ab Imperio* 4 (2011): 113.

While the earlier interpretations highlighted Sayat-Nova's "internationalist" character, it was fully exploited only during the Thaw. The main indicator of this brief development was the emergence of Azerbaijani scholarship on the poet. The first monograph on Sayat-Nova in Soviet Azerbaijan was only published in 1954. *Xalqlar Dostlugunun Mugennisi* (The Singer of the People's Friendship) by philologist Mirali Seidov provided a relatively comprehensive analysis of the bard's life and poetry while also pointing out the "misreadings" of the previous scholarship.<sup>72</sup> In the same year, the main publishing house of Soviet Azerbaijan *Azarnashr* published *The Anthology of Armenian Poetry* which included the translation of 10 Armenian poems of the bard. Finally, the first more or less comprehensive collection of Sayat-Nova's poems in all three languages edited by Hamid Arasli appeared during the 1963 celebrations.

The early 1960s also marked an increase in the celebrations of the Transcaucasian friendship. Numerous cultural events ranging from the week of the Transcaucasian literature to the Transcaucasian cinema and music festival and mutual TV program "Dostlug Jarchisi" (The Friendship Herald) were accompanied by an institutional attempt to revitalize the regional identification. In 1963, the Central Committee adopted a resolution on the establishment of the Transcaucasian Bureau (*Zakbiuro*, 1963-1964) which functioned as an intermediary structure between the center and the Transcaucasian republics with its headquarters in Tbilisi.<sup>73</sup> Its main goal was to coordinate the economic activities of Soviet Armenia, Azerbaijan and Georgia in order to achieve the targets laid out in the 22<sup>nd</sup> Party Congress.<sup>74</sup>

Despite its short existence, *Zakbiuro* represented a revival in the regionally-based organization characteristic of Transcaucasia before high Stalinism. Contrary to the common

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<sup>72</sup> The book was later republished in Russian in 1963 on the eve of the poet's 250th anniversary.

<sup>73</sup> RGANI 3/18/132/6-8.

<sup>74</sup> Ibid.

assumption in the studies of Soviet nationality policy, “federalism was integral to building power relations, and was part of a conscious effort to create intermediary political buffers and “redundancies” that partially replaced top down authority by horizontal controls and checks, making Bolshevik power more palatable.”<sup>75</sup> The establishment of the Transcaucasian Federal Socialist Republic (ZSFSR) in 1922 served the same purpose by giving more autonomy to the federation’s members not only in resolving ethnic conflicts but also in championing the economic interests of the region.<sup>76</sup> There was also serious efforts to mold a Transcaucasian identification which did not persist as the revolutionary internationalism of the early Soviet period gave way to Stalinist primordialism. ZSFSR was dissolved in 1936 with the adoption of the new Constitution which intensified the process of ethnic homogenization in the titular republics.

The Thaw-era capitalization on the Transcaucasian friendship bore the elements of the Stalinist nationality policy because the friendship among the peoples presupposed their reification. A collection of articles *Iz Istorii Literatur Narodov Zakavkaze* (From the Literary History of the Transcaucasian people) published in Yerevan in 1961 was illustrative of such an attitude. Celebrating the Transcaucasian friendship in the literary sphere, the book consisted of independent articles about the literary canons of Armenia, Azerbaijan and Georgia without trying to connect them. In his review in *Voprosi Literaturi*, Azeri literary critic Aziz Sharif criticized the national framework of the volume pointing out the lack of effort to compare and relate the works of the Transcaucasian poets while the analogies to Russian and Western European literature were abundant in the analyses of the prerevolutionary literature.<sup>77</sup>

<sup>75</sup> Etienne Peyrat, “Soviet Federalism at Work: Lessons from the History of the Transcaucasian Federation, 1922–1936,” *Jahrbücher für Geschichte Osteuropas* 65, no. 4, (2017), 532, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/44646088> (Accessed December 9, 2021).

<sup>76</sup> Ibid., 532-539.

<sup>77</sup> Aziz Sharif, “Stranitsi istorii literatur narodov Zakavkazia,” *Voprosi Literaturi* no. 2 (1962), 198-203.



When the connections were built between national literatures, they still took the national identity as a given. The revisionist histories of the Soviet peoples retroactively projected the idea of friendship into their distant past.<sup>78</sup> This kind of interpretation which assumed the perennial nature of Soviet nationalities transferred the present state of friendship and enmity to the 18<sup>th</sup> century Caucasus in which Sayat-Nova lived. The poet became the epitome of the friendship between the Armenian, Azeri and Georgian people while symbolizing their struggle against the Persian and Ottoman imperial powers. The bard's multilingual corpus proved particularly useful in conveying such a narrative. The Azeri and Georgian songs showed his high regard for and familiarity with the Azeri and Georgian people and their literature. Since the *ashiq* poetry was nationalized and institutionalized in Soviet Azerbaijan,<sup>79</sup> Sayat-Nova's poems were interpreted as a sign of his familiarity with Azerbaijani literature. From this point of view, the literary histories of Armenia, Azerbaijan and Georgia represented independent temporal dimensions that occasionally came into contact while maintaining their own pace of development and integrity.

Soviet interpreters treated any form of cultural fusion and intertextuality in Sayat-Nova's poetry through the language of influence. The poet extensively alluded to the Persian poetic themes to express the power of his love.<sup>80</sup> He frequently referred to himself and his beloved as the protagonists of Persian love stories *Leili and Majnun* and *Farhad and Shirin*. The motifs of these popular stories were adapted by different poets in the Persianate literary sphere including Nizami Ganjavi who was canonized as an Azerbaijani national poet. It led to the hypotheses about Nizami's influence on Sayat-Nova showcasing the literary relation between Armenia and

<sup>78</sup> Lowell Tillett, *The Great Friendship: Soviet Historians on the Non-Russian Nationalities* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1969), 4.

<sup>79</sup> Anna Oldfield, "Reimagining the Caucasus: Music and Community in the Azerbaijani *Aşıq* Tradition," in *The Globalization of Musics in Transit: Music Migration and Tourism* eds. Simone Krüger and Ruxandra Trandafoiu (New York: Routledge, 2013), 233.

<sup>80</sup> While Persian high literature exerted much influence on *ashiq* poetry, it is unlikely that the bard had direct knowledge about its conventions considering the generally humble background of *ashiqs*. Xi Yang, 236-237.

Azerbaijan. Such arguments were usually presented in a form of conjecture rather than a historical fact. The authors themselves acknowledged the impossibility of verifying their claims. For instance, in his book on the literary relations between Armenian and Azerbaijani people, Gurgen Antonian concluded that Sayat-Nova was influenced by Nizami, albeit indirectly through folk literature.<sup>81</sup>

Another example of the influence hypotheses was the poet's relationship with his Azeri contemporaries. Arasli proposed that Sayat-Nova might have met the 18<sup>th</sup>-century Azeri poets Molla Panah Vagif and Molla Vali Vidadi because the former was believed to visit Tbilisi once and the latter was supposedly a minstrel at the court of Irakli II.<sup>82</sup> Unlike Sayat-Nova, Vagif and Vidadi were the representatives of classical poetry while also using the *ashiq* prosodies. Therefore, their poetry exhibits similar tropes to that of Sayat-Nova including complaints about the transience and unfairness of life. All of them conformed to the cliché of a national poet whose poetry gained a pessimistic tone at an older age after facing the adversities of life. It translated into the Soviet "language" as a realization of the hypocrisy of the ruling class and eventual contempt towards them disguised in the poets' despair. According to Arasli, this commonality between Sayat-Nova and the two Azeri poets could indicate, if not prove, their influence on each other as well as their acquaintance.

An indispensable dimension of the friendship narrative was the portrayal of Russians as a savior of the Transcaucasian people. Not only did Soviet historians emphasize the role of the Bolsheviks in the latter's liberation but they also expanded it to the prerevolutionary period depicting the Russian Empire in a positive light. The Russian annexation of the Caucasus came to be associated with the progressive development of the region. It brought peace and stability to the

<sup>81</sup> Gurgen Antonian, *Ermani ve Azerbaijan xalqlarının adabi alagasi* (Baku: Azarnashr, 1955), 24-25.

<sup>82</sup> Hamid Arasli, "Dostlug mugennisi," in *Sayat-Nova* (Baku: Azerneshr, 1963), 7.

peoples struggling against the Persian and Turkic imperialism and paved the way for the Bolshevik Revolution which finally set them free.<sup>83</sup> The territorial conquests were justified because the non-Russian people saw a better prospect of joining the Russian Empire.<sup>84</sup> There was an attempt to connect Sayat-Nova to Russia through a legend recounted to Akhverdian. According to the legend, upon hearing about the approaching Persian threat, the poet immediately came to Tbilisi to send his children to Mozdok, the North Caucasian city then already part of the Russian empire. The legend served to contrast the violence of the Persian imperial forces to the “civilizing” Russian empire demonstrating the trust the poet had for the latter. Moreover, the “discovery” of the bard by prerevolutionary Russian poets such as Polonsky and Briusov was unanimously mentioned by Soviet scholars not only to prove the value of the bard’s poetry but also to appreciate the Russian leading role in safeguarding the poet’s legacy.

### 1.5. Sayat-Nova Within the Armenian Literary Canon

The living *ashiqs* of the Stalin-era became the agents of the state propaganda as the panegyric form of bardic songs did not discriminate between the objects of praise. Whether it was the beauty of a woman, the majesty of a king or the accomplishments of the Soviet Union, glorification was an integral part of *ashiq* poetry whose sophistication determined the level of the bards’ mastery. Together with the lack of authorial voice among the *ashiqs*, which Evgeny Dobrenko called the “death of the author”, this tendency rendered them ideal subjects for Stalin to assert his pervasive authorship through the eulogies dedicated to his personality and the Party line.<sup>85</sup> When it came to

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<sup>83</sup> Lowell Tillett, 14-17.

<sup>84</sup> Ibid.

<sup>85</sup> Evgeny Dobrenko, “Naideno v perevode: rozhdenie sovetsskoi mnogonatsionalnoi literatury iz smerti avtora” [Found in translation: The birth of Soviet multinational literature from the death of the author]. *Neprikosnovennyi Zapas* 4 (2011): 235-262, <https://magazines.gorky.media/nz/2011/4/najdeno-v-perevode-rozhdenie-sovetsskoj-mnogonatsionalnoj-literatury-iz-smerti-avtora.html> (Accessed March 30, 2022).

the nationalization of the past *ashiq*, the process was reverse: it led to the birth of Sayat-Nova (the Author) as a member of the *synthetic tradition* of Armenian literature.<sup>86</sup> The Author bard was to represent the Armenian literature whose membership was not measured by following the tradition but by contributing to its progress that kept the national narrative in motion. Sayat-Nova's nationalization came along with uprooting him from the *ashiq* tradition as a unique figure who stood out from all his predecessors and marked a new stage in the development of Armenian literature.

The bard was now situated in an imaginary conversation with the poets of both Western and Eastern Armenian origin. The bard's recontextualization was not concerned with the historical accuracy of such connections. It rather aimed at preserving "the thread of spiritual development of the nation"<sup>87</sup> to which Sayat-Nova contributed tremendously. In a rather poetic manner, Vazgen Mnatsakanian described the bequeathment of a "poetic sky covered with clouds" from the 10<sup>th</sup>-century Armenian poet Grigor Narekatsi and his successors to Sayat-Nova who "announced the spiritual renaissance of the Armenian nation."<sup>88</sup>

The Romantic ideal of the congruence between the literary and extraliterary persona of a poet was ascribed to Sayat-Nova rendering the *ashiq* an ultimate arbiter on the matters like the language of his songs and the forms of expression used in them. Present in the prerevolutionary depictions of the bard, this pattern was not a Soviet novelty but reached its apogee with the support of Soviet nationality policy. Although the *ashiq* tradition was not completely omitted from the literary analysis of Sayat-Nova, it was assigned secondary importance due to the emphasis on the bard's individuality. As an inspired nightingale, the poet chose to use certain *ashiq* prosodies and

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<sup>86</sup> Conal Condren, 65.

<sup>87</sup> Vazgen Mnatsakanian, "Velikii podvig poeta: K 250-letiiu so dnia rozhdeniia Sayat-Novi," *Druzhba Narodov* no. 10 (1963), 231.

<sup>88</sup> Ibid.

tropes but was never restrained by them. The nationalization of the *ashiq* also implied the revaluation of his linguistic competence by depicting him as being equally fluent not only in the languages of the Transcaucasian peoples but also in Persian and Arabic.

In the preface to the 1961 Russian publication of Sayat-Nova's poems, Armenian literary critic Suren Gaisarian argued that "although the poet used some prosodies of *ashiq* poetry, they bore the stamp of his individuality and his inspired mastery on them."<sup>89</sup> Similar to Briusov who talked about "the transformation of the craft of a folk singer into a higher poetic mission,"<sup>90</sup> Gaisarian maintained that Sayat-Nova liberated the *ashiq* poetry from its inferior elements: "He transformed the professional art of *ashiqs* – wandering folk singer-performers – into the level of virtuosity freeing it from the craftiness it suffered from and elevated it to the heights of genuine poetics. He was an *ashiq* and poet at the same time with explicit awareness of his destiny as an "inspired nightingale" – "the servant of the people"."<sup>91</sup> In another article, Gaisarian took his argument even further, claiming that the mastery of *ashiq* art was secondary to the poet's genius and the source of his inspiration was the constant state of being in love.<sup>92</sup>

The nationalization of Sayat-Nova as well as the construction of Armenian national literature was not a self-contained endeavor. The value of Armenian literature had to be recognized internationally for the national project to succeed. "As in the colonial and semicolonial world more generally," the commemoration of the bard was "not only an exercise in internal political consolidation and cultural homogenization; it was also an attempt to project an image outward to the world, declaring a nation's compatibility with and desire to join the new universalism of

<sup>89</sup> Suren Gaisarian, "Sayat-Nova," In *Stikhotvorenie* (Leningrad: Sovetski Pisatel, 1961), 50.

<sup>90</sup> Valery Briusov, 92.

<sup>91</sup> Suren Gaisarian, 5.

<sup>92</sup> Suren Gaisarian, "Sayat-Nova: Zametki o zhizni i tvorchestve velikogo armianskogo poeta," in *Literatura i isskustvo*, vol. 6, bk. 17 of *Novoe v zhizni, nauke, tekhnike* (Moscow: Znanie, 1963), 23.

modernity.”<sup>93</sup> The entanglement of the national with the international was present among the prerevolutionary intellectuals but the emergence of the Soviet friendship discourse opened a multinational, if not international, arena for the Armenian literature to be appreciated by other Soviet people.

The effort to showcase Sayat-Nova’s universal significance was particularly oriented toward Russian and Western attention. This tendency was manifest in the remarks of Tumanian after reading the Armenian anthology in Briusov’s translation: “Let our Russian brothers as well as those in the farthest lands finally know that “heavenly heights” were never alien to Armenian soul, that the Armenian genius was always floating in those high, divine and finest spheres too, although he himself – the Armenian – was bathing in blood like Sayat-Nova.”<sup>94</sup> The Soviet literary critics also tended to draw analogies to the Russian and European poets which served to demonstrate that Sayat-Nova was on par with them while Soviet media was eager to report any form of validating news from the Western countries. On the days of the poet’s 250<sup>th</sup> anniversary, *Literaturnaia Armeniia* published an article that meticulously listed the translations of Sayat-Nova’s poetry into European languages as well as scholarly references to him initiated mostly by the Western Armenian diaspora.<sup>95</sup> Although the author did not see any aesthetic value in those translations, he, nevertheless, thought they were important in terms of representing the bard’s poetry in different languages of the world.

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<sup>93</sup> Afshin Marashi, “Nation and Memory: Commemorations and the Construction of National Memory under Reza Shah,” in *Nationalizing Iran: Culture, Power, and the State, 1870-1940* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2008), 129.

<sup>94</sup> Vazgen Mnatsakanian, 234.

<sup>95</sup> Astero, “Sayat-Nova na iazikakh narodov Evropi,” *Literaturnaia Armeniia* no. 10 (1963), 89-92.

## Sovietizing Sayat-Nova: The Thaw-era Literary Criticism

Khrushchev's Secret Speech in 1956 opened Pandora's box which complicated the relationship between the Party and Soviet intellectuals for the rest of his administration. From then until the mid-60s, the Soviet literary sphere was underpinned by a back-and-forth movement between the Party's relative tolerance toward artistic freedom and the offensive against creative cadres necessitated by the desire to distance itself from the Stalin repressions and the fear of long-term repercussions of de-Stalinization.<sup>96</sup> The main protagonists of this tension were liberal intellectuals who demanded a 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 of public criticism and ostracization, the role of the Communist Party as an ultimate arbiter of the arts remained unquestionable.<sup>97</sup> The new Party Programme adopted in 1961 buttressed the "significance of the Communist Party as the leading and guiding force of Soviet society."<sup>98</sup> As Dina Spechler argued, the "permitted dissent"<sup>99</sup> of the Soviet artists and intellectuals operated within the system and helped the state oversee the public discourse without recourse to terror.

The changes in the political environment impacted the canonical status of Socialist Realism whose orthodoxy started to wane with the emergence of new genres during the Thaw.<sup>100</sup>

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<sup>96</sup> Priscilla Johnson, "The Politics of Soviet Culture, 1962-1964," In *Khrushchev and the Arts: The Politics of Soviet Culture, 1962-1964* ed. Priscilla Johnson and Leopold Labedz (Cambridge: M.I.T. Press, 1965), 1-89.

<sup>97</sup> There was an instance of the call for the abolishment of censorship by Alexander Solzhenitsyn supported by other Soviet writers during the Fourth Congress of the Union of Soviet Writers in 1967. However, this demand took place within the official literary institution controlled by the Party which reaffirmed that the right of ending censorship belonged to the Party.

<sup>98</sup> Alexander Titov, "The 1961 Party Programme and the fate of Khrushchev's reforms," in *Soviet State and Society Under Nikita Khrushchev* ed. Melanie Ilic and Jeremy Smith (London and New York: Routledge, 2009), 15-18.

<sup>99</sup> Dina R. Spechler, *Permitted dissent in the USSR: Novy mir and the Soviet regime* (New York: Praeger, 1982), xv-xxi.

<sup>100</sup> 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.

Nonetheless, the literary criticism did not break away with the principles of Socialist Realism functioning as “an educator of both the writer and the reader, and a branch of the system of censorship.”<sup>101</sup> This didactic function linked with the principle of *narodnost* (orientation toward the people) favored the simplicity and accessibility of a literary work to the common people. *Narodnost* served as a basis for attacks on formalism that was deemed one of the deviations from Socialist Realism due to its association with the capitalist world. Formalism in this context did not specifically refer to the same-titled Russian literary movement of the 1920s. It rather connoted any form of artistic novelty deemed ideologically dangerous. As Hans Günther argued, “the norms of the Soviet canon functioned above all as prohibitions, sealing off literature and the arts from hostile tendencies.”<sup>102</sup>

At the meetings the Party leaders held with the 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.<sup>103</sup> He denounced formalism and abstractionism as alien tendencies that did not fit the truth of Soviet life. The conservative cadres could not conceive of art outside the ideological context. Formalism which reflected a distorted picture of the world could not spring out of Soviet reality and any attempt to create such artwork was unavoidably contrived. Although the liberals championed diversity in literature they were still appealing to the same principles as their rivals since ironically, “they have been trained to regard social organization and political institutions as the source of all good and all

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<sup>101</sup> Hans Günther, “Soviet Literary Criticism and the Formulation of the Aesthetics of Socialist Realism,” 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), 91.

<sup>102</sup> Hans Günther, 105.

<sup>103</sup> Priscilla Johnson, 105-120, 137-147.



bad in human life.”<sup>104</sup> For them too, the aesthetic value of a literary work was an epiphenomenon of its ideological significance.<sup>105</sup>

## 2.1. The Homogenization of the Poet’s Image

The Sovietization of Sayat-Nova resolved the ambiguities concerning the poet’s identity and brought ideological clarity to his interpretations that it lacked in the interwar period when the scholarship on the bard was still dominated by the prerevolutionary intellectuals. One of the important aspects of this shift in the post-war period was the homogenization of the range of scholarly opinions that could be held about the poet. Until the early 1930s, the Armenian and Georgian scholarship on Sayat-Nova was relatively open-ended and plural. There was room for debating not only the national identity of the poet but also the plausibility of considering the *ashiq* art part of Armenian literature. For instance, in the third volume of his *History of the Armenians*,<sup>106</sup> Armenian historian Leo (Arakel Babakhanian) argued that “only inconsiderable part of *aşiq* art belonged to our [Armenian] literature as its major works were composed in the Turkic language and the Armenian dialects were poor in their poetic expressivity as opposed to the church language.”<sup>107</sup> In his monograph on Sayat-Nova, Seidov objected to Leo’s argument asserting that, even if written in Azerbaijani, the works of Armenian *ashiqs* should be regarded as belonging to Armenian literature. Referring to Akhverdian, he also argued that the progressive Armenian bards composed verses in foreign languages in order to avoid the persecution by the Apostolic church to

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<sup>104</sup> Dina Spechler, xix.

<sup>105</sup> Evgeny Dobrenko and Ilya Kalinin, 193.

<sup>106</sup> Although the historian’s work became the target of Soviet criticism because of the lack of ideological clarity, it still held an authoritative position in Armenia as it can be seen from its republication in the 1940s. *The Heritage of Armenian Literature: From the eighteenth century to modern times* vol. 3, ed. Agop Jack Hacikyan (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 2005), 508.

<sup>107</sup> Mirali Seidov, 44.

which they were regularly subjected.<sup>108</sup> Another alternative argument was made by Armeno-Georgian critic Levon Meliksetbek who, based on the questionable attribution of some of Sayat-Nova's Georgian poems, speculated that "he and certain Georgian poet Stepane Mkervali were one and the same person writing under two pennames."<sup>109</sup> This hypothesis was criticized by Meliksetbek's contemporaries, but the more adamant defense came from Armenian medievalist Paruir Muradian in 1963.<sup>110</sup>

The prerevolutionary scholars became subject to the Thaw-era criticism particularly due to the lack of ideological awareness in their interpretations. Gaisarian labeled the scholarship of the 1930s which proposed that the poet was commissioned by the ruling class and did not engage in political affairs as "vulgar anti-historicism."<sup>111</sup> Similarly, Seidov objected to Armenian literary historian Garegin Levonian's assertion that Sayat-Nova's poems "did not have an ideological impact on his contemporary readers"<sup>112</sup> and that being unpopular among the common people, the poet composed for his own pleasure "as if he lived beyond "time and space".<sup>113</sup> Another sensitive topic regarding the poet's life was his religious service at an older age which became unanimously explained as being forced by the external circumstances during the Thaw. The conjectures about the poet's voluntary seclusion and asceticism were excluded from the officially acceptable interpretations.

The reassessment of the previous studies on Sayat-Nova reflected the shift in the literary history and criticism characterized by increased uniformity of ideological reading. At the same

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<sup>108</sup> Ibid., 58.

<sup>109</sup> Charles Dowsett, 48-49.

<sup>110</sup> Ibid., 49-55.

<sup>111</sup> He did not specify the names but from his quotations, it is obvious that one of the scholars he attacked was Garegin Levonian, the first Armenian scholar to study the *ashiq* tradition and who was the son of the 19<sup>th</sup>-century Armenian bard Jivani. Suren Gaisarian, "Sayat-Nova," 9.

<sup>112</sup> Mirali Seidov, 62.

<sup>113</sup> Ibid., 94.

time, the authoritative language of the late Soviet era broke away from being “evaluated and calibrated against an independent external “canon” of Marxist-Leninist dogma, knowledge (or interpretation) of which was possessed by the “master” (Stalin), who stood outside discourse.”<sup>114</sup> As a result of this transition that originated in the late Stalinism, Marxist-Leninism lost its unambiguous extralinguistic power and the authoritative discourse became less based on subjective evaluation of the canon.<sup>115</sup> This ambivalence was further reinforced by the Khrushchev reforms that “introduced a profound ambiguity into the Soviet authoritative discourse, making it impossible to know for sure whether any given formulation was right or wrong.”<sup>116</sup>

Some interpretations of Sayat-Nova’s poetry went beyond the range of acceptable topics, but they were still reframed through the lens of class struggle. For example, Hasratian’s article in the almanac *Adabi Ermanistan* touched upon a rather taboo subject, that is religious allusions in the bard’s songs. One of the poems he quoted referred to the prophet Mohammad and twelve *imams* venerated in Shia Islam while another one recommended everyone to have the three holy books (Old Testament, New Testament and Koran) in their possession.<sup>117</sup> Hasratian viewed those poems “not as the shortcoming but the strength of Sayat-Nova’s oeuvre” because they showed “the poet’s ability to respect all religions at the time when clashes took place between the Christians and the Muslims in Turkey and Iran under the disguise of religion.”<sup>118</sup> The author deemed inclusion of the religious theme appropriate since it once again proved how Sayat-Nova was not fooled by the religious divisions which played into the hands of the ruling class.

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<sup>114</sup> Alexei Yurchak, “The Hegemony of Form,” in *Everything Was Forever, Until It Was No More: The Last Soviet Generation* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2005), 43.

<sup>115</sup> *Ibid.*, 47.

<sup>116</sup> *Ibid.*, 163.

<sup>117</sup> Morus Hasratian, “Zagafgaziia xalglarinin boyuk shairi,” in *Adabi Ermanistan*, vol. 5, ed. M.B. Bayramov and A.Y. Yerevanli (Yerevan: Haipetrat, 1963), 306.

<sup>118</sup> *Ibid.*

Striking a balance between the discourse of nationality policy and the Soviet authoritative language was a dangerous zone from the beginning. Yet, despite the state's attempts to control the literary output, there was still room for unorthodox opinions to be filtered through censorship. It was particularly the case for the literature of the titular republics. Since it was uncommon for those in the center to learn minority languages, the only way non-Russian nationalities could be overseen was through the cooperation of their national cadres.<sup>119</sup> The latter managed to find ways to “preserve some of their cultural treasures and creative autonomy, exploiting the gaps in Soviet discourse and the distance between the center and the periphery.”<sup>120</sup>

In some cases, the national representation of Sayat-Nova could contradict the norms of Socialist Realism. The analysis of his entreaty poem to the Georgian king Irakli II emphasizing the poet's uniqueness conflicted with the principle of accessibility. The following tristich has the element of boasting typical for *ashiq* contests while the poet seems to address not a rival but someone in power. Hence, it is commonly accepted as his plea to the Georgian king. Soviet interpreters used the poem to substantiate their claims about the giftedness of Sayat-Nova:

Not everyone can drink of my spring: 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!

Although the poem fitted the Romantic representation of Sayat-Nova as a poet-genius, it also had an elitist connotation. Limiting the accessibility of Sayat-Nova, it went against one of the cornerstones of Socialist Realism: the orientation toward the people. Therefore, after quoting the tristich, Grishashvili remarked that “it did not mean that he [Sayat-Nova] was the poet of the

<sup>119</sup> Kathryn Douglas Schild, “Between Moscow and Baku: National Literatures at the 1934 Congress of Soviet Writers,” (PhD diss., University of California, 2010), 157.

<sup>120</sup> Ibid.

chosen ones.”<sup>121</sup> The bard rather addressed the ruling class who was unable to appreciate the genuine art.

The way Sayat-Nova’s purported patron Irakli II was depicted with regards to his impact on the bard’s life merits particular attention.<sup>122</sup> While Marxist-Leninist canon engendered a dark feudalist image of the 18<sup>th</sup> century Transcaucasia, the parallel Georgian project of nationalization required Irakli II to be portrayed as a unifier of his nation under whom the country experienced relative prosperity.<sup>123</sup> He also exemplified the struggle of the Transcaucasian people against the Turkic and Persian imperial powers while his attempts to obtain a Russian protectorate was extolled as the symbol of the “great friendship” between the Georgian and Russian people. These tendencies also materialized in the interpretation of the poet’s court life as well as his subsequent religious service. According to Grishashvili, the *ashiq* spent the best part of his life at the court of Irakli II who was a great appreciator of the arts.<sup>124</sup> Sayat-Nova’s expulsion from the court was linked to the envious princes who could not stand the success of the poet of a non-noble origin. Yet, it could not be Irakli who expelled him from the court. The *ashiq* decided to seclude himself after the death of his wife,<sup>125</sup> only to realize that he did not fit in the religious lifestyle, secretly keeping his instrument (*chongur*) and participating in bardic competitions.<sup>126</sup> Thanks to Irakli

<sup>121</sup> Joseph Grishashvili, “Sayat-Nova,” *Literaturnaia Gruzia* no. 10 (1963), 62.

<sup>122</sup> There is no account of the poet’s court life. Given that he served in the Irakli’s court, it is still unlikely that he was a court poet since the *ashiqs* usually functioned as musicians and entertainers in courts. Xi Yang, 79.

<sup>123</sup> The 18<sup>th</sup>-century Georgian king Irakli II is known for uniting the Georgian kingdoms of Kartli and Kakheti and his attempts to centralize the government while striving to build close relationship with Russia and Europe. Encyclopædia Iranica, s.v. “Erekle II,” <https://www.iranicaonline.org/articles/erekle-ii>.

<sup>124</sup> Joseph Grishashvili, “Sayat-Nova,” in *Lirika* (Moscow: Gospolitizdat, 1963), 9-16.

<sup>125</sup> There were several hypotheses regarding the poet’s expulsion. One of them that was particularly favored in the popular depictions of Sayat-Nova linked the bard’s misfortune to his love affair with the king’s sister Anna. More ideological explanations pointed to the poet’s rebelliousness towards the hypocrite nobility as the main cause of his dismissal.

<sup>126</sup> These legends originate from *Kalmasoba* (Alms-Gathering) and Akhverdian’s account of Sayat-Nova’s biography. The former is an encyclopedic adventure story written by prince Ioane of Georgia comprised of junior deacon Ioane Khelashvili’s encounters with the main historical figures of Georgia. Ioane meets Sayat-Nova at the monastery finding out that the poet kept playing his *chongur* and is not happy with the religious life. Although it is not probable that such

again, Sayat-Nova could get away with his unruly behavior as a monk and was even promoted to the position of bishop.

Likewise, Gaisarian portrayed Irakli II as an enlightened leader whose attempts to civilize the nobility were in vain. Despite the king's decency, there was still a class difference between him and Sayat-Nova manifesting itself in the bitter lot of the poet. The scholar argued that the moments of the realization of this simple truth were expressed through the oscillating feelings towards Irakli in the bard's poems. In the Armenian poem supposedly directed to Irakli, the *ashiq* accepts that his destiny is in the hands of the king and pleads for his mercy.<sup>127</sup> The poem also expressed a sense of pride and superiority. To prove this point, Gaisarian quoted two lines from another Georgian love poem whose Russian translation replaced Jesus with king.<sup>128</sup> Here, the poet tells her beloved that he would neither leave her nor endure humiliation and rebukes her rather in a friendly manner for not even worshipping to Jesus which implies the level of her mercilessness. The theme of a lover under the spell of a pitiless beloved bears functional parallelism to the bard's plea to the king creating a sense of submission while paradoxically maintaining a dignified tone. In this case, the structure of the Russian translation gives the impression of the poet's irreverence toward Irakli due to the (self-)censorship of religious language.<sup>129</sup>

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a meeting took place, the poet's inclusion in the book indicates his popularity. David M. Lang, "Prince Ioann of Georgia and His "Kalmasoba"," *The American Slavic and East European Review* 11, no. 4 (1952), 286-287.

<sup>127</sup>The manuscript (*davtar*) ascribed to the *ashiq* consists of Armenian and Azeri poems. The Georgian poems can only be found in the manuscript of the poet's son Ioane commissioned by Georgian prince Teimurazi in the early 19<sup>th</sup> century. Charles Dowsett, 4.

<sup>128</sup> Gaisarian, "Sayat-Nova," 35.

<sup>129</sup> The Azeri publication of 1963 did not include the poem in question. It appeared in the 1988 Azeri publication (*Gulag as sozume*) translated by Georgian-Azeri translator Aflatun Sarachli who spoke both Georgian and Azeri. The Azeri translation by Eflatun Sarachli:

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!

## 2.2. Soviet Life of the *Ashiq* Poetry

As discussed in the first chapter, Sayat-Nova's songs adhered to the conventional prosodies of *ashiq* poetry mostly prioritizing form over content. In some instances, the formality of the poems resulted in their untranslatability due to the lack of a coherent theme. Such aspects of Sayat-Nova's work were usually downgraded in the Soviet interpretations. The Soviet scholars strived to neutralize the possibility of interpreting the bard's poems from a merely aesthetic point of view. They insisted that even if the bard followed certain prosodies of *ashiq* poetry, their use neither came at the expense of the content nor stemmed from the poet's desire for experimentation.

In the preface to the Russian publication of 1961, Gaisarian discussed the prevalence of the "Eastern" formal conventions in Sayat-Nova's poetry by commenting on the comparison of the bard with the European and Russian decadent poets. These analogies validating the "high culture" status of the poet by linking him to Western literature were especially common among the Russian and Armenian critics. Feeding the Armenian national imagery, such claims were at the same time ambivalent on ideological grounds. Hence, Gaisarian drew an explicit line between the bourgeois poetic movements and *ashiq* poetry based on the pragmatic value of their form:

There is a substantial difference between the application of such poetic means in the Western decadent schools and Eastern or folk poetry. The problem is not about the means but the aim of their employment. It should be noted that the one and the same means of poetic impression and expression can be used for organizing the world of human senses, drawing close to concrete reality and indispensable synthesis and they can also serve to the fragmentation and split of senses, isolation from reality, a departure from synthesis – to indeterminacy and chaos. In the latter case, these means become distorted from within and transform into their opposite.<sup>130</sup>

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

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<sup>130</sup> Gaisarian, 54-55.

not reflect 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 extraliterary world, became predominant. The critical readings of Sayat-Nova demonstrate psychologism which looked at the content of his poems as a biographical reference and mirror of the poet's state of mind when composing them. This approach was informed not as much by the literary and scholarly considerations as by the demands of historical circumstances its authors found themselves in.

The chronology of the poet's early life and training has been drawn from his Azeri *vujudnama*, an "autobiographical" poem. Conventionally, such poems depicted 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. The poem also has a component of complaint about the transience of life and fortune typical of the bardic poetry. Furthermore, the rhyming and metrical patterns of the poem predetermine the range of expressions that can be used in each line. Besides some inconsistencies in the manuscript, the *vujudnama* was composed in quatrains (aaab, cccb, dddb, etc.) each line consisting of 16 syllables. These restraints implied that the preference for certain expressions over others was not always guided by the semantic requirements. It was rather the rhythmic flow and musicality that constituted indispensable parts of *ashiq* poetry as it was created to be performed.

Although the *vujudnama* is unlikely to depict an accurate chronology of the poet's life, 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 concluded that



Sayat-Nova earlier worked as a weaver<sup>131</sup> and traveled to Iran, Ethiopia and India.<sup>132</sup> The first conjecture reinforced the working-class background of the poet further strengthening his image as “the people’s poet”. Another reason to support this interpretation was provided by Akhverdian. He argued that the bard’s elaborate description of textiles when praising the beauty of the beloved might indicate that he learned the craft of weaving before becoming a bard.<sup>133</sup> There is another version claiming Sayat-Nova’s profession to be a dyer based on his frequent use of tropes involving colors. It might well be true that Sayat-Nova had a side job as a weaver or dyer since that was a common practice among the *ashiqs* in order to offset the financial instability brought by their main craft.<sup>134</sup> Nonetheless, the metaphors with textiles and colors were typical conventions in *ashiq* poetry.

Sayat-Nova’s lyrical songs praising the beauty of the beloved (*gozallama*) and complaining about the suffering she inflicted upon the lover (*shikayatnama*) account for the majority of his survived oeuvre. Yet, one can argue that it was mostly moralistic poems (*oyudlama*) that fueled the Soviet interpretations of the bard’s views on his milieu. Appealing to the didacticism of Socialist Realism, these poems depict different life circumstances and moral lessons deduced from them.<sup>135</sup> One of the most quoted stanzas to demonstrate Sayat-Nova’s appreciation of working-class people was taken from an Azeri moralistic poem:

Mercy on the one who builds a bridge for the old master  
May the passer-by add a stone to its foundation.

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<sup>131</sup> The first hypothesis is derived from the fifth and sixth stanzas where the poet depicts that at the age of 13, he mastered a craft and at the age of 14, sent his master a *khalat* (robe). This was interpreted as a sign of perfecting the craft of a weaver. However, bringing the master a gift might signify a ritual after the successful completion of any other crafts in the 18<sup>th</sup> century Caucasus. Charles Dowsett, 9-11.

<sup>132</sup> While the colophons Sayat-Nova copied in Anzal testify to his travel to Northern Iran, the other two places were taken from the seventh stanza of the poem: “My nineteenth year passed. I journeyed to Abyssinia and India.” Charles Dowsett, 57-59.

<sup>133</sup> Charles Dowsett, 10.

<sup>134</sup> Xi Yang, 72.

<sup>135</sup> The elements of praising, complaining, and teaching coexist in the poems of Sayat-Nova while they also form genres in their own right when one of the elements dominates the others.

I worked myself to death for the sake of the people.  
A friend will set up a rock to mark my grave.<sup>136</sup>

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

As mentioned earlier, among the techniques that the bards used in *ashiq* competitions to defeat their rivals were ridicule and self-praise. Such tactics were part of the *ashiq* ritual and did not necessarily indicate actual rivalries in the extraliterary world. The element of belittlement present in Sayat-Nova’s poems was either improvised during the contests or used with other elements in the poems unlikely composed in those settings. Feeding the binary nature of the class

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<sup>136</sup> The English translation was borrowed from Charles Dowsett with slight amendments. The first line “Rahmat pir ustada korpu tikana” can be translated as “Mercy on the one who builds a bridge for the old master” instead of “Mercy on the old master building his bridge” since it seems that an old master Sayat-Nova refers to is the poet himself. Moreover, “for the sake of nation” was changed to “for the sake of the people” due to the lack of better alternatives. The Azeri word used by Sayat-Nova (*el*) has a local connotation which refers to the people of a specific place.

struggle, this element also contributed to the interpretations ranging from the poet's satirical attitude towards the 18th-century mercantile bourgeoisie and nobles to his aesthetic reflections.

One of the characteristics of the Socialist Realist canon was its preference for monumentalism.<sup>137</sup> In terms of poetry, it implied the superiority of the narrative poem as a grand genre form with a heroic theme.<sup>138</sup> In contrast, Sayat-Nova's love poems narrated in the first person had a rather personal tone which could potentially pose a challenge for the poet's Sovietization. This issue was addressed with a historicist sleight of hand as can be seen from Sharif's interpretation of 18<sup>th</sup>-century Caucasian poetry:

Delving into one's own spiritual world, an attempt to escape from the insurmountable problems of everyday life and struggle in sometimes abstract judgments about good and evil, the fate of the world, the purpose of human life, or the glorification of love, female beauty – these are what constituted the content of poetry for over four centuries since mid-13th to early 18th century. Frik, Konstantin Yertzinkatsi, Mkrtich Nagash, Grigoris Akhtamartsi, Nahapet Kuchak in Armenian, Hasanoglu, Nasimi, Khatai, Fuzuli, Govsi Tabrizi, Sahib Tabrizi in Azerbaijani, Teimuraz I, Archil II and others in Georgian were the representatives of this lyrical poetry. The era did not allow them, did not provide them with an opportunity to create major works with heroic and epic content.<sup>139</sup>

On the one hand, according to the Marxist-Leninist reading, the stage of socio-economic development (feudalist, capitalist, communist) determined the dominant modes of artistic creation. In that sense, the predominance of lyricism reflected the historical reality of the 18<sup>th</sup>-century Caucasian peoples who suffered at the hands of their ruling classes 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

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<sup>137</sup> Evgeny Dobrenko, "Socialist Realism," in *The Cambridge Companion to Twentieth-Century Russian Literature* Evgeny Dobrenko and Marina Balina (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), 102.

<sup>138</sup> Ibid.

<sup>139</sup> Aziz Sharif, "Stranitsi istorii literatur narodov Zakavkazia," *Voprosi Literaturi* no. 2 (1962), 198-203, <https://voplit.ru/article/stranitsy-istorii-literatur-narodov-zakavkazya/>.

the love drama turns into a social drama. If reality is the opposite of love, it means that reality is vicious, the lyricism becomes tragic, concentrating in itself the dramatic collision of an individual and society, a feeling of dissatisfaction and discord with the world.”<sup>140</sup> For such an interpretation, the overwhelming lyricism of the bard’s oeuvre did not pose an obstacle as the socio-economic undertone of his poetic choices could be read between the lines. Gaisarian also highlighted the multifaceted nature of Sayat-Nova’s lyricism. He agreed that “the motif of love is pervasive in the bard’s poems, but it is usually interwoven with other motifs.”<sup>141</sup> From this point of view, even the love poems of Sayat-Nova could be stretched to acquire diverse meanings, particularly those concerning his social embeddedness.

On the other hand, locating Sayat-Nova completely within the feudal system would be incongruent with the bard’s canonization as a national poet which required highlighting his uniqueness. In this case, the element of complaint in his poetry equated to the poet’s pessimistic worldview was instrumentalized to accentuate his discontent with the establishment. Yet, the bard’s dissatisfaction was not a self-conscious one. Such understanding was manifest in Seidov’s argument: “Sayat-Nova did not understand the real historical causes of the people’s tragedy as a result of which he did not know how to prevent it. He could not find a solution to the problem and eventually fell into melancholy.”<sup>142</sup> The poet himself could not be aware of the deep social forces that found their expression in his poetry. His “melancholy” was an inadequate reaction to the injustice and suffering brought about by the feudalistic class struggle because the conditions had not ripened for the bard to be able to articulate the social dynamics of his time, unlike the Soviet scholars who lived in a classless society. Hence, the Marxist-Leninist principles were reconciled

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<sup>140</sup> Lev Arutiunov, “Sayat-Nova: K 250 letiiu so dnia rozhdeniia,” *Novy Mir* no. 10 (1963), 233.

<sup>141</sup> Suren Gaisarian, 17-18.

<sup>142</sup> Mirali Siedov, 82.

with the idea of the poet's uniqueness through subtle historicism that can be formulated as follows: Sayat-Nova's personality and poetry were delimited by the socio-economic and cultural norms of his age whereas the bard's misfortune in an oppressive system symbolized by his expulsion from the court and the sense of indignation he expressed at that which he could not fully grasp reaffirmed his image as an outlier.

The discussions of the poet's pessimism followed a particular form of argumentation which began with equating his pessimism to realism and ended with an ultimate judgment of the poet's optimism. Distinguishing his poetry from "the medieval Armenian lyricism which depicted human nature in its perfection and believed in its realization only in the afterlife", Arutiunov praised "Sayat-Nova's ability to accept the conflictual nature of the real world."<sup>143</sup> "However," the scholar concluded, "there is neither fatalism nor alienation in his poetry."<sup>144</sup> The conflictual reality to which Arutiunian and other Soviet scholars referred was explained by the bard's oscillation between cheerful and gloomy attitude towards life. As can be seen in the entreaty poem, this ambivalence was engendered by the coexistence of contrasting poetic elements in the same poem.

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<sup>143</sup> Lev Arutiunov, 234.

<sup>144</sup> Ibid., 234-235.

## Foreignizing Sayat-Nova: The Soviet Translation Project

The Soviet translation project mostly relied on the so-called *podstrochnik* practices (or interlinear trots) especially when it came to the literature of non-Russian nationalities. Often anonymous *podstrochnikists* carried out a verbatim translation of the original text into the target language for a final artistic rendition to be performed by poets or writers.<sup>145</sup> The *podstrochniki* accommodated the urgent need of the Soviet project of “world literature” actualized through a historically unprecedented translation campaign. They were seen as a temporary measure to compensate for the translators’ lack of proficiency in non-Russian languages which would eventually fade away with the drawing together of the Soviet people. Yet, as other temporary means in Soviet history, the employment of interlinear trots persisted throughout the entire existence of the Soviet Union.<sup>146</sup>

The *podstrochniki* were even more widespread in the translations of non-Russian poetry. Not only young practitioners but also prominent Russian poet-translators used interlinear trots. For the poets who could not publish their own works due to censorship, translation served as a means of maintaining the reputation of a published author as well as a source of income.<sup>147</sup> Their full-time investment in translating other authors contributed to the perception of translation as a creative process and that of a translator as a co-creator of the final product. It also led to the emergence of a subgenre expressing the frustration of poet-translators who “spent the best years of my life for someone else’s words.”<sup>148</sup>

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<sup>145</sup> Susanna Witt, “The Shorthand of Empire: *Podstrochnik* Practices and the Making of Soviet Literature,” *Ab Imperio* 3 (2013): 155-161.

<sup>146</sup> *Ibid.*, 184-186.

<sup>147</sup> Natalia Kamovnikova, “Poetry in Translation: To Match or Not to Match,” in *Made Under Pressure: Literary Translation in the Soviet Union, 1960-1991* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2019), 150.

<sup>148</sup> This line is from the poem “Perevodchik” (“Translator”) by Russian poet Arseny Tarkovsky who specialized in Eastern poetry. He was also the author of the Azeri and Georgian poems of Sayat-Nova. Tarkovsky’s first book could only be published in 1962.

The recent studies on Soviet translation tend to characterize it as a predominantly domesticating practice prioritizing the demands of the target culture. This consensus is, to a large extent, informed by the focus of the scholarship on the Russian translations of Western literature. It provides further explanation for the prevalence of the *podstrochniki* since the mission of localizing texts within the receiving culture was more salient for Soviet translators than the actual knowledge of the source language.<sup>149</sup> The ideological endorsement of domestication emerged in the 1930s with the state efforts to unify the literary sphere under the banner of Socialist Realism. The norms of the latter transported into translation theory privileged the fluency of translation as a means of achieving its readability for the masses. It also manifested in the denunciation of *bukvalizm* (“literalism”) defined as the reproduction of the form (formalism) and content of the original (naturalism) and considered inferior to the “realist translation” that strived to convey the essence of the original.<sup>150</sup>

Analyzing the prerevolutionary and Soviet translations of Sayat-Nova, this chapter will explore the continuities between the two. The dominance of domesticating approach in ideological and theoretical debates did not considerably affect the translation practice when it came to Sayat-Nova’s poetry. The Soviet translators of the poet inherited the prerevolutionary tradition of foreignizing underpinned by its faithfulness to the source language. Amidst the attacks against the elements of *bukvalizm* present both in the pre-Soviet and contemporary translations,<sup>151</sup> works by Valery Briusov and Mikhail Lozinskii who followed the same principles were still praised as exemplary Soviet translations.

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<sup>149</sup> Ibid.

<sup>150</sup> Andrei Azov, *Poverzhennye bukvalisty: Iz istorii khudozhestvennogo perevoda v SSSR v 1920–1960-e gody* (Moscow: Vysshaya shkola ekonomiki, 2013), 59–61.

<sup>151</sup> The most exemplary case is the controversy around the translation of *Don Juan* (1947) by Georgy Shengeli which received harsh criticism from the major theoretician of the “realist translation” Ivan Kashkin. Susanna Witt, “Translation and Intertextuality in the Soviet-Russian Context: The Case of Georgy Shengeli’s “Don Juan”,” *The Slavic and East European Journal* 60, no. 1 (2016): 28–29, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/26633216>.

### 3.1. Sayat-Nova in Valery Briusov's Translation

The translation technique that paid close attention to the formal elements of the original poetry was common in the Silver Age. The same strategy was applied in the anthology of Armenian poetry translated by Valery Briusov and other prominent Russian poets in 1916.<sup>152</sup> Published with the support of the Armenian Committee in Moscow, it is commonly regarded as the first systematic project reliant on the *podstrochniki*. According to Briusov's own account, after being solicited by the Armenian intellectuals, the poet hesitated to accept the request as he was not familiar with Armenian literature.<sup>153</sup> He tried to familiarize himself with Armenian culture through Russian scholarship and a short visit to Armenia attempting to learn the language. However, as he could not achieve the level of proficiency for less than a year to be able to translate the poems that required the knowledge of specific dialects, the use of interlinear trots was inescapable.<sup>154</sup>

The translation of 12 Armenian songs of Sayat-Nova by Briusov far outnumbered the poems of other *ashiqs* included in the anthology which demonstrated his aesthetic superiority in the eyes of the publication's initiators and the editor Briusov. In his preface to the book, the latter maintained that "the primary goal of the publication was to achieve a *literal reconstruction of the original* so that the readers would *trust* the translations and be certain that through them, they get to know the works of *Armenian* poets, not *Russian* translators."<sup>155</sup> Briusov's translations of Sayat-Nova's poems leans more towards foreignization by keeping the rhyme scheme and meter of poems intact and including the Armenian, Persian and Turkic words which the bard extensively

<sup>152</sup> The translations from "Eastern" poetry (Arabic, Persianate and the Caucasian) experienced a boom among Russian poets in the Silver Age. Katerina Clark, "Translation and Transnationalism: Non-European Writers and Soviet Power in the 1920s and 1930s," *Translation in Russian Contexts: Culture, Politics, Identity* ed. Brian James Baer and Susanna Witt (New York and London: Routledge, 2018), 144.

<sup>153</sup> Valery Briusov, "Ot Redaktora k Chitateliu," 3-4.

<sup>154</sup> In the case of Sayat-Nova, his poems were composed in the Tbilisi Armenian dialect not quite intelligible to the users of contemporary Eastern and especially Western Armenian.

<sup>155</sup> Valery Briusov, "Zadachi Izdaniia," 16.



incorporated into his Armenian poems. The foreign words unfamiliar to the domestic (Russian) readers were clarified in the footnotes. In the following translation, these two tendencies overlap as the rhyming is constructed around non-Russian words (*jan*, *pinjan*, *sultan* and *khan*):

Ia v zhizni vzdokha ne izdam, dokole *jan* ti dlia menia!  
 Napolnennii zhivoi vodoi zlatoi *pinjan* ti dlia menia!  
 Ia siadu, ti mne brosish ten, v pustine – *stan* ti dlia menia!  
 Uznava moi grekh, menia ubei: *sultan i khan* ti dlia menia!<sup>156</sup>

This technique disrupts the “fluency” of translation and the “illusion of transparency” it creates.<sup>157</sup> The foreign expressions enter the Russian text “resisting”<sup>158</sup> the dominance of the receiving culture and inviting the readers to encounter another language in its particularity. However, the act of translation can be more holistically understood through David Damrosch’s concept of “world literature” as an “elliptic refraction of national literatures.”<sup>159</sup> Any given translation is “the locus of a negotiation between two different cultures”<sup>160</sup> whether the intention behind it is to domesticate or foreignize. Sometimes this negotiation could lead to an asymmetrical power relationship between the source and host culture, but the “elliptic refraction” implies that “they provide the two foci that generate the elliptical space within which a work lives as world literature, connected to both cultures, circumscribed by neither alone.”<sup>161</sup> In poetic translation, the poetic elements and linguistic specificities of the source text as they travel from one culture to another undergo the

<sup>156</sup> The rhyming words and refrain of the poem are reproduced in Briusov’s translation. He adhered to the syllabic meter, although the number of syllables per line is not equal to those in the original while the rhyme scheme (aaaa, bbba, ccca) is maintained as well.

Ashkharumis akh chim kashi, kani vor *jan* is ints ama!  
 Anmakhakan churov likin oske *pinjan* is ints ama!  
 Nistim, veres shinak anis, zarbab *veran* is ints ama!  
 Sutss imatsi enents spani: sultan u *khan* is ints ama!

<sup>157</sup> The transparency denotes the effect by which the readability and fluency of a translation lead to its identification with the original. Lawrence Venuti, “Invisibility,” *The Translator’s Invisibility: A History of Translation* 2nd ed. (London and New York: Routledge, 2008), 1.

<sup>158</sup> Lawrence Venuti, 18.

<sup>159</sup> David Damrosch, “World Enough and Time,” in *What Is World Literature* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2003), 281.

<sup>160</sup> Ibid., 283.

<sup>161</sup> Ibid.

process of reassessment by a translator that privileges certain functions over others. The preservation of some elements is inevitably paralleled by the loss of others. Therefore, a translator's priorities are guided by their reading (or misreading) of a poem in terms of determining its dominant and subordinate elements. Briusov himself reflected upon such negotiation in his famous article *Fialki v Tigele*:

The appearance of a lyrical poem, its form is made of a number of constituent elements, the combination of which embodies more or less fully the feeling and poetic idea of the artist - these are: the style of the language, images, size and rhyme, the movement of the verse, the play of syllables and sounds... It is unthinkable to reproduce all these elements completely and accurately when translating a poem. The translator usually seeks to convey only one or, at best, two (mostly imagery and meter), changing others (style, verse movement, rhymes, word sounds). However, there are verses in which the primary role is played not by images, but, for example, by the sounds of words ("The Bells" by Edgar Allan Poe) or even rhymes (many of the humorous poems). The choice of the element that you consider the most important in the translated work constitutes the method of translation.<sup>162</sup>

It was not only the poet-translator's aesthetic judgment but also the ability of the target language to accommodate the specificities of the source language that defined the translation's trajectory. The differences between the Armenian and Russian linguistic and poetic conventions imposed a set of limitations on how Briusov could handle the translation of Sayat-Nova's poems. The poet was aware of such restraints beyond the translator's control. For instance, he pointed out the prevalence of masculine rhyme in Armenian poetry which stresses the last syllable of each line while his translations employed masculine and feminine rhymes in succession characteristic of Russian poetry.<sup>163</sup>

<sup>162</sup> Valery Briusov, "Fialki v Tigele" [Violets in a Crucible], *Vesi* no. 7 (1905), [http://dugward.ru/library/brusov/brusov\\_fialki\\_v\\_tigle.html](http://dugward.ru/library/brusov/brusov_fialki_v_tigle.html).

<sup>163</sup> Valery Briusov, "Zadachi Izdaniia," 16.

### 3.2. (Soviet) Russian Translations of Sayat-Nova

Another Russian translation of Sayat-Nova's poems appeared two decades later in 1939. Published in Moscow by *Khudozhestvennaia Literatura*, *Pesni* (Songs) consisted of the bard's 33 Armenian and 14 Georgian poems translated by Mikhail Lozinskii, Sergei Shervinskii, Konstantin Lipskerov and Yurii Verkhovskii. The first translation of Azeri poems was published in Armenia in 1945 when the 150<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the poet's death was celebrated. They were translated by Russian poets Konstantin Lipskerov, Vera Zviagintseva and Arseny Tarkovsky. More comprehensive translations of Sayat-Nova's poems into Russian were printed during the Thaw. The first book *Stikhotvorenia* (1961) edited by Gaisarian was part of short series of "Biblioteka Poeta" (Poet's Library). The second one *Lirika* (1963) edited by Grishashvili was published by *Khudozhestvennaia Literatura* at the time of the bard's 250<sup>th</sup> anniversary.

Despite the condemnation of "literal translation" and the shift towards "fluency" in translation beginning from the 1930s, the pre-revolutionary norms of translation persisted in practice both during and after the years of high Stalinism.<sup>164</sup> It is evident in the later Soviet translations of Sayat-Nova's poetry that the poet-translators still treated the formal elements of the foreign verse diligently striving to approximate its prosody. On the occasion of the 150<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Soviet Armenia in 1935, the Moscow-based publishing house *Academia* embarked upon another publication of Armenian anthology which was finished only in 1940 and included 22 poems of Sayat-Nova. In the article discussing the book, Karen Mikaelian maintained that the anthology continued the tradition of Briusov's pioneering work in terms of prioritizing the versification rules of Armenian poetry. The author's evaluation of Briusov's translations was based on their success in fully capturing the meter and rhythm scheme of the original poems. For

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<sup>164</sup> Andrei Azov, "Problema stikhotvornogo perevoda: Vopros o forme," 45-46.

instance, Mikaelian criticized Briusov for altering the metrical foot of one of Nahapet Kuchak's poems "with an intention to not confuse the Russian audience accustomed to classical meters."<sup>165</sup> "As a result, the translator abandoned his initial goal to stay faithful to the original text regarding its meter and syllabic structure."<sup>166</sup> Although in his conclusion, Mikaelian mentioned the importance of *khudozhestvennii perevod* (creative translation),<sup>167</sup> the main premise of the new anthology was to surpass the prerevolutionary publication by better reproducing the linguistic and poetic specificities of Armenian originals.

The Soviet anthology also included translations by one of the most acclaimed Soviet translators Mikhail Lozinskii.<sup>168</sup> In his influential essay on poetic translation, he considered "recreative translation" "reproducing both the form and content of the original with all possible completeness and accuracy" superior to "reconstructive translation" that "adjusts the form and content of the original work to the needs of the target culture."<sup>169</sup> The 1961 publication included 5 Armenian poems of the *ashiq* translated by Lozinskii in which he took the same approach imitating the syllabic meter and, as much as possible, the rhyme scheme of the poems without jeopardizing their content.

The continuity was also the case regarding the migration of unfamiliar words to the Russian translation. One of the examples is Shervinskii's translation of a *divani*<sup>170</sup> titled "Krasiva ochen

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<sup>165</sup> Karen Minaelian, "Poeziia Armenii," *Literaturnaia Gazeta* no. 66 (1935), 5.

<sup>166</sup> Ibid.

<sup>167</sup> Between the 1930s and 1950s the term *khudozhestvennii (tvorcheskii) perevod* was used to refer to an appropriate form of translation similar to "adequate translation" or "realist translation". Andrei Azov, "Teoriia tvorcheskogo perevoda," 47-48.

<sup>168</sup> Lozinskii was awarded the Stalin Prize in 1946 for his translation of Dante's *Divine Comedy*. His works were extolled by other poet-translators such as Nikolai Gumilev and Anna Akhmatova.

<sup>169</sup> Mikhail Lozinskii, "Iskusstvo stikhotvornogo perevoda" [The Art of Poetic Translation], in *Russian Writers on Translation: An Anthology* ed. Brian James Baer and Natalia Olshanskaya (London and New York: Routledge, 2014), 88.

<sup>170</sup> *Divani* is a prosody in *ashiq* poetry borrowed from *divan* (court) literature. Originally, it was composed in the *arud* quantitative meter but since most of the *ashiqs* did not know the rules of *arud* meter they composed *divani* based on 14-15 or 16 syllables per line. Maharram Gasimli and Mahmud Allahmanli, 91.

*shakhatan*, pevca ne oporochish ti...” (*Shakhatan* is so beautiful, you will not disgrace the poet...). The poem is composed in a particular genre of *divani* called *shahkhataii* which traditionally begins with the praise of Shah Ismail I, the founder of the Safavid dynasty and famous poet. Such poems originally referred to him as the originator of the Shiite confession.<sup>171</sup> However, the bard’s reference to the *shah* lacks a religious connotation. It can be seen as a poetic convention adopted in the *ashiq* poetry stemming from the prestigious status of Persianate forms. In Shervinskii’s translation, *shahkhataii* was changed to *shahkhatan* in order to fully preserve the syllabic meter of the poem. The modification was mentioned in the endnotes without any explanation while the editor did not contextualize the meaning of the word resorting to vague definitions such as “a symbol of deity, type of melody, poetic form” inferred from individual poems. This case exemplifies how the adherence to maintaining the metrical structure of the original poem could conflict with the tendency to emphasize cultural differences. Subsequently, the alteration of the foreign word was compensated with the preservation of the number of syllables.

### 3.3. Azeri Translation of Sayat-Nova

The first Azeri publication of Sayat-Nova’s poems appeared in 1963 on the occasion of the 250<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the poet’s birth. Until then, few Azeri songs, as well as the translations of Armenian and Georgian poems, were scattered in the Armenian anthology and several periodicals such as *Adabiyat*, *Kommunist* and *Veten Ugrunda*. In general, Azeri poems attracted the least attention from scholars although they accounted for the majority of the bard’s poems. Even the 1963 publication included less Azeri poems than Armenian ones.<sup>172</sup>

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<sup>171</sup> Xi Yang, 159.

<sup>172</sup> More Azeri and Georgian poems were included in *Gulag as sozume* (Listen to my word) published in 1988 which, to this day, is the most comprehensive Azeri compilation of Sayat-Nova’s poetry.

The first transliteration and *podstrochnik* rendition of Sayat-Nova's Azeri verses that formed the basis of their translation into Armenian and Russian were carried out by Morus Hasratian. The Azeri publication of 1963 used the facsimiles of the poet's *davtar* to transcribe the Azeri poems. The verbatim translations of the Armenian and Georgian songs were provided by Azeri scholars Yusif Ramazanov and Dilara Aliyeva. Like their Russian counterparts, Azeri translators took a "literal" approach to Sayat-Nova's poetry.<sup>173</sup> In the preface of the book, the editor Arasli indicated that the translations aimed at "preserving the rhyme scheme and metrical structure of the original as well as keeping the Azeri words the poet integrated into his poems."<sup>174</sup>

The embeddedness of *ashiq* poetry in Azeri national culture provided the translators with a number of advantages when it came to localizing Sayat-Nova's Armenian and Georgian poems. First of all, the bard employed the same range of tropes and prosodies in all three languages, albeit in a varied frequency. He also incorporated many Azeri words into Armenian and Georgian poems intelligible to the contemporary Azeri audience. Apart from the rare inclusion of unfamiliar Armenian words, Azeri translators did not need to employ foreign expressions to highlight the Other as much as the Russians did since what would count as "foreign" to the Russian reader was domestic to the Azeri one. Secondly, the *ashiq* art was still a living tradition in Soviet Azerbaijan unlike other Transcaucasian republics where its popularity gave way to modern cultural forms. Moreover, the contemporary Azeri poets adapted the stylistic devices and prosodies of *ashiq* poetry. The absence of a significant cultural difference between Sayat-Nova's verses and the

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<sup>173</sup> It is worth noting that the ideological pressure on the Russian translations showing the signs of *bukvalizm* was not as strict with regards to the translations into the languages of non-Russian nationalities. Maurice Friedberg, *Literary Translation in Russia: A Cultural History* (University Park, PA: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1997), 184.

<sup>174</sup> Hamid Arasli, "Dostlug Mugannisi," in *Sayat Nova* ed. Hamid Arasli (Baku: Azerbaijan Dövlət Nəşriyyatı, 1963), 15-16.

contemporary readership in Azerbaijan renders the bipolar division between domesticating and foreignizing tendencies of translation not applicable to the Azeri translations.

## Conclusion

A brief episode of Azerbaijani enthusiasm around Sayat-Nova was an exceptional phenomenon that emerged out of the Thaw internationalism. Following the dissolution of the Soviet Union, the poet's memory in independent Azerbaijan fell into oblivion. When Armenia and, to a lesser extent, Georgia were celebrating the 300<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Sayat-Nova in 2013, no commemoration took place in Azerbaijan. Amidst the continuing ethno-territorial conflict between Armenia and Azerbaijan accompanied by cultural disputes, one could imagine a scenario where the national identity of the bard was contested by the latter since most of his survived oeuvre consist of Azeri poems. However, that did not happen. What happened instead was continuous with the Soviet nationality policy which secured the poet's place within the Armenian literary canon while accentuating his multicultural appeal. In the long 20<sup>th</sup> century, Sayat-Nova's Azeri corpus drew the least attention and the Thaw-era spike in Azeri scholarship could not establish itself as a long-standing practice. On the other hand, the Georgian interest in the poet that can be traced back to the pre-revolutionary times was culturally motivated bolstering the Georgian imagery of cosmopolitan Tbilisi. The long tradition of the poet's celebration in Georgia was carried on in the post-Soviet era, albeit with less zeal compared to the Soviet times.

This thesis was an attempt to break the silence from the side of an Azerbaijani scholar. Shedding light on the mutual cultural histories of the South Caucasus, it strived to go beyond the national framework prevalent in the studies of the region. The research on *ashiq* tradition and particularly Sayat-Nova provides a vantage point from which such commonalities can be further examined. From a literary perspective, contextualizing Sayat-Nova within the *ashiq* tradition and analyzing the self-referential aspects of his poetry served to refrain from the Romanticist assumptions common in the literary studies on the *ashiq*. This approach also helped to explain the



peculiarities of his Soviet appraisal characterized by further exploitation of those presuppositions combined with ideological reading.

The analysis of Sayat-Nova in the context of the Soviet friendship project illuminated not only the mechanism of the friendship between non-Russian nationalities but also drew attention to its regional dimension which experienced an upsurge during the early 1960s. However, the Transcaucasian friendship was not a mere “imagined community”. It had an institutional origin in the federal formations established in the region following the October Revolution. Examining the political and social dimensions of Transcaucasian regionalism and its *longue durée* development was beyond the scope of this thesis but it opens an alternative arena for further studies that would complement the nationally oriented historiography of the region.

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