

# “DIVANI-HIKMET”

## AND THE TRADITION OF 19TH CENTURY LITERARY MAZLISES

### “DIVANI-HIKMET” Y LA TRADICIÓN DE LOS MAZLISES LITERARIOS DEL SIGLO XIX

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#### ABSTRACT

This study examines the role of the Divani-Hikmet Literary Council, founded by Mirza Shafi Vazeh, on Azerbaijani cultural development in the 19th century. While Western Europe and Russia have acknowledged the impact of Vazeh, current work does not fully address how such literary circles served as agents for national literary change. This study aims to examine the democratizing effect of these councils on Azerbaijani intellectual discourse and their role in promoting regional cultural diversity. We argue that these gatherings broke down social and age barriers, especially by encouraging the use of the Azerbaijani language as a means of cultural expression. Furthermore, the plays of prominent authors such as Vazeh, Akhundzadeh, and Bakikhanov formed the groundwork for a critical realism that sought to tackle contemporary social problems through new forms of literature. The findings of this study show the manner in which these literary prescriptions not merely revolutionized literature during their time but have come to constitute contemporary Azerbaijani literary canons, affirming that inclusive intellectual spaces continue to play a pivotal role in cultural constitution.

**Keywords:** Literary advices, Mirza Shafi Vazeh, Azerbaijani literature, Critical realism, Cultural development.

#### RESUMEN

Este estudio examina el papel del Consejo Literario Divani-Hikmet, fundado por Mirza Shafi Vazeh, en el desarrollo cultural azerbaiyano del siglo XIX. Si bien Europa Occidental y Rusia han reconocido el impacto de Vazeh, los trabajos actuales no abordan a fondo cómo estos círculos literarios sirvieron como agentes del cambio literario nacional. Este estudio busca examinar el efecto democratizador de estos consejos en el discurso intelectual azerbaiyano y su papel en la promoción de la diversidad cultural regional. Argumentamos que estas reuniones rompieron barreras sociales y de edad, especialmente al fomentar el uso del idioma azerbaiyano como medio de expresión cultural. Además, las obras de autores destacados como Vazeh, Akhundzadeh y Bakikhanov sentaron las bases de un realismo crítico que buscó abordar los problemas sociales contemporáneos a través de nuevas formas literarias. Los hallazgos de este estudio muestran cómo estas prescripciones literarias no solo revolucionaron la literatura de su época, sino que han

llegado a constituir los cánones literarios azerbaiyanos contemporáneos, afirmando que los espacios intelectuales inclusivos siguen desempeñando un papel fundamental en la constitución cultural.

**Palabras clave:** Consejos literarios, Mirza Shafi Vazeh, Literatura azerbaiyana, Realismo crítico, Desarrollo cultural.

## INTRODUCTION

The work “Divan-i Hikmet,” attributed to the 12th-century Sufi poet Ahmed Yesevi (The Editors of Encyclopaedia Britannica, 2024), is one of the most representative works of Turkish mystical literature and to this day remains one of the fundamental texts that have influenced the spiritual and poetic tradition in the Islamic world. Known as the “Book of Wisdom,” this collection of mystical poems is characterized by its simple language and distinctive meter, which facilitated its dissemination both orally in spiritual gatherings (mezlis), and later through printing (Kalin, 2017; Kasapoglu Cengel, 2020). This duality in its transmission contributed to preserving and expanding its legacy over the centuries. Specifically, during the 19th century, the Ottoman Empire underwent a process of modernization and Westernization, evidenced in the Tanzimat reforms and the transformation of traditional literary currents. But despite this trend toward more Western literary forms, Sufi traditions continued to be a decisive influence on cultural debates and national identity. In this sense, the themes of mystical love, moral teaching, and critique of the transience of life present in Divan-i Hikmet found their place in the spirit of the times, where these values were reinterpreted in light of nationalist fervor and new literary currents (Ilhan, 2024; Valiyeva, 2025).

Undoubtedly, the presence of Divan-i Hikmet in the literary gatherings—or mezlis—of the 19th century underscores the continuity of the Sufi tradition within a context of modernization. These spaces for discussion and recitation not only kept Yesevi’s poetic heritage alive but also served as a platform for reflection on cultural identity and the evolution of artistic practices in the empire. The simplicity of the poem’s language and rhythmic structure, in contrast to the complexity of Divan poetry, emphasized the work’s accessibility and popular hece metric, aspects that were especially appealing at a time of intense social and cultural change (Kalin, 2017; Rezaei, 2021; Tutar, 2022).

Considering this, the goal of this research is to briefly analyze the role of the Divani-hikmet literary council, founded by Mirza Shafi Vazeh in 1820, in the development of 19th-century literary majlises in Azerbaijan, highlighting its influence on the cultural and intellectual life of the region, as well as its contribution to the emergence of other

literary assemblies in different cities such as Shamakhi, Shusha, and Ordubad. To achieve this objective, historical and philological research methods were employed, based on the analysis of primary and secondary sources, including memoirs, correspondence, and critical studies, in order to clarify the impact of Vazeh’s literary activity, his interaction with contemporary figures such as F. Bodenstedt, and his role in the dissemination of Enlightenment thought and Eastern spiritual values in the Caucasus and beyond.

## DEVELOPMENT

M.Sh. Vazeh created a literary council called “Divani-hikmet” in 1820. The poet’s goal in creating this council was to gather together the distinguished scientists, poets, and poetry lovers of his time and to ensure their participation in the discussion of newly written literary examples. Among the active members of the literary council were the names of M.Muhammadtaghi, I.Naseh, MMNaji, H.Abdulla, and H.S.Ziyadkhanzade. However, we receive information from some sources that the number of participants in the literary council was much higher. The members of the “Divani-hikmet” literary council also maintained close contact with a number of poets active in our regions and regularly corresponded with them. An important part of Vazeh’s creativity is also the poet’s activity in the literary environment of Tbilisi. Even after moving to Tbilisi, the poet was closely connected with the literary, scientific, and social life of the time, regularly meeting with intellectuals, while at the same time working in the pedagogical field and also engaging in private lessons in addition to his work at the district school.

The change of location to Tbilisi did not prevent him from engaging in artistic creativity, but rather inspired the poet to further expand his activities in this field. In Tbilisi, the poet re-established the “Divani-hikmet” literary council with the support of intellectual representatives of neighboring nations. Along with writers from different nations, scientists, journalists, and even travelers participated in the literary council. Among the people whom the poet considered close friends was his student, German-born F. Bodenstedt. Bodenstedt was invited by the Caucasian viceroy to Tbilisi to teach French and Latin at the city gymnasium, where he met his teacher, Mirza Shafi Vazeh, who, in his own words, was the “wise man of the wise.” He wrote in one of his memoirs:

First of all, I was looking for a teacher for myself, I needed a teacher of the Tatar language who was convenient for me, because this language was an important language understood throughout the Caucasus; it could be learned as quickly as possible. (Fakhraddin, 2010, p. 20).

Bodenstedt, who noted that his acquaintance with Mirza Shafi, whom he called "the wise man of Ganja", happened by chance, noted that his teacher promoted Eastern thinking and Eastern spiritual values.

There are different opinions among scholars and researchers interested in the heritage of Mirza Shafi and involved in the research of the poet's work. Some of them call Vazeh's German-born student F. Bodenstedt a "plagiarist," while others positively evaluate Bodenstedt's service in recording the poet's poems and their arrival to our time. Doctor of Philology Fakhraddin Veysalov wrote in his work "Mirza Shafi Vazeh and Bodenstedt: Interpretations and Facts":

When assessing himself, F. Bodenstedt notes that he is a bad poet. Mirza Shafi's poems were the language of the Tatars and Russians in Tbilisi. Mirza Shafi himself recited most of his poems spontaneously and did not bother to write them down. Therefore, we should be grateful to F. von Bodenstedt for bringing our lost poet back to us. (Fakhraddin, 2010, p. 154).

Yusifov (2014), who studies the poet's life and work, holds a completely different opinion. He notes that Vazeh's works were well received by a large audience, and for this reason he puts forward the opinion that Bodenstedt deceived the public and presented himself as the author of these works: "It is alleged that F. Bodenstedt used the name Mirza Shafi as a pseudonym, like his Eastern name. After that, Bodenstedt's assistants were also found in Western Europe, and for a long time the name of Mirza Shafi was almost forgotten." Researchers who highlight A. Berge's notes as the main source of these ideas and considerations should remember that Berge received this information from the Armenian Tumanov, with whom Bodenstedt had stayed as a lodger. Bodenstedt noted in his memoirs that he had stayed as a lodger in Tumanov's house for a while, and apparently, based on this Armenian's incorrect information, the existence of an Azerbaijani poet named Mirza Shafi was doubted (Fakhraddin, 2010, p. 154).

The "Divani-hikmet" literary assembly organized by Mirza Shafi Vazeh laid the foundation for the formation of literary assemblies in other regions of Azerbaijan in the second half of the 19th century. One after another, the literary assemblies "Beytus-sefa" (Shamakhi), "Fovcul-fusaha" (Lankaran), "Majmaush-shuera" (Shusha), "Anjumanush-shuera" (Ordubad), "Majlisi-uns", "Majlisi-faramushan" (Karabakh) began to operate.

In addition to the aforementioned assemblies, small literary associations operated in other cities - Gazakh, Derbent, Sheki, Agdash, and others. People who gathered there

talked about literature, art, education, and culture, and discussed some controversial issues among themselves.

In the 19th century, progress began to be observed in many areas in Karabakh, especially in the city of Shusha, one of our centers of science and culture. This development did not bypass those who tried their hand at literature. New literary trends emerged in the literature of this period, attracting attention with their diversity of themes, ideas, and content. Literary examples that had the power to reflect social life in all its nakedness began to develop in terms of themes and content and spread over a larger area. This, of course, gave impetus to the strengthening of enlightened-democratic thoughts and ideas, and for critical realism to take its place and position in literature.

The tendency towards translated literature can also be considered one of the development directions of this period. Firidun bey Kocharli (2005), one of the great researchers of 19th century Azerbaijani literature, noted in one of his notes that he wished that M.R.Fena, M.A.Baki, and M.H.Qudsi continue the work that had been left unfinished due to the death of Mustafa agha Nazir, who had made great contributions in the field of translation. A number of members of the literary council, who fulfilled this wish, translated the works of great thinkers, scholars, masters of words and art of the East - Firdovsi, Sadi, Jami, Navai, and Krylov, one of the prominent representatives of Russian literature.

During this period, Shusha also frequently resorted to sectarian literature. Poems with religious content occupied a special place in the literary heritage of almost every participant in literary gatherings. Artists who devoted a certain part of their creativity to lament literature and writing novels rarely performed their works with this content at literary gatherings and presented them for discussion by the general gathering participants. The reason for this can be the presence of musicians (Majlisi-uns, Majlisi-faramushan) and even wine (Beytus-sefa), which were not welcomed in religion, in the organization of some gatherings.

In the 19th century, as in many other areas of literature, the tendency towards nazira literature also strengthened. Writing naziras in these literary assemblies organized in the regions became a tradition. Sometimes, however, the written samples were sent to another assembly for evaluation outside the circle of the assembly in which they were created. Although the masters of words who wrote naziras mostly turned to the works of classics, there were also many naziras written to the ghazals of the assembly members themselves. Nasreddin Garayev noted in his book "19th century Azerbaijani literary assemblies" that "If the naziras written to the ghazals of Natavan and Seyid Azim

from separate divans, jungs and fragments were collected together, they would be equal to a large divan" (Garayev, 2010, p. 21).

The first person to provide information about literary circles operating in the 19th century in printed literature was Firidun bey Kocharli. In his work "The Literature of the Azerbaijani Turks" written in Russian, he informed his readers as follows: "In many cities of Transcaucasia, there were literary circles under various poetic names, for example, 'Beytus-sefa,' 'Beyti-khamushan,' 'Darus-surur,' etc. There were friendly relations between individual circles, and these circles corresponded with each other. The representatives of these circles were: Abdulla bey Asi in Shusha, Haji Seyid Azim in Shamakhi, Mirza Mehdi Naji in Yelizavetpol, Mirza Ismail Bazmi in Yerevan, and Kazim bey Salik in Gazakh."

The mutual communication between the literary assemblies of "Majlisi-uns" and "Majlisi-faramushan" organized in the same city was easier and more accessible. Mir Mohsen Navvab, a connoisseur of medieval Oriental sciences, and the members of "Majlisi-faramushan" headed by him corresponded closely with the members of "Majlisi-uns" whom Natavan took under her patronage and had close friendly relations. In particular, the poetic letters sent to Navvab clarified a number of issues important for studying the social issues of the time - love, friendship, loyalty, wisdom, hypocrisy, etc., and it was noted that his advice was needed on these topics.

A number of scholars and poets who visited Shusha were guests of the literary gatherings organized there and communicated with the learned persons of the place. Nasreddin Garayev wrote about this: "In 1868, the poet Unga from Ardabil came to Shusha, went to meet Navvab, and a consultation took place between the two" (Garayev, 2010, p. 202).

As the activities of the assemblies became regular, the connections of the assembly members with literary assemblies and associations organized in other regions of Azerbaijan also increased. The activities of "Majlisi-uns" spread far and wide, and S. Azim, A. Zuhuri, MA Bikhud from Shamakhi, M. I. Gasir from Lankaran, and Sidqi from Nakhchivan sent congratulatory letters to the assembly, expressing their appreciation in this way. HAAGah and M. Mamai, who were guests of Seyid Azim and "Beytus Sefa" in Shamakhi, participated in the poetry and music assemblies there, and did not break off their contacts even after returning to Shusha, and continued to correspond.

YV Chamanzaminli, recording his memories of Fatma Khanum Kamina from Shusha, wrote:

...my father used to invite the poetess Fati Khanum Kamina as a guest. I remember that evening, there was a long discussion. My older brother spoke against the Shahs of Iran, Kamina defended them. Poets and people interested in literature would gather at her house. (Garayev, 2010, p. 256).

Mirmohsun Navvab and Natavan played an important role in preserving the identity and spiritual and cultural heritage of their people. The literary environment of Karabakh is a vivid example of the synthesis of various cultural and literary traditions of the 19th century, which led to the emergence of a unique culture (Valiyeva, 2025, p. 46).

The listed facts constitute a very small part of the role of Shusha literary assemblies in the development of historical and cultural relations. The Shusha literary environment has been distinguished by its richness at all times.

## CONCLUSIONS

The foundation of the Divani-Hikmet Literary Council by Mirza Shafi Vazeh marked a turning point in Azerbaijani cultural development, creating a space where diverse intellectual thought converged and would inform the literary landscape of the 19th century. This council, along with other literary assemblies spread across Shusha, Lankaran, and other locations, formed a cultural mosaic that reflected the country's regional plurality, allowing each region to contribute its distinctive characteristics to national literature. The absence of age or social status restrictions at these gatherings democratized access to knowledge and fostered inclusive dialogue, particularly promoting the use of the Azerbaijani language as a vehicle for cultural expression. Collaborations between figures such as Vazeh, Akhundzadeh, and Bakikhanov catalyzed the evolution toward a critical realism that addressed social issues and depictions of everyday life, renewing both literary themes and forms. This movement not only transformed the literature of its time but also laid the foundation for subsequent movements, leaving an enduring legacy that continues to inspire new generations of Azerbaijani writers.

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