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Sufi Symbolism in Tolib Shakhidi's Televised Ballet *The Rubaiyat of Omar Khayyam*

In the article devoted to one of the most well-known compositions by the Tajik composer Tolib Shakhidi the means of reflection of Sufi symbolism in the synthetic genre of the televised ballet are researched. Stemming from the essential parameters of the symbol (taking into account the formed traditions of study of this category), the authors propose their own perspective of the issue. The role of the symbol is shown in expounding by artistic means of the Sufi path of perfection (Tarikat) as a bridge between the two worlds. The orientation on the multilevel complex of sets (musical, scenographic, choreographical, scenic or poetical) and the specificity of the chief Sufi principle of *zohir-botin* (the inner vs. the outer) made it possible to carry out the analysis of the indicated phenomenon on the basis of a differentiated approach toward symbol. As a result, symbol-images are revealed (the main characters are the Poet, his Muse and Death), which are the most multifaceted and acquiring the features of allegory and metaphor; symbol-signs, frequently carrying out the functions of leit-symbols (a pitcher, a chalice of wine, fire, a flute) and in virtue of Sufi cryptography acquiring signs of the symbol-emblem.

The possession of the verbal row (the sounding Rubaiyat of Omar Khayyam) aids the comprehension of Sufi conception with its metaphoricity. Research has shown that the examined symbolism is presented on the following level: in scenic dramaturgy, in the images of the main dramatis personae, in their musical manifestation, in the utilization of symbolic poetry, in color solutions in the attributive formatting of the televised ballet.

Keywords: Sufi symbolism, televised ballet, Rubaiyat of Omar Khayyam, the principle of *zohir-botin*, Tolib Shakhidi.

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Суфийская символика в телебалете Т. Шахиди «Рубаи Хайяма»

В статье, посвящённой одному из самых известных сочинений таджикского композитора Толиба Шахиди, исследованы способы отражения суфийской символики в синтетическом жанре телебалета. Исходя из сущностных параметров символа (с учётом сложившихся традиций изучения этой категории), авторы предлагают собственный взгляд на проблему. Показывается роль символа в экспонировании художественными средствами суфийского пути совершенствования (Тарикат) как моста между двумя мирами. Ориентация на многоуровневый комплекс рядов (музыкального, сценографического, хореографического, сценического, поэтического) и специфику ведущего суфийского принципа *зохир-ботин* (внешнее-внутреннее) позволила выполнить анализ обозначенного феномена на основе дифференцированного подхода к символу. В результате выявлены символы-образы (главные персонажи – Поэт, его Муза и Смерть), наиболее многогранные и обретающие черты аллегории и метафоры; символы-знаки, нередко выполняющие функцию лейтсимволов (кувшин, чаша вина, огонь, флейта) и в силу суфийской тайнописи обретающие признаки символа-эмблемы.

Наличие вербального ряда (звучащие рубаи Омара Хайяма) помогает пониманию суфийской концепции с её метафоричностью. Исследование показало, что рассматриваемая символика представлена на следующих уровнях: в сценарной драматургии, образах главных действующих лиц, их музыкальном воплощении, в использовании символической поэзии, цветовых решениях и атрибутивном оформлении телебалета.

Ключевые слова: суфийская символика, телебалет, рубаи Хайяма, принцип *зохир-ботин*, Толиб Шахиди.



The televised ballet *The Rubaiyat of Omar Khayyam*, composed by Tajik composer Tolib Shakhidi in 1980, is one of the first incorporations of the Sufi theme in Soviet music. In the conditions of the ideology of that time projects of ballets in the vein of the Sufi aesthetics were not encouraged. In this particular case there is nothing remarkable, however, since the literary legacy of Omar Khayyam was regarded as being outside of this tradition. However, research of Vassily Zhukovsky, Jahangir Dorrie, Paramahansa Yogananda, Georgy Miloslavsky and Javad Nurbakhsh bears witness to the fact that Omar Khayyam pertained to the mystical branch of Islam. For the composer himself, who grew up in an atmosphere of veneration of the Tajik-Persian classical poetry¹, the Sufi base of the poet's legacy was all too obvious. It is not by chance that in the same year 1980 he used a fragment of the Rubaiyat of Omar Khayyam, which served as the epigraph to his chamber symphony *Charkh* (*charkh* – potter's wheel) devoted to the comprehension of the circular flow of life and death. There is no doubt that the group of musicians the composer associated himself with initially oriented itself on this position².

It must be emphasized: the comprehension of the specified issue requires a preliminary excursus into the sphere of perceptions of Sufism and its symbolism. Sufism as a mystical-philosophical trend, which appeared within the Arab Muslim civilization after the death of the Prophet Muhammed, remains up to the present day, is one of the leading directions of Islamic mysticism. It owes its popularity in the contemporary world to the works of Sufi poets (Farid-ad-din Attar, Abd Al-Rakhman Jami, Jalal ad-Din Rumi, Hakim Abul-Majd Majdūd ibn Ādam Sanā'ī, Hafiz, Omar Khayyam and others) and its relation to music³. The medieval poets and sheikhs successfully applied poetry and music to their sermons and councils (Mejlis) to attract new adepts as a means of sublime emotional impact on the auditorium. The lack of the opportunities to spread their teaching openly stipulated the use of verbal codes and the language of metaphors, founded on the leading Sufi binary principle of *zohir-botin* (the revealed vs. the concealed, the outward vs. the inward)⁴. This resulted in a metaphorical system, permeated with symbolic images.

Let us concurrently note that the aspiration towards the comprehension of the manifestations

of symbols within the framework of religious consciousness, culture and art is characteristic for works of both secular and confessional focus. Notwithstanding all the diversity of approaches and positions in the context of the present article it is important to highlight one joint moment: understanding the bridge (in the capacity of a connecting link) between the two worlds – the empyrean and the earthly (according to Pavel Florensky), the natural and the spiritual (Nikolai Berdyayev), the sacred and the profane (Mircea Eliade), the inward and the outward (Aynulkuzat Khamadani), the rational and the mystical (Yuri Lotman), the physical and the metaphysical (Juan Kerlot), etc.⁵

Symbolism in Islamic mysticism predominated not only in the arts of poetry, music and dance, but also permeated into the sphere of architecture, painting and calligraphy. "From the very beginning of its existence Sufism applied symbols in its anthology, gnoseology, ethics and aesthetics, organizing on its basis a certain worldview doctrine and explaining with its help that which is not amenable to formal logical explanation," the researcher Aknazar Kurbanmamadov writes [4, p. 81]. Thereby, symbols exerted substantial influence not only on the idea-based and content-based side of a musical composition, but also on very its texture and structure.

These artistic resources did not pass by the attention of 20th and 21st century composers, such as Granville Bantock, Anatoly Varelas, Philip Glass, Sofia Gubaidulina, Alisher Latifadze, Karol Szymanowski, Yuri Yuketchev and others. The most multilaterally outlined traditions are reflected in the music of Tajik composer Tolib Shakhidi (b. 1946). They replicate the values of Sufism – from rituals and poetry to the recreation of the images of saints by means of musical language⁶.

The poetry which regulates the graphic structure of the televised ballet initially contains in itself the potential of symbolic interpretation. Moreover, also because "the art of dance pertains to symbolic activity, while his language appears with a remarkable capacity of harmonization of man with the world" [2, p. 50]. Correspondingly, the realization of the noted potential in the conditions of the synthesis of the genre of the ballet and the principles of cinematic art expands the horizons and the possibilities of perception.

From hence follows the practicability of realization of adequately set goals of inner

differentiation of the category of the symbol, since this kind of differentiation does not possess with a generally accepted interpretation up to the present day and is presented by variants stipulated by the context.

Inasmuch as during the course of the undertaken analysis the following nuances in the manifestation of the Sufi symbolism arose: the symbol-sign, the symbol-emblem, the symbol-image, the symbolic metaphor and symbolic allegory. Despite the fact that Alexei Losev calls upon us not to mix up these “adjacent [in relation to symbol. – *M. D.*, *S. D.*] structural-semantic categories” [6, p. 143–168], in the existent literature (especially in Sufi literature) one may frequently encounter a lack of any boundary lines between them. In the present article, without erasing the boundaries set up by Losev, the symbolic constituent of these categories shall be considered. Such a symbolization is admissible not only in line with study of the traditions of Sufism, but also in the conditions of analysis of the synthetic genre endowed with the possibility of a multilevel, poly-modal perception on the basis of a complex of sets. It is not by chance that Victoria Alesenkova in the process of studying theatrical symbolization highlights the multidimensionality of the theatrical symbol, “one pole of which bears the symbol, the other pole bears the image, and the intermediary stage of the development of the symbol-sign into the symbol-image is the symbol-metaphor” [1, p. 154].

On the basis of the expounded it is deemed possible to characterize the symbols indicated above, placing them (similar to Alesenkova, but in a more differentiated matter) in between the two poles.

1) The symbol-sign. Generalizing the definitions presented in the research literature, we comprehend it as the material, tangible object of the outer world, replacing another object in the inner world and possessing singular concreteness. Considering the metaphoric quality of Sufi cryptography such signs frequently possess points of connection with the metaphor.

2) The symbol-emblem. As a rule, it is not differentiated in a definitive level from the symbol, but is marked out as a special, more concrete symbol. The existence of a context interconnected with such cryptography is frequently conducive to the “transformation” of signs and symbols into emblems comprehensible to the ordained⁷.

3) Symbolic metaphor, while possessing attributes common to metaphors⁸, in this case is connected with the aforementioned cryptography.

4) The image-symbol. It is interconnected with a concrete character endowed with an expressed connection with the irrational, mystical world. It must be noted that the image-symbol is the most multidimensional and multifaceted, frequently acquiring traits of allegory⁹ and metaphor.

The plot itself of the televised ballet is full of symbolic metaphors. Let us remind ourselves: one of the chief attributes of Sufi poetry consists in the poet invoking the Creator, the Absolute, presented in the guise of a dialogue with the Beloved Lady. Nonetheless, the Beloved here is God, and the entrancement from the Beloved is the achievement of unity with the Absolute¹⁰. Thereby, while the audience member who is unfamiliar with the Sufi conception sees in the plot the eternal motive of the battle of good and evil, where the latter bears death to poetic inspiration, for somebody who understands this symbolism the main conflict of the one-act ballet inscribed in the musical score is concentrated on expounding the Path of Perfection, the *Tarikat*. On this path the poet is encouraged by the Forces of Light (the Sitora Muse), while being counteracted by the Forces of Darkness (Death).

As the result of the synthetic quality of the genre of the televised ballet the examined symbolism in the present opus is revealed on all levels: the *audial* (the musical set), the *visual* (the scenographic set), the *kinesthetic* (the choreographic and scenic set) and the *verbal* (the poetical set). Correspondingly, the universal Sufi binary principle of *zohir-botin*, discovered on these levels, discloses the peculiarities of the dramaturgical conflict in Tolib Shakhidi’s musical composition. Thus, in the scenic dramaturgy of the ballet the indicated principle is manifested most brightly in the juxtaposition of the two polar opposite worlds: the worldly and the otherworldly. They are conveyed through two strata: the *autobiographical, real stratum* (Khayyam, who serves in a palace, is surrounded by the Malik-Shah and the nobility) and the mystical (the poet’s dialogue with the imaginary Muse and his struggle with Death). This kind of parallelism (the worldly and the otherworldly) forestalled the satiation of the dramaturgy with symbols.

Each of these worlds obeys its own set of laws, and is endowed with its own set of meanings.

Already as early as in the musical introduction the main idea of the ballet is contained – the struggle between matter and spirit, shown through the juxtaposition of the sound symbols-emblems – Death and Love, which forestall the subsequent appearance of the characters, the analogous symbols-images – Death and the Muse. The “beating motive” of Death (with the leit-timbre of temple-blocks) is sounded thirteen times. This ostinato writing depicts the implacability of the motion of time. The answer to the mechanistic motive is served by the short leitmotif of love – the softly ringing ascending trichord in the upper registers of the flute and the metallophone.

The symbolic quality of the main images of the televised ballet (the Poet, the Muse, Death) made an impact on their musical characteristics as well. Khayyam the thinker is presented as an antipode to the court life. His presence is not limited to the real world, since the glance of the poet is capable of viewing the hidden world. In the audial set the real, outer sphere (*zohir*) is delineated by the contrast between the dynamics and the pomposity of social life and the sound image of Khayyam the observer, who thinks instead of dancing. His characteristic features are given through prayer, which emphasizes the poet’s adherence to Sufism. On the other hand, in the concealed world Khayyam is characterized by means of dance – in the duos with the Muse, and in trios, where they are joined by Death. The characteristic features of the Muse Sitara as a symbol-image of Love is disclosed in three variations by means of the audial, visual and kinesthetic sets. Its musical characterization demonstrates a predominance of sounds of the flute and the harpsichords, which endows the image of Sitara with purity and light. It is important to emphasize that in the Sufi semantics the flute plays an important role, personifying the soul aspiring to move to the direction of the Creator, and the flute in this context becomes a symbol-emblem¹¹.

Another symbol-image in the ballet *The Rubaiyat of Omar Khayyam* is Death, which carries the role of an intermediary between the visible and the invisible worlds. It is endowed with a personal sound-emblem – a leit-timbre (the temple-blocks) and a leitmotif, as well as with personal gestures-emblems¹². The special trait of the image is that of a sudden incursion, its appearance in the solo and ensemble music depicting the other protagonists. In correspondence with the principle of *zohir-*

botin the image of Death is shown on two planes – the inward and the outward. On the outward plane it is efficient, characterized through dance solos, duos and trios. Here the composer utilized exclusively brass instruments in combination with the percussion group. On the hidden plane (the sphere of *botin*) the image is expounded in a directly opposite manner – as a static observing protagonist. Hereby it is emphasized: Death is powerful only in the real world¹³, while in the ultramundane world it is powerless. Concurrently, let us remind ourselves that the poet, on the other hand, acquires the dynamicism of dance only in the hidden world.

In the characteristics of the image-symbols of the ballet a significant role was played the color semantics, which possesses special significance in the aesthetics of Islamic mysticism. Omar Khayyam is presented in white raiment, Death – in black clothing, and the image of the Muse incorporates the glimmering of various lights (white, pink, violet and blue). And this is not by chance. It is commonly known that the white color represents innocence, purity of the soul, detachment from all earthly things, associating itself with the divine color. The woolen clothes of the Islamic mystic – the *khirka* – also solely white in its color. The meaning of the black color was interpreted as a sign of evil, adversity and mourning. It is no accident that “in the Sufi poems the word ‘black’ appeared as a synonym, and sometimes as a measure for human villainies, the sins of Adam’s sons” [7, p. 68].

In the characterization of the Muse there are gleams of such colors as pink, violet, blue, since “among the Muslims blue and purple were valued as colors of mystical contemplation, admission into the Divine essence” [9, p. 132]. In Tajik and Persian poetry the blue color is not only the sign of approaching death and parting, but also the sign of “the condition of the Sufi at the beginning of the spiritual path, the departure of the outer and the acknowledgement of the inner world” [7, p. 70]¹⁴.

The creators of the televised ballet were oriented not only on meanings of colors, but on attributive-substantive signs of the given tradition: the pitcher, the wine chalice, fire, and the vineyard. Thus, for example, the pitcher, appearing as a symbol-sign, plays the role of a peculiar leit-symbol. The “cohesive” pitcher demonstrated at the beginning of the composition is subsequently shown at various angles, and is

shattered at the dramatic moments of the ballet. Basing oneself on Sufi cryptography it is possible to assert: here it personifies human life. Such an understanding is unambiguously expressed in the episode expounded in the form of a symbolic metaphor, where the poet goes around and examines pitchers, which momentarily assume the images of people.

The role of another leit-symbol is carried out by the symbol-sign of the wine chalice. Let us note that in the works of Islamic mystics the process of wine drinking holds a special position, since wine for them is not a material substance, but it signifies the ravishment with Divine love, the disclosure of Truth, and becomes the source of the knowledge of God. In the televised ballet *The Rubaiyat of Omar Khayyam* the wine chalice acquires the character of a symbol-sign and is connected for the most part with the demonstration of Khayyam in the real world – not dancing, but thinking, observing the main protagonist. However, particularly after this the poet is transferred to the ultramundane world, where the transformation takes place of the image from the static to the efficient, involved in the element of dance. Thereby, the symbol-sign is complexified, obtaining the attributes of the metaphor, since in the activities of the Sufis “the process of psychological concentration on the object of fascination is compared with drinking wine, while the wine itself – with Divine love; the pitcher or the chalice symbolize the heart of the mystic, the repository of Divine love, symbolized by wine” [8, p. 122].

An important leit-symbol is also the symbol-sign of fire. In the visual set of the ballet it personifies destruction, the end of human life, accompanying the image of Death and the Forces of Darkness. It is symptomatic that in the demonstration of all the indicated symbols-signs (the pitcher, the wine chalice, fire) a special role is played by operators’ devices, such as high-speed shooting, combined film shooting, freeze frame shot, etc. Particularly

with their help the importance of any details whatsoever is emphasized.

A significant role in the ballet’s dramaturgy is played by the verbal set. Particularly the quatrains (the *rubai*) help disclose the essence of what takes place and to convey to the listener their idea of the aural, musical and scenographic sets. Analysis of these sixteen *rubai* in the aspect of the Sufi dictionary of cryptography shows that the verbal set contains its own dramaturgy, where the first *rubai* set the chief “code”: the theme of human fate and the inevitability of death. However, the mystical conception of the ballet is distinctly visible in the three concluding quatrains. They present the stages of motion of the human spirit, which realized the proximity of the end. In the first we see a certain demonstration of weakness and hesitation. But this is but a momentary weakness. The human being who believes in the Creator has only one regret – that in his life, which is nearing its end, he could have been closer to God. And, finally, the conclusive *rubai* presents the strength of the human spirit, which has known the unity with God and has perceived itself as His creation.

Summarizing this exposition, let us note that an adequate analysis of the Sufi symbolism in the televised ballet *The Rubaiyat of Omar Khayyam* called for additional differentiation within the category of the symbol, as well as the consideration of the specificity connected with metaphorical cryptography. This is predetermined by the synthetic quality of the genre, in which the symbolism is disclosed in the stage dramaturgy, the images of the chief dramatis personae and their musical characteristic features, in the utilization of Sufi poetry, the color-based solutions and the attributive organization of the televised ballet.

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NOTES

¹ This atmosphere was created by the composer’s father, Ziyadullo Shakhidi (1914–1985), one of the founders of the Tajik compositional school, who knew Tajik-Persian literature very well and loved it.

² This kind of confidence is conditioned not only by the position of the composer, who has developed the Sufi theme lengthily and consistently in his music, but also by accentuation (as shown below) on all levels of synthetic



text of the televised ballet of symbols characteristic for the poetics of Sufism and aimed at veiling the true meaning accessible only to the anointed.

³ It is known that the question of the permissibility of music in Islam remains arguable up to the present. On the other hand, in Sufism, particularly in some of its brotherhoods, music comprises an inseparable part of the rituals.

⁴ The sources of the Sufi principle of *zohir-botin* reach in their roots far back in the history of the pre-Islamic civilization based on Zoroastrianism and Manichaeism (which have absorbed in themselves the foundations of Christianity, complemented by Zoroastrianism and Buddhism).

⁵ Immanuel Kant speaks about two worlds. For him symbols in the human consciousness are a means of correlation between the noumenal and the phenomenal worlds. However, the philosopher is an adversary of the transcendence beyond the limits of the rational into the sphere of the intelligible.

⁶ Unlike the aforementioned composers the Sufi theme permeates the overwhelming number of Tolib Shakhidi's compositions. These include the Suite for Flute and Piano *The Recitatives of Rumi* (1981), concert music for fifteenth instruments *The Sufi Dance* (2000), Etude-Tableau for piano *The Sufi and Buddha* (2002), a piece for violin and piano *The Dance of Rumi* (2006), suite for three flutes *Conversation of Birds* based on F. Attar (2007), Fantasy for clarinet and piano *Poem about the Hidden Meaning* based on Jellaludin Rumi (2007), poem for chorus *The Essence of the Sufi* (2014), the choreographic cantata *Khafizname* (2014) and others. In connection with this the absence of research work in the line of the indicated problem range looks paradoxical. An exception is formed by the publications by the authors of the present work. These are the articles of Marina Drozhzhina (where the manifestation of the Sufi theme in the compositional works is examined, in particular, also on the examples of the compositions of Tolib Shakhidi): Jalal-ad-din Rumi v sochineniyakh sovremennykh kompozitorov [Jalal-ad-din Rumi in the Works by Contemporary Composers]. *Irano-Slavica*. 2008. No. 3, pp. 52–55; O poetike Jalal-ad-dina Rumi v kompozitorskom tvorchestve [About the Poetics of Jalal-ad-din Rumi in Composers' Works]. *Vestnik Tomskogo gosudarstvennogo universiteta* [Herald of the Tomsk State University]. 2012. No. 360, pp. 65–68. And also the diploma work by

S. D. Davlatova "Sufiyskaya tema v instrumental'nykh sochineniyakh Toliba Shakhidi" ["The Sufi Theme in the Instrumental Compositions of Tolib Shakhidi"] directly conjugated with the examined problem range (Novosibirsk, 2014), is continued at the present time in the dissertation for the degree of Candidate of Arts and the publications connected with it.

⁷ The peculiarities of the understanding of the Sufi metaphoricality are to a certain degree stipulated by the distribution of accents upon translation and depend on the adherence of the translator to a particular cultural milieu. About this see, for example: [11; 12].

⁸ Metaphor (Greek. *transferral*) – comparison, a stylistic device. It is frequently examined as the transferral of the characteristics of one object onto another according to the principle of their similarity in any relation or according to their concept.

⁹ Allegory is directed on revealing the abstract idea by means of a concrete depiction of an object or the phenomenon of reality, where the connection between the meaning and the image is established upon analogy or contiguity.

¹⁰ This is particularly why in Tolib Shakhidi's televised ballet there is no real beloved woman, but only the imagined presence of the Muse Sitora.

¹¹ This kind of semantics of the instrument is not the prerogative of Sufism. Thus, Victoria Davydova notes this semantics without any tying in with a concrete religion: "Surrounded by the breath of God, she is the hypostasis of God Himself" [3, p. 186].

¹² In psychology they are also called emblems or autonomous gestures, replacements for words. Thus, frequently the gesture-emblem of the end appear in the form of crossed hands.

¹³ Death for an ascetic Sufi "is not an event, but the disappearance of that last 'thing,' the symbol called 'death' by us" [6, pp. 116–117]. For direct references to Khayyam's attitude towards the questions of life and death see: [10; 13].

¹⁴ The color symbolism in the ballet is utilized not only upon expounding the main heroes, but also for indication of the place of action. Thus, for example, one of the duos between the Muse and Khayyam takes place against the green background of the vineyard. Green is considered to be a sacred color for Muslims. As a symbol of youth and abundance, it symbolized a benign oasis which rejuvenates nature.



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