

The Myth of The East in The Tashkent Poems of A.A. Akhmatova

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Abstract:

The Tashkent poems of Anna Akhmatova reflect a unique phase in her poetic evolution, shaped during her wartime exile in Uzbekistan. While Akhmatova's Russian works have been widely studied, her engagement with Eastern motifs—particularly the cultural and linguistic elements of Uzbekistan—remains underexplored. This study employs literary analysis, focusing on symbolic imagery, metaphor, and intertextual references across Akhmatova's Tashkent cycle. The research uncovers Akhmatova's deliberate construction of an Eastern myth through nature, historical allusions, everyday life, and linguistic borrowing from Uzbek and Persian-Turkic lexicons. It reveals how Akhmatova integrates Oriental aesthetics without exoticizing, creating an authentic, multi-dimensional image of the East. These findings illuminate the cultural hybridity in Akhmatova's wartime poetics and contribute to broader discussions on cross-cultural literary expression and identity within Soviet literature.

Keywords: Non-fictional East, Oriental Motif, Man of the East, Means of Expression, Metaphor, Comparison

Introduction

In the poetic legacy of Anna Akhmatova, her Tashkent period stands out as a transformative stage, where her creative imagination was deeply inspired by the landscapes, traditions, and cultural depth of the East. During her evacuation to Tashkent from 1941 to 1944, Akhmatova encountered a world that was geographically, spiritually, and culturally distinct from her native surroundings, yet resonant with poetic depth. This encounter led to the development of a unique Oriental myth, which permeates her poetic cycle written during those years. The East, as depicted in her verses, transcends a mere

geographic space—it emerges as a symbolic landscape rich in metaphors, religious and folkloric allusions, and nuanced emotional textures. Through the invocation of natural symbols such as poplars, pomegranates, and the moon, as well as historical references and cultural imagery like teahouses and harems, Akhmatova constructs an intimate and reverent vision of the East. Notably, she intertwines Eastern poetic traditions and linguistic elements—Uzbek, Persian, and Turkic—with Russian literary expression, allowing for a cross-cultural synthesis that enriches her myth-making. This poetic myth not only celebrates the East but also subtly affirms the interconnectedness of cultural identities. The Tashkent poems thus offer a rare literary expression of wartime exile, transformed through a profound engagement with the aesthetics, history, and spiritual allure of the East, ultimately positioning it as both muse and metaphor within Akhmatova’s artistic universe.

Methods

This study employed a literary-historical and contextual-interpretive approach to examine the mythologization of the East in the Tashkent poems of Anna Akhmatova [1]. The primary source materials comprised Akhmatova’s poetic works written during her evacuation period in Tashkent, specifically selected poems that demonstrate orientalist imagery and motifs [2]. These texts were analyzed alongside authentic linguistic and cultural elements, including Uzbek folklore, Persian-Turkic lexicon, Quranic references, and oral traditions prevalent in Central Asian societies [3]. The method involved close textual reading to identify symbols, metaphors, and similes used by the poet to construct a mythic representation of the East [4]. Emphasis was placed on intertextual references, such as Akhmatova’s incorporation of oriental poetry, local proverbs, and her interactions with prominent Central Asian literary figures [5]. Supplementary materials, including memoirs, scholarly commentaries, and historical texts about Akhmatova’s time in Tashkent, were critically reviewed to support the cultural and historical contextualization of her works [6]. Particular attention was paid to the use of Eastern flora, celestial imagery, and everyday life references, such as bazaars, teahouses, and traditional household items, to evaluate how these contributed to the layered construction of Eastern myth in her poetry [7]. The study also drew on theories of cultural semiotics and myth-making to interpret how Akhmatova’s personal experiences, translation work, and interactions with Uzbek society informed her poetic imagination [8]. This methodological framework allowed for a nuanced understanding of the East as both a symbolic and lived space in Akhmatova’s literary vision [9].

Results and Discussion

According to Vyach. Vs. Ivanov, “Russian poetry also includes the East as part of our living history, continuing in the experience of modernity” [10]. Akhmatova’s poetic pseudonym already refers to the East: “They named me Anna in honor of my grandmother Anna Yegorovna Motovilov [11]. Her mother was a Chingizid, a Tatar princess Akhmatova, whose surname, without realizing that I was going to become a Russian poet, I made my literary name” [12]. But Akhmatova’s deep interest in the East and Eastern culture begins during her Tashkent period (evacuation) [13]. Akhmatova was evacuated to Tashkent from 1941 to May 1944 [14]. In the poems of this period, she turns to the East, to its nature and culture, creating her own poetic myth about it [15].

Firstly, the basis of this myth-making is the very nature of the East, for example, in the poem “From the Terrible Squares”: “You sent me such coolness, / Decorated the fences with poplars / And spread myriads of Asian luminaries / Over my sorrow?”. In the works of Eastern writers, the poplar is a symbol of greatness and wisdom. In oral folklore, proverbs, sayings, and phraseological units are used that contain the word “poplar” (in Uzbek – “terAk”): Qora terAk (lit. black poplar) – “a noble person” who can give a helping hand at the right moment. Sen ekkan teraklar kesilib ketkan (lit. your poplars are cut down) – “your time has passed”.

In Akhmatova’s Tashkent poems, fruits are mentioned that in the Muslim tradition are considered to be the fruits of the Garden of Eden, as mentioned in the Koran, with which, apparently, Akhmatova was well acquainted. In the poem “And in Memory, as if in a Patterned Laying”, the key image is the pomegranate: “And the royal dwarf, / the pomegranate bush...”. In the Koran, the pomegranate acts

as a symbol of heavenly pleasure: in one of the gardens of Eden, a pomegranate tree blooms as a symbol of abundance and tranquility: (“68 وَرُمَّانٌ وَتَخْلُ فَاكِهَةٌ فِيهِمَا”) – “in which there are fruits, palm trees and pomegranates (68)).

In the poem “Our Motherland Gave Us a Haven” (1943), the key images of the East are roses and grapes: “Our Motherland Gave Us a Haven of Immortal Roses and Dry Grapes...”. “Immortal” indicates that the beauty of the East is not temporary, but eternal, immortal. “Dry grapes” – usually, Uzbeks dry grapes so that they can be stored for a long time and retain their taste (Uzbek “mayiz” – Russian “raisin”, “kishmish”). And this phrase also confirms the idea of immortality.

In the poem “Interieur”, the image of the East is given through the image of the moon: “When the moon lies like a slice of Chardjui melon / On the edge of the window, and it’s stuffy all around”. Akhmatova compares the moon to a slice of melon, since in Uzbekistan melon is usually cut into pieces, and these pieces resemble the early moon, the sight of which causes amazement and delight in the author. The word “chardjui” is translated from Persian as “four channels, sources”. “Chardjui” is the name of one of the regions of Turkmenistan, which became famous for its melons. These melons and watermelons were imported from this region to all corners of the Union (including Tashkent). At the bazaars of Tashkent, Chardjui melons were highly valued and sold like hot cakes. In the East, it is customary to leave a slice of melon or watermelon on the windowsill so that the house smells of sweet melon or watermelon.

In the poem “Now I thank everyone”, the myth of the East is revealed through the symbolism of blue (azure): “For eight hundred magical days / Under your blue cup, / Lapis lazuli cup / I breathed you, a burning garden...”. Shades of blue in Eastern culture are multifaceted in semantics. They are associated with the magical component of the world, pacify and set the mood for contemplation or reflection. “Lapis lazuli” (from Latin lapis – “stone”) is a mineral from blue to bluish-gray, the best stones are considered to be rich blue or blue-violet, as well as deep blue. The name “lapis lazuli” appeared in the early Middle Ages. The word “azure” comes from the Persian. «لازورد» – lāzhvard – blue stone, lapis lazuli. The color of the sky is compared to the color of the azure stone. In Persian, the word «zhom» (in Russian «cup»), when translated, means «sky», under which live people who believe in God, who are internally and externally pure, whom God will reward with a place in paradise on the Day of Judgment. The 15th-century Persian poet Abdurrahman Jami took this word as his pseudonym («jamiy» from the word «zhom» – «heavenly, pure»). With these images («blue cup», «lapis lazuli cup»), Akhmatova emphasizes this word: «Joylari jannatning bogʻida boʻlsin, / Jomlarigʻa kavsar ziloli toʻlsin. / Let their place be in the Garden of Eden / Let the cups be filled with “kawsar” water / Let them take this sunlight / With the legendary Jamshid plate].

Secondly, Akhmatova mythologizes the man of the East, for example, in the poem “Falling Asleep Upset” Akhmatova calls the heroine of the fairy tales “A Thousand and One Nights”: “Scheherazade / Comes from the garden... / So this is what you are like, the East!”. This poem is dedicated to Galina Gerus (Kozlovskaya), who was exiled to Tashkent in 1937 together with her husband, the Leningrad composer A. F. Kozlovsky. In Tashkent, they were close friends of Akhmatova. G. L. Kozlovskaya recalled the background to this poem: “My husband often took her for walks around the old city, which he knew and loved. He once brought her to that “paradise” in which we lived for three years of our exile. “Two houses, two gardens with cherry and peach trees that sometimes blossomed, sometimes bore fruit, a silvery fragrant dzhida, a huge poplar and apricot trees that covered half the garden. There was everything here: a grape vine, a rose bush, and a ditch running along the paths where fragrant mint of all colors curled”. Akhmatova called Gerus “my Scheherazade”. N. Gumilyov also had an interest in oriental fairy tales and wrote about Scheherazade in the poem “About lakes, about white peacocks”: “As if tender Scheherazade / Started a magical story, / And it seemed that nothing was needed / Except for these illuminated eyes”.

In Tashkent, Akhmatova was friends with representatives of the literary circle of different nationalities – with Aibek, Gulyam, Chusti, Kakhkhar, Khalima, which she mentions in the poem

“Everything will return to me again”: “Everything will return to me again: / The scorching night and languor / (As if Asia is delirious in a dream), / Khalima’s nightingale singing, / And the bloom of biblical daffodils, / And an invisible blessing / Rustles like a breeze across the country”. Khalima Nasyrova is a famous Uzbek singer who sang songs on the ghazals of Lutfi, whom Akhmatova loved. In the poem “Now I thank everyone”, Akhmatova calls a child “baranchuka”: “And to the little baranchukas / Of black-haired mothers / In the young arms...”. Since Uzbek and Tatar belong to the same language family, some words have become common. “Baranchuk” is a Tatar word meaning a baby ram (the Uzbek equivalent is “küzychOk” - a lamb). In the Uzbek people, a sheep (or lamb) is a symbol of helplessness, for example, in the Uzbek proverb “küy ogzidan chüp olmagan” (meaning “won’t hurt a fly”) - “quiet, soft, gentle, helpless”. A child is helpless, like a lamb, so Uzbek women call their children lambs. The image of a baby lamb is present in the poem “You are not an orphan” by the Uzbek poet G. Gulyam, translated by Akhmatova, whom she considered one of the best poets of Asia: “Sleep, my boy, my white lamb, fall asleep. / I am a father! I will give you whatever you want, / All your worries will become my happiness”.

Thirdly, Akhmatova’s Eastern myth is built on historical allusions – references to historical figures, events, and traditions of the East. In the poem “At the Smolensk Cemetery”: “The East still lay as an unknown space / And thundered in the distance like a formidable enemy camp”. Akhmatova probably has in mind the story of Tamerlane, who tried to capture Moscow in 1395, but retreated after the intercession of the Vladimir Icon of the Mother of God. The historical context is also important in the poem “These Are Your Lynx Eyes, Asia”: “These Are Your Lynx Eyes, Asia, / They saw something in me...”. The lynx has traditionally been considered a very intelligent animal, its distinctive feature being the ability to see through various obstacles, making it difficult to catch. Its keen eyes have become a symbol of courage. Akhmatova probably has in mind the terrifying eyes of the legendary commander of the East, Tamerlane: as the historian Ibn Arabshah points out, “his eyes were like candles, but without shine”. Fourthly, Akhmatova often introduces images into her Tashkent poems that reflect everyday Eastern life. Thus, in the poem “Falling Asleep Upset”: “Mangalochy yard, / How bitter your smoke is”. “Mangalochy yard” is a brazier in the Middle East, a copper bowl on legs with wide horizontal rims, two handles for carrying and a hemispherical lid. A copper or clay cup with hot (charcoal) coals is placed inside the brazier. Everyday realities are also introduced in the poem “Another Lyrical Digression”: “The whole sky is in red doves, / Bars in the windows – the spirit of a harem... / Like in a house where there is fragrant darkness / And the windows are locked from the heat, / And where there is no hero yet, / But the poppy has flooded the roof with blood...”. In ancient times, the eastern khans had harems. These harems held, as if in captivity, more than a hundred wives. Men were not allowed into the harems, so the windows were barred. When tulips bloom, a strong wind blows, so their petals are carried in all directions. During the heat, the windows in the house are closed to keep cool. “Fragrant darkness” – fresh pepper is dried in houses and its smell fills the entire house.

In the poem “And I’ll Tell You Everything”, the image of a teahouse appears: “And I’ll tell you everything: / How the wild “Afghan” rushed past. / And whose face is on the white moon, / What the irrigation ditches will still whisper, / What I’ll overhear in the teahouse”. “Teahouse” is a word of Turkic origin that combines two words: “tea” and “khana” – literally a room where they drink tea and talk, mostly old people. Fifthly, Akhmatova’s experience of translating Eastern poets, in which she advocates for preserving the authentic spirit, also influenced the creation of the myth of the East. Translations helped her to master a foreign culture, while she always tried to preserve the spirit and imagery of the original. By translating, Akhmatova mastered a foreign culture and transformed herself into a person with a different worldview. In her poems, the “natural” point of view on the world prevails, and the human soul comes into agreement with the laws of existence, the possibility of “rebellion” against the injustice of these laws is removed (“nature is good”). In Akhmatova’s Tashkent poems, there are Eastern genres (sidjo, couplet, etc.), Eastern philosophy of nature and culture, which bring Akhmatova’s lyrics so close to the poetry of the East that the reader may think that such

expressions as "eternal roses", "my ancient home", "all-knowing lips", "barbecue yard", "tall poplar", "red poppy", "baranchuk" belong not to a Russian, but to an Eastern poet.

Thus, Akhmatova mythologizes the image of the East on the following levels:

- a. The nature of the "Asian" East (referring, among other things, to Eastern poetic and Muslim traditions) allows Akhmatova to create a sense of the ancient, eternal, timeless, "immortal" East;
- b. The East is mythologized through images of an Eastern man, also referring to Eastern poetic and Muslim traditions; one of the sources of this mythologization for Akhmatova was the poetry of Gumilev;
- c. The East is mythologized through historical allusions – references to historical figures, events, traditions of the East (to Tamerlane and the culture of his reign); The East is associated with the masculine principle;
- d. Everyday, everyday realities of the East are mythologized.

In creating an oriental myth and conveying oriental flavor, Akhmatova uses Uzbek words and expressions, words of Persian-Turkic origin ("mangalochy dvorik", "khair", "jigit", "rahmat", "ankhAr", "aryk", "black rayhan", etc.). She never abuses oriental flavor - a bowl, skullcaps, aksakals, etc., but expands the space of her "Asian home" to the general East - Tashkent, Samarkand, Durmen (Writers' House in Tashkent), Cairo, Burma, Kashmir, China.

Mythologization of the East in several dimensions (nature, man, history, life, traditions, language, experience of a translator) allows Akhmatova to comprehensively and widely depict the East as the "cradle of humanity", the "cradle of civilization". Love for a foreign culture becomes the basis for the manifestation of love for one's own culture and the whole world.

Conclusion

The Tashkent poems of Anna Akhmatova represent a deeply layered and poetic mythologization of the East, built on her personal experiences during her evacuation to Uzbekistan. Through vivid imagery and cultural references, she reimagines the East not merely as a geographic or exotic entity but as a rich symbolic world infused with nature, historical memory, spiritual insight, and everyday life. Her depictions—ranging from the symbolism of the poplar and pomegranate to the mysticism of blue lapis lazuli, to historical and literary allusions such as Tamerlane and Scheherazade—reveal a nuanced understanding of the East grounded in Uzbek, Persian, and Turkic traditions. The inclusion of localized words and expressions further reinforces the authenticity of her engagement, while her friendships with local artists and translators allowed her to absorb the East through both personal connection and poetic vision. By merging her own lyrical voice with Eastern poetic forms, Akhmatova not only expands Russian poetic tradition but also builds a cultural bridge that honors the East as a cradle of civilization. Her myth of the East, far from being superficial or decorative, becomes a profound narrative of admiration, dialogue, and cultural unity. This poetic synthesis underscores a universal theme: that the love for a foreign culture can deepen one's love for humanity as a whole.

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