

The Myth of the East in the Poems of S. Esenin

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Abstract:

The poetry of Sergei Yesenin reveals a deep engagement with the East, particularly Persia, reflecting a cultural and aesthetic fascination during Russia's Silver Age. While Yesenin's lyrical reflections have been broadly explored, the structured myth-making of the East within his works remains insufficiently examined, especially in relation to Persian imagery and philosophy. This study utilizes literary and thematic analysis, examining motifs, metaphors, and Eastern subtexts across the "Persian Motifs" cycle. The analysis identifies how Yesenin constructs a multi-layered myth of the East through the romanticization of nature, tradition, and the idealized Eastern woman, symbolized by figures like Shagane and Peri. These representations create an authentic vision of the East—not as exotic fantasy, but as an emotionally and culturally resonant world rooted in lived history and poetic imagination. The findings contribute to understanding how Eastern cultural elements shape Russian poetic identity, demonstrating that Yesenin's embrace of the East enriches both cross-cultural dialogue and a deeper appreciation of his national heritage.

Keywords: non-fictional East, oriental motif, man of the East, means of expression: metaphor, comparison.

Introduction

The image of the East has long fascinated Russian poets, particularly during the Silver Age, when Oriental culture was not only an exotic theme but also a profound philosophical and aesthetic resource. In this context, Sergei Yesenin stands out for his poetic engagement with the East—not as a superficial or decorative theme, but as a deeply internalized and mythologized worldview. Unlike earlier Russian literary portrayals that often oscillated between idealization and denigration of the East, Yesenin's poems reflect a personal and nuanced immersion in Eastern culture, especially Persian traditions. His poetic vision is rooted in both admiration for the beauty of the East and an awareness of its symbolic depth, where landscapes, characters, and traditions form a cohesive

mythical whole. Drawing from Persian mythology, Islamic poetic tropes, and the cultural codes of Uzbekistan and Iran, Yesenin creates a lyrical cosmos in which figures such as “peri” and “Shagane” are not merely literary constructs but embodiments of emotional, spiritual, and cultural synthesis. His language incorporates Eastern expressions, metaphors, and sensual imagery, reflecting his desire to bridge the poetic sensibilities of Russia and the East. However, beneath this myth lies a tension between the allure of foreign beauty and the pull of native soil, ultimately reaffirming the sacredness of homeland over exotic fascination. This introduction explores the foundation of Yesenin’s Eastern myth and situates it within the broader discourse of cultural hybridity, revealing how mythologization serves as a poetic method for reconciling the foreign with the familiar.

Methods

The methodological approach of this study is grounded in qualitative literary analysis, focusing on Sergei Yesenin’s poetic texts that explicitly engage with the theme of the East, especially those from his “Persian Motifs” cycle.[1] The research involves close reading and contextual interpretation of selected poems to trace myth-making strategies, identify orientalist imagery, and reveal intertextual connections with Eastern literary traditions.[2] Linguistic and cultural references are critically analyzed to uncover how Yesenin incorporates Eastern symbols, metaphors, and tropes, not as superficial ornaments but as integral elements of meaning construction.[3] The methodology emphasizes textual evidence, drawing from primary sources—Yesenin’s poems—and cross-referencing them with Persian literary influences and folkloric elements.[4] The analysis also integrates insights from secondary sources, such as scholarly commentary on myth, East-West dichotomies, and the Silver Age’s perception of Asia, to build a comparative framework.[5] The study applies cultural-historical and semiotic lenses to interpret the myth of the East as articulated through the poet’s representations of “peri,” Persian landscape, and cultural customs.[6] Furthermore, the method involves identifying shifts in tone, symbolism[7]

Results and Discussion

The East was the focus of attention for many creators of the Silver Age, and for them it was the land of Sufi poets: from Hafiz to Rumi. According to Vyach. Vs. Ivanov, “Russian poetry also includes the East as part of our living history, continuing in the experience of modernity”.[8] Rus’ and Asia were contrasted with each other as “pure” and “impure” places, the Russian and Muslim languages – one holy, the other sinful.[9] As Likhachev notes, only in the 18th century did Russian culture discover the East with all its traditions, and from that time onwards, the early negative view was replaced by a positive one.[10] To be brief, it was in the 18th century that Russian literature paid much attention to Eastern culture, and especially poetry.[11]

Mass translations began, and the translators were most interested in the works of Saadi, famous throughout the Muslim East.[12] But Russian literature also published notes, diaries, and ethnographic observations.[13] They introduced the real, not fictional East.[14] In Eastern stories, Eastern topics and onomastics were initially used as decorations for the plot of “enlightenment,” and in Russian poetry, Eastern motifs began to be used as an Eastern style.[15] In the appeals to the image of the East by Russian poets and writers, we can find their similarities and differences. The theme of the East has been repeatedly addressed over the years by such Russian writers and poets as A. Fet, N. Gumilyov, A. Akhmatova, V. Khlebnikov, A. Blok, and others, and they masterfully used Eastern images in their work. One of those whose work is closely connected with the East is S. Yesenin. Yesenin’s poetry is multidirectional. In it we can see a variety of motives, including Eastern ones (in a letter to G. A. Benislavskaya dated April 8, 1925, Yesenin wrote: “I want to go even to Shiraz and I think I will definitely go. After all, all the best Persian lyricists were born there. And it is not for nothing that Muslims say: if he does not sing, it means he is not from Shushu, if he

does not write, it means he is not from Shiraz” . The poet used this proverb in the poem «The hands of my darling are a pair of swans... » («Руки милой — пара лебедей...»)

Everything has its own gait,
What pleases the ear, what pleases the eye.
If a Persian composes a song poorly,
It means he is never from Shiraz).

This is precisely what is felt in the cycle of poems “Persian Motifs”. E.I. Naumov rightly called them (“Persian Motifs”) “The most striking evidence of the poet’s new, deeper, brighter feelings and thoughts” . Many Russian poets and writers have addressed the theme of the East. And each of them shows the East in a different way. And most of them partially addressed this theme. But Yesenin reflects the East in a special way. He mythologizes the East (A.F. Losev gives the following definition of myth: “Myth is the most necessary – it must be said frankly, transcendently – necessary category of thought and life; and there is absolutely nothing accidental, unnecessary, arbitrary, fictitious or fantastic in it. It is a genuine and maximally concrete reality”) and revives it in a unique way. And a new legendary East with its “Peri”, “Shagane” is reborn before the Russian reader. The myth of the East in Yesenin’s lyrics is not a fiction, not a fantasy, but the poet’s real idea of Asia, mainly of Persia. Persia is not simply included in Yesenin’s poems, but flows into them. The poet’s vocabulary includes both landscape and Persian words, an example of this can be the poet’s poem "In Khorasan there are such doors...":

In Khorasan there are such doors,
Where the threshold is strewn with roses.
There lives a pensive peri.
In Khorasan there are such doors,
But I couldn’t open those doors

"Where the threshold is strewn with roses" - usually in the East, thresholds in front of the door are decorated with flowers. And this landscape certainly attracts the poet's attention. "Thoughtful peri" - (Persian: پری Parī) - in the image of "Peri" we find some aspects: - reminding us of eastern mythology (the image of a beautiful girl with wings); - reminding us of the literature of romanticism: "peri" - beautiful Shagane (the image of a precise, specific girl); - going back to the eastern idea of the peri as an angel who lives in the heavenly gardens of Allah (from the ideological and thematic side) In the poem "You are beautiful, Persia, I know":

You are beautiful, Persia, I know
Roses, like lamps, burn
And again they tell me about a distant land.
With elastic freshness.
You are beautiful, Persia, I know

The poet is enchanted by the beauty of the East. For him, the East is another, unknown, unfamiliar land, unlike the one where he was born and raised. In this new world, everything is different: the culture, the places, the customs, the traditions – everything is unique, like in a dream. The East is a delicate matter. A man of the East is a man of feelings. He does not just tell everyone about his feelings in his soul, but expresses them with the help of various metaphors and comparisons. For example, in the works of Eastern poets, a beloved is likened to a flower. In Uzbek classical

literature, such poets as Navoi, Babur, Atoi, Sakkoki, Gadoi also often turned to the image of a flower in their works. An example of this is the poem "Sen gulsen" by Babur, where the image of a beloved is likened to a flower: Sen gulsenu men haqir bulbuldurmen (You are a flower, I am a real nightingale), This way of expression of the people of the East also attracts the poet's attention in the poem "I asked the money changer today":

They don't speak of love in words,
They sigh about love only furtively,
And their eyes, like sapphires, burn

They say that it was beauty that made a poet a poet. Of course, a poet is an admirer of beauty, and creativity is a product of beauty. In the poem "My former wound has subsided", Yesenin's attention is also drawn to the beauty of eastern girls - "peri":

It was not for nothing that my eyes winked,
Throwing back the black chador

The Eastern "peri" is the Universe itself. Not a simple Universe, but a Universe that hides the secret of the entire Universe. This secret has not yet been discovered by humanity. To solve this secret, the Russian poet is ready to do anything. To win the heart of the "Peri" he is ready to give everything he has:

Well, and to this one for the movement of her figure,
Whose face resembles the dawn,
I will give a shawl from Khorasan
And I will give a Shiraz carpet

But in the East, the beauty of the "peri" is not revealed to everyone. Their beauty is supposedly a treasure, and, of course, the treasure is always kept secret. Eastern girls usually walk with their faces covered in veils. And this surprises Yesenin. And the poet expresses his attitude to this:

I don't like that Persians
Keep women and girls under the chador.
In Russia, we don't keep spring girls
On a chain, like dogs...

Along with the reflection of the beautiful image of the East, Yesenin raises the theme of love. For the poet's lyrical hero Shagane serves as a symbol of the beauty of the East:

There, in the North, there is a girl too,
She looks terribly like you...

But, unfortunately for the poet, the love story of the lyrical hero will not last long - Shagane loves another:

Your Shagane was caressing another,
Shagane was kissing another...

The love of any poet falls first of all on his homeland, on the land of the country where he was born and raised. No matter how beautiful his beloved is, his homeland still continues to call him to itself. This situation is reflected in Yesenin. The poet loves Shagane, for her sake he is ready to do anything (Well, and to this one for the movement of her waist / Whose face is like the dawn / I will

give a shawl from Khorasan / And I will give a Shiraz carpet), but the homeland is sacred. Longing for the homeland outweighs longing for the "Peri". The loss of the homeland is harder than the separation of the beloved. The Persian land, no matter how beautiful it is, does not have a native land in it, after all, native Ryazan is different:

Just don't wake up the memory in me
About wavy rye under the moon
No matter how beautiful Shiraz is,
It is no better than the Ryazan expanses

The poet becomes disillusioned with love and decides to leave the East, no matter how difficult it may be:

It's time for me to go back to Rus'
Persia, I'm leaving you.
Am I parting with you forever.
Out of love for my native land?
It's time for me to go back to Rus'

Many poets and writers have created their own myths about the East. But the myth created by Yesenin is unique. It is not just a product of the poet's artistic imagination, not a legend, but the real world. It contains all the traditions, legends, foundations, and beauty of the real East. Yesenin's East is not an impression of a person from another culture who represents a culture alien to him, but a hymn about the country where the poet's beloved "Peri" was born and raised.

Yesenin often turns to the image of the East in his work. The theme of the East dominates in many poems. He tries to describe the East as widely and diversely as possible, as it really is. This process is carried out both against the background of biographical subtext and against the background of individual images. Yesenin mythologizes the image of the East at the following levels: The East is mythologized through the images of an Eastern man (Shagane); Everyday, everyday realities of the East are mythologized ("They keep women and girls under the veil"), etc. Thus, this mythologization of the East in several dimensions (nature, man, everyday life, traditions, language) allows Yesenin to comprehensively and broadly 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 entire world.

Conclusion

Sergei Yesenin's poetic engagement with the East, particularly in his "Persian Motifs," reveals a profound and multifaceted myth-making process that transcends mere stylistic imitation. Through evocative imagery, cultural allusions, and linguistic integration, Yesenin does not depict a distant, exotic East, but rather reanimates it as a living, breathing reality grounded in authentic admiration and emotional resonance. The East in his poetry is not a fictional space; it is a realm inhabited by figures like Shagane and Peri, steeped in tradition, sensuality, and mysticism, reflecting both historical reverence and personal longing. Yesenin's use of metaphor, Persian vocabulary, and symbolic landscapes reflects a genuine internalization of Eastern poetic sensibilities. Yet, beneath the enchantment lies a tension between the allure of the East and the unbreakable bond with his native Rus'. The myth he constructs ultimately becomes a dialogue between foreign admiration and national identity, culminating in his poetic return to his homeland. By intertwining biographical elements with rich cultural symbolism, Yesenin elevates the East not merely as a poetic theme but as a vital lens through which to explore universal questions of love, longing, and belonging. In

doing so, he contributes a unique and enduring layer to the Russian literary tradition's complex portrayal of the East, offering readers a bridge between civilizations and a poetic tribute to the beauty and mystery of cultural convergence.

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