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The Noble Heroines: A feministic perspective on a Persian classical romance: Khosrow and Shirin by Nezami of Ganja
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The Noble Heroines

Study on representation of female characters in a Persian
classical romance:

Khosrow and Shirin by Nezami of Ganja

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

Preface	3
Thesis Question and the Organisation of the Thesis	3
Chapter One: Introduction.....	5
Chapter Two: A Synopsis of This Romance.....	16
Chapter Three: Shirin Torn between Love and Marriage.....	21
Chapter Five: Maryam and Shekar, Lust or Love.....	40
Chapter Six: Conclusion.....	46
Bibliography.....	50

PREFACE

Women are featured distinctively in the works of many major classical Persian poets. Their portrayal of female characters is variable. Occasionally, they introduce new ethics concerning the position of women. Some female roles are developed based on historical characters and some are fictional. It is well known that the beauty, charm, and grace of Persian poetry is unsurpassed in Persian literature. Next to the heroism of Ferdowsi (932-1020), the fatalism of Khayyam (1048-1131), and the humanism of Sanai (1080-1131), Nezami (1141-1209) and his romanticism is a synthesis of Persian literary achievement¹. Persian poets are experts in playing with words, exercising metaphors and allusions through the usage of rhythms and the language. Through poetry, the poet communicates his or her thoughts and views of subjects.

In this thesis, I will look at Nezami's romance directing my attention on his depiction of female characters. This study is in conception and intention an analysis of women's representations. I explore and clarify who are depicted as women in the story, what their roles are, and what ethics they present. The gender viewpoint in this thesis stands on the privileges or limits that Nezami offers through his female characters. This elaboration has specifically benefited from Nezami's female portrayal in the story of *Khosrow and Shirin*.

THESIS QUESTION AND THE ORGANISATION OF THE THESIS

When it concerns the view of women and femininity, Nezami's works are unique. The main subject of the present study attempts to analyse the portrayal of women in one of Nezami's romances. In the spirit of curiosity, I aim to provide a deep reading of four women such as Shirin, Mahin Banu, Maryam, and Shekar, who are depicted in Nezami's *Khosrow and Shirin*. I will evaluate these characters as a source of information on how women are revealed in this specific classical work while investigating whether this romance can be considered as a revolt against inequality and what ethics are introduced.

¹ P.J. Chelkowski, *Mirror of the invisible world: tales from the Khamseh of Nezami*, p.2.

The present thesis consists of six chapters. In the first chapter while introducing *Khosrow and Shirin's* story, I examine Nezami, his poetic output, and the evaluation of female characters in Persian poetry. In the second chapter, I will build on the complicated plots of this work to frame this romantic story and present the characters. Then, in the third, fourth, and fifth chapter, I will discuss the depiction of each character next to Shirin's, concerning their viewpoints and their morality. This comparative examination of the portrayals of women will seek to clarify their position in the poem as well as their ideological characteristics. This can potentially explain the ambiguity surrounding the diversity in Nezami's presentations of the female. In the last chapter, I argue whether these female images can elevate new ethical possibilities for women in that era. This will, I hope, complement and enrich the ongoing of *Khosrow and Shirin's* women's perspective and act as a useful viewpoint for the other articles on this special issue. If such a description is accepted, then, Nezami's *Khosrow and Shirin*, raises new possibilities for interpretation, completion, and even launching women's idealism in medieval literary traditions. Consequently, *Khosrow and Shirin's* story stands to grow even more expansive and liberal.

I believe that the importance of Nezami's *Khosrow and Shirin* in the realm of women studies and the richness of this work are insufficiently reflected upon. This probably is due to the lack of research on this work. Nezami's *Quintet*² is one of those popular works which have been copied and illustrated numerous times through the medieval period, both in Iran, Central Asia, Turkey, and India, but research on individual epics is limited. I hope that the structured approach proposed by the present preliminary thesis may foster such further research.

The quotations from the *Khosrow and Shirin* will partly be given in Persian script along with a translation. In the course of translating in English, I benefited greatly from the Italian translation of the poem by Daniela Meneghini 2017. The edition of the *Khosrow and Shirin* story that has been used throughout is the 1378(1999) Tehran edition by Vahid Dastgerdi. I also refer to the first English translation by Peter J. Chelkowski 1975.

² The *Quintet* is composed by Nezami which consists of five different stories.

CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

Writing *Khosrow and Shirin*, Nezami was disapproved of by many of his rather religious friends due to the romantic and sentimental relationships of men and women and the female-centred features of this work³. By inviting his close friend to his place and reading him some verses of this newly written work, he could dissolve all deprecation.

Khosrow and Shirin, the remarkable romantic Persian epic, is based on a true story which Ferdowsi has already mentioned in his *Shahnameh*⁴. It contains about 6,500 couplets written with the form of *mathnavi*⁵ or rhyming couplets. Nezami's romanticized story of *Khosrow and Shirin* exploits several genres simultaneously and has a very complex structure. It depicts the love of Sasanian Khosrow Parviz II towards the Armenian princess Shirin, the niece of the Queen Mahin Banu. The story endures long physical and spiritual journeys between these two main characters through many verbal exchanges, all of which have been imbued with lyrical intensity. Shirin's purity and her strength of character will allow her eventually to conquer her lover Khosrow, and to help him reach some state of perfection, making him worthy of the Iranian idea of kingship⁶. Evidently, the characters begin to show a desire for goodness as they mature and gain knowledge and experience. The delicacy of the story is manifested from the pure and selfless love of the character named Farhad, who is madly in love with Shirin and ultimately killed because of Khosrow's jealousy. Khosrow and Shirin, eventually, get married almost by the end of this long story, but, tragically, Khosrow gets assassinated by his own son. As huge as the grief is for Shirin, she commits suicide over the corpse of her husband.

A Brief Biography of Nezami

Jamal al-din Abu Muhammad Elyas ibn-Yusuf, known as Nezami, was born in about the year 1140 and died in about 1209 in the town of Ganja in the present-day Azerbaijan Republic. He is an unrivalled poetic genius, whose place

³ Nezami explains this himself by the introduction of *Khosrow and Shirin*. (V. Dastgerdi, *Khosrow and Shirin*, 2017).

⁴ *The Book of Kings*, completed 1010.

⁵ It comes from Arabic language meaning two by two. Each verse rhymes in the same way.

⁶ C. van Ruymbeke, *What is it that Khusraw learns from the Kalila-Dimna stories*, p.145.

in Persian romantic literature can be compared to that of Dante in Italian or Chaucer in English⁷. Nezami of Ganja is considered the greatest romantic epic poet in the Islamic world whose fame reaches outside the Iranian world as he is imitated by poets from the Balkan to Bengal. His poems unite pre-Islamic Persian culture with Islamic Persia. He has dealt with a great variety of scenes, some within romantic appeal. Nezami, in his works, deals with many notions such as justice, equality, the power of science, humanity, and more importantly, women. Women are characterized uniquely by Nezami regarding the genres and the contexts of his works.

I maintain that Nezami suggests a constructive and reliable concept of human love conducting his presentation of female characters. Women are lovers, heroines, rulers, and even educators and challengers of men. They may be represented as deceivers and seducers as well. Nezami personifies women's influence on managing political power and society, then emphasises women's privileges in each sector as he places them in a variety of contexts. At times, he portrays ideal women and shows an example to the male rulers of the world.

Kamran Talattof presents Nezami and his devotion of his *sokhan*⁸ (eloquent rhetoric) exceptionally to love and women in his poetry⁹. Led by his education, his knowledge of diverse societies, his liberal viewpoint on social issues, and, more noticeably, his personal experiences, Nezami presents his advanced view of women. His works have been the subject of notably contradictory readings as, correspondingly, Kamran Talattof justifies. While some scholars have read Nezami's works from a non-ideological point of view, other scholars' critics declare merely religious readings of these works¹⁰. This result is in high diversity in interpretation of the poet's beliefs and attitudes.

It was between 1165 and 1200 that Nezami composed one of his best-known works, *Khamsa* (Quintet) or *Panj Ganj* (Five Treasures). The *Quintet* consists of five different stories. Next to Ferdowsi's *Shahnameh*, the *Quintet* of Nezami was the most popular work for many illustrators and miniaturists in the Islamic world. Chelkowski's description of the *Quintet* as "sensuous, dramatic,

⁷ A.A. Seyed-Gohrab, *Longing for Love: The Romance of Layla and Majnun*, New York, 2020, p.862.

⁸ *Sokhan* literally means "speech", "words", or "discourse". Seyed- Gohrab in his *Courtly Riddles* deciphers Nezami's use of *sokhan*, "[Nezami's *sokhan*] alludes to the metaphysical logos, the as yet undivided principle of creation, which is closely related to universal reason" (156). Further he explains that *sokhan* can refer to God's creative command or to God's Word as a command to ethical action. It also alludes to the rational capacity of individuals, understanding reality. Moreover, *sokhan* refers to language which is worthy to express the eternal truth.

⁹ K. Talattof, *Nizami's Unlikely Heroines: A Study of the Characterizations of Women in Classical Persian Literature*, p.59.

¹⁰ *ibid.* p.52.

gracious, and refined¹¹” encapsulates the essence of this fascinating work.

Nezami’s Poetic Output

The poems are in order of their appearance in his collected work: *The Treasury of Mysteries*, *Khosrow and Shirin*, *Layli and Majnun*, *The Book of Alexander*, and the last one, *The Haft Peykar*¹². These five poems collectively became one of the most successful works in the Persian literary canon. After it was published, the *Quintet* has been an ideal for many poets that followed. *The Treasury of Mysteries* is an ethico-philosophical poem, using short storylines to demonstrate various kingly virtues, while the other four are treating the adventures of kings and lovers through romance and detailed narrations. In his second work, *Khosrow and Shirin*, Nezami turns from the mystical philosophy of his first book to historical romance. He represents human dramas and their relationships. He transforms the scandalous affair into a touching and noble love-relationship. Through these dramatic devices, Nezami makes a powerful commentary on human behaviour, on its follies, its glories, its struggles, and its unbridled passions and tragedies¹³. This is what makes this work a powerful humanistic approach.

After *Khosrow and Shirin*, Nezami wrote the powerful story of *Layli and Majnun*, the second romance and the third book of the *Quintet*. It recounts a simple story of an Arab boy obsessed with the love for Layli. As Seyed-Gorab clarifies, “Nezami changes the Arabic anecdotal narrative to a Persian courtly epic, introducing new elements such as meeting at school, descriptions of gardens and nature, a plea for vegetarianism, etc¹⁴”. Layli and Majnun fall in love but when Majnun asks to marry Layli, her father rejects him. Layli is forced to marry another man. Hearing this, Majnun becomes mad due to his intense love for Layli. Ultimately, they both die without consummating their love.

The fourth book of the *Quintet* is *The Haft Paykar*. It is a romanticized story of King Bahram Gur. The focus is on a series of seven stories narrated to Bahram by seven beauties. It is singularly complex in its structure as Cross justifies, “While Nezami’s other narratives follow the relatively linear path of a

¹¹ P.J. Chelkowski, *Mirror of the invisible world*, p.1.

¹² See *Kamsa of Nezami* in Encyclopaedia Iranica.

¹³ P.J. Chelkowski, *Mirror of the invisible world*, p.47.

¹⁴ A.A. Seyed-Gohrab, *Teaching Persian literature in Persian*, p. 419.

love affair or a hero's life, *The Haft Paykar* can be seen as a composite weave of horizontal (temporal) and vertical (transcendental) elements¹⁵.

Ultimately, the fifth book of the Quintet is *The Book of Alexander*, a poetic version of the life of the Greek ruler Alexander who defeats Persians and becomes the ruler of the world. In his final book of the *Quintet*, Nezami narrates how his very personal experiences facilitated the creation of this masterpiece¹⁶.

Female Characters in *Khosrow and Shirin*

Earlier, I mentioned that the uniqueness of Nezami's works is partially because of his sincere attention to female characters. Specifically, *Khosrow and Shirin* is considered as a source of information on encouraging different mind-sets on human equality and women's privileges. The main emphasis of this thesis is to evaluate how Nezami delicately paid attention in developing women characters, their presence next to male characters, and power relations in the era in which women were condemned to perform within a complex context of cultural restrictions and norms. As Talattof mentions, Nezami wrote during a period when women were strongly believed to be impaired in intelligence (*naqes al-aql*)¹⁷. Nezami's high opinion of the female sex, is opposed to the attitude of his time.

His undeniable skill in characterization is the subject of many papers. His genius for psychological characterization has been imitated by many poets since his second book. In general, Nezami reveals images of his dynamic and sometimes, tense characters, displaying a thorough knowledge of man's psyche. Bürgel explains Nezami's characterization, "[Nezami's] heroes are not static types; they are human beings, who undergo a development, driven by their particular dispositions and emotions. They have to struggle against temptations that come from within, they have to purify themselves in order to become what the poet (here as it were in the place of God) wants them to become"¹⁸. The characters, as in *Khosrow and Shirin*, grow, mature, and fulfil their lives, most of the time, by the end of the story.

¹⁵ C. Cross, *The Many Colors of Love in Nizāmī's Haft Paykar Beyond the Spectrum*, p.58.

¹⁶ According to Nezami's chronology, the deaths of his wives convey important turning points coinciding with the completion of one work and the start of another.

¹⁷ K. Talattof, *Nizami's Unlikely Heroines*, p.57.

¹⁸ J. C. Bürgel, *Nezami's World Order*, p.22.

Nezami's attempt to design an egalitarian human society is apparent. The picture of these imaginary societies include various social classes, the poor as well as the rich, the rulers as well as the ordinary people. In these unbiased societies, there is a special attitude towards female protagonists. Women are as sovereignty endowed with noble features and dignified character traits as men. In the romance of *Khosrow and Shirin*, a story is deliberately narrated in a certain way on finding a new place for women in that era. Nezami depicts feminine aspects entangled with passion and romance. His effort in writing this piece is proposing a balance between male and female characteristics. In this rather long narrative, there are four main female characters, Mahin Banu who is the Queen of Armenia; Shirin, the princess and the lover of King Khosrow; Maryam, the wife of King Khosrow; and Shekar, a beautiful courtesan in Isfahan. Each of these characters were undoubtedly given firm and assertive voices. They are described as important and strong as any other male roles represented in the story.

Mahin Banu is a very strong woman. Although she is the ruler of Armenia, she is not fond of the wealth and the possession of the throne. Nezami depicts Mahin Banu as a queen who rules her country with utmost patience and justice. She has never been married, yet content and satisfied in life. She is the first woman to appear in the story defined as intelligent and independent.

Mahin Banu's niece, **Shirin**, the princess of Armenia, is the most favorable character of Nezami's *Khosrow and Shirin*. This can only be explained by the influence of Nezami's first wife Afaq, "who was a Kipchak and thus a Christian¹⁹". As Nezami mentions, Shirin stands for Nezami's first and most favorite wife who died very young²⁰. Hundreds of couplets are dedicated to the description of Shirin's beauty, grace, and delicacy. Shirin is an epic lover and a beautiful woman with a strong will. She is the manifestation of resistance, patience, and self-control. Throughout this passionate romance, Shirin is the symbol of purity, piety, and beauty. The verses that designate Shirin's look and her appearance are outstandingly lengthened. Her voice and thoughts are communicated sweetly and splendidly through laments or contentment. She is the chief female character of this romance.

¹⁹ J. C. Bürgel, *Nezami's World Order*, p.29.

²⁰ In *Simaye Do Zan*, S. Sirjani clarifies that one of Nezami's explanations to shift from his first book to a romantic book of *Khosrow and Shirin* is to remember the loss of his young wife Afaq.

On the contrary, there is a female character named **Maryam**. She is the daughter of the Byzantine's emperor who enabled King Khosrow to take his throne back and in return, he had to marry his daughter. Historically, Khosrow II Parviz (590-628), the son of Hormozd IV, is the late Sasanian king of Persia who greatly expanded the Persian empire. On the other hand, Maurice was the outstanding emperor who transformed the shattered Roman empire into Byzantine Empire. The late Roman empire and the Sasanian Iran have developed a particularly deep and close relationship. Maurice's daughter Maria or Maryam is delineated in the story as a jealous, selfish, and proud woman. She is not a promising female character in the story, yet, she appears independent and strong.

The last female character who will be analysed in this thesis is **Shekar**. She is a famous courtesan in Isfahan who appears when king Khosrow demands a beautiful woman after the death of Maryam. She plays a very short role in the story but it is indeed powerful. Her beauty is comparable to the portrayal of Shirin. She is depicted as an independent and confident courtesan who does not sleep with the king unless her desires are completely met.

Female characters and topics in Nezami have not received sufficient detailed attention, yet, a limited number devoted to *Shirin*. One of the Iranian academics, Zeinab Norouzi, has studied women in Nezami's works in general. She examined women from political, social, moral, and historical point of view²¹. Women, in some stories of the *Quintet*, are lovers and in others, they are the emperors or the rulers, and sometimes even both. Additionally, women are also characterized as deceivers, seducers, sometimes with old and wrinkled appearances. However, Nezami in his works stands up for women's rights and positions in the society, stressing their centrality and influence on men.

In fact, his works enable the reader to recognize societal and cultural conditions of that era. In the story of *Layli and Majnun*, Nezami's portrayal of Layli may be interpreted as a criticism of male-dominated society and cultural restrictions. This is evident when Layli was forced to marry against her will, and, when her husband approaches her, she fights for her virginity. Layli never submits to her husband. Seyed-Gohrab interprets Nezami's Layli as a poetess, a lonely woman, who takes initiatives to meet Majnun, who lives a life loyal to her

²¹ Z. Norouzi, *Women in Nezami's works* بررسی شخصیت زن در شعر نظامی، p.1.

parents, to Majnun and to some degree to her husband²². When Layli's husband dies, the situation does not improve either. He does not seek to reunite with her and there will be no physical contact between the two until the end of the story. Layli dies out of anguish and distress. Upon receiving news of her death, Majnun goes to Layli's tomb and dies there. The elaborate attention that Nezami gives to the rights of women is exceptional as he disapproves of the subordination of women to the tribal interests.

Many of the female characters in Nezami's *Quintet* are fictitious and not real. He delicately designs his own type of characters in the stories. In general, women in the *Quintet* are able to nurture, teach, and develop male characters with their wisdom. There is some kind of duality in women's characters. It is evident that Nezami could not resist the stereotypical clichés of women as slender and beautiful, though he emphasized their mature, dynamic, and thoughtful features. In all five stories of Nezami's *Quintet*, women are depicted as morals. They are prepared for any responsibility since they can handle anything that comes their way. These imaginary characters are, like male spirits in epics, in the realms of governance and politics, wisdom and knowledge, bravery and war, chastity and infallibility. Their wisdom and justice, especially in love and perseverance, are favoured over males. The majority of the women in the *Quintet* are independent and powerful characters, and these characteristics give them the authority to fight the prevailing norms and traditions (such as Shirin). At the same time, they maintain their values as women since they do not lose their emotions and sensibility in their actions. Courage and intellectuality are the essence of femininity in these stories.

Women in most of Nezami's works participate in all sorts of activities. They can play music, fight on the battlefield, and provide deep insight into social and philosophical issues²³. They are capable beings who make their own decisions. They can be "beloved" and "lovers" at the same time. Particularly, in *Khosrow and Shirin*, women have free voices and choices of love and marriage.

Classification of Types of Female Characters

²² A.A. Seyed-Gohrab, *Longing for Love: The Romance of Layla and Majnun*, p. 863-4.

²³ K. Talattof, *Nizami's Unlikely Heroines*, p.52.

Women and their ideals are among the topics that have received much attention in recent years. Since one way to acknowledge the position of women in any culture is by referring to the literary texts, this thesis attempts to outline the roles of female characters of *Khosrow and Shirin* and expresses the similarities and differences between them. Literary works not only show the author's view on the subject but also form the society's perspective on the same issue. In order to study the position of women in literature, according to the multiplicity of perspectives and views of authors, the different roles of women must be first distinguished. Women are introduced with three symbolic aspects. First, woman as *Femme Fatale*²⁴, mysterious and seductive who ensnares the hero of the story. Second, a woman as a mother symbolises the cradle of the earth and a figure of fertility and abundance. This character traditionally gives emotional and spiritual strength to all those who are in contact with them. Third, a Jungian woman-lover or Sufi woman. This woman is the source of inspiration and spiritually desired perfection²⁵. Among these three, Nezami considers women as lovers and spiritual inspirations. This is marked when Shirin, after being married to Khosrow, continues to ascend morally and spiritually by good deeds and thoughts.

However, in Persian epics, women's roles are often divided into beloved and wives, of which the role of beloved is more significant. Although the general observation of woman as a beloved is almost the same for many poets, occasionally, it is seen that the position of women in one romance despite the same role of being beloved, is different. This might be due to the distinctive condition and context in which the work was created. As Talattof observes, "Aware of the position of women in pre-Islamic Iran and the cultural context of his own time, Nezami demonstrates familiarity with the psychological aspects of women's experience²⁶". He portrays several women in pre-Islamic society such as Shirin, while in *Layli and Majnun*, women are presented within the social context of the Islamic period. Nezami's main attention is still on Layli, showing how she cannot trust anybody to reveal her love for Majnun, but her last words to her mother expresses her condemnation of tribal restrictions. Reflecting on

²⁴ A French phrase and an archetype of literature and art. Mysterious, beautiful, and seductive women who achieve her hidden purpose by using feminine wiles such as beauty, charm, or sexual allure leading male characters into deadly traps.

²⁵ Zeinab Norouzi in her *Women in Nezami* explains the three different kinds of women. Citing: Cirlot, J.E. *A Dictionary of Symbols*. Trans. Jack Sage. New York: Routledge & Kegan Paul Ltd, 1962.

²⁶ K. Talattof, *Nizami's Unlikely Heroines*, p. 53.

the character of Shirin and Layli, Shirin's political and physical power over Layli is considerable. This might also be due to the contextual differences of the two works. Nezami represents women, in some cases superior to men, capable of ruling a country. Accordingly Talattof concludes that women close to the heroes are portrayed as sublime and superior models in beauty and servitude to their men²⁷.

Scholars' Evaluations of Nezami's Female Characters

Nezami, in his works, has already shown his concern about gender topics. Tackling the idea of justice and equality, he managed to produce an environment in which there is justness among masculinity and femininity. In an article written by two Persian scholars, Toghyani and Moienfard, the city of Armenia proposed by Nezami in the poem, has been considered a utopia for women²⁸. This city is perceived as an isolated place which is surrounded by mountains. The rulers are initially, Queen Mahin Banu, and later, Shirin, governing with nothing but justice. It is populated only by female individuals who are, emotionally as well as physically, capable. In their spare time, they practice hunting, horseback riding, and shooting. None of them are married nor in love with any other sexes except for Shirin. Toghyani also perceives Nezami's characters in this poem as androgyny characteristics in human beings²⁹.

In an article published in 2014, Niloufar Hematyar and Kian Soheil justify Nezami's preoccupation in that era about female positions. The primary influence, as they explain, is that Nezami has grown up with a Kurdish mother who worked hard to earn a living. She was an active woman and physically strong. She was occupied with affairs that mostly men were only capable of doing at that time³⁰. The other element is Nezami's first wife, Afaq. As I already mentioned, Nezami designs Shirin's character according to his beloved Afaq. The rest of the aforementioned article focuses again on the effective character of Shirin. Shirin, in Persian language, means "sweet" or "sweetness"³¹. It

²⁷ K. Talattof, *Nizami's Unlikely Heroines*, p.65.

²⁸ E. Moienfard and Z. Toghyani, *ارمان شهر زنان در خسرو و شیرین* Women Utopia in Khosrow and Shirin, p.113.

²⁹ *ibid.* p. 128.

³⁰ N. Hematyar suggests the reasons for Nezami's concerns about female position (p. 201). Explaining this matter, she cites S. Sirjani, *Simaye Do Zan*, Tehran, 1989.

³¹ According to the DehKhoda Dictionary, the word "Shirin" in Persian context signifies cool, honeyed, sweet, or sugary. It has a positive connotation and it is always used to refer to something good.

indicates Shirin's character trait. Her appearance, her deeds, and her dialogues are all sweet, appealing, and soothing. She is not busy with sewing clothes and cooking like all the other women of that era. She is a woman who loves nature and horseback riding. She knows perfectly herself and her love for King Khosrow. She is not scared of anything. She was able to ride her horse from her city to Persia and back, alone, taking some weeks to accomplish her journey. She never felt weak nor shameful of being in love with Khosrow. She enjoys hunting, horseback riding as well as feasting and drinking. Accordingly, Talattof describes Shirin as an affectionate, strong, and honest woman who plays polo, goes on picnics with her maids, and swims naked in ponds, who hears about Khosrow, sees his picture, falls in love with him, and rides to the capital, Mada'en, without an escort, to meet him³².

As it is evident, women are not secondary nor peripheral in this romance. They are what brings male characters into life. The presence of male characters becomes meaningful when they are placed next to the female characters. The story suggests that male and female characters are bound in life and in death. The earthiness of love among Shirin and Khosrow or Shirin and Farhad, is what brings completion to men's life. Khosrow benefited from Shirin's presence in his life to grow and become a loyal and devoted leader. Shirin's love for Farhad was his reason to live and made the impossible possible. In the traditional interpretation of *Khosrow and Shirin*, Fatimah Alaqih remarks that Shirin appears in the story simply to exalt the spirit of Farhad, a male character deeply in love with her³³.

In *Khosrow and Shirin*, Nezami brings an open society into existence in which men and women seem to be more equal, and women enjoy life, love, and sex. Talattof proposes Nezami's attitude in connection with the subject of sex:

"Nezami approaches the subject of sex in keeping with the settings of his stories [...]. In the stories of Shirin and the characters of *The Seven Beauties*³⁴, set in more open societies, Nezami explores the complexities of this subject. He avoids sexuality in the story of Layli, because in her conservative society she was deprived of any realization of her sexual self, and therefore no lovemaking scene is described and no words of passion with sexual connotations

³² K. Talattof, *Nizami's Unlikely Heroines*, p.54.

³³ *ibid*, p.52.

³⁴ The fourth book of the *Quintet*, *Haft Peykar* (1197).

are exchanged between the lovers³⁵”.

Particularly, in *Khosrow and Shirin*, Shirin has no shame nor reluctance in talking about herself, her feelings, or her attempts to make love with the man. She is a free woman to desire.

Next to those four female characters such as Shirin, Mahin Banu, Maryam, and Shekar, there are female figures as companions and servants. Most of these characters are featured with beauty in the first place. Furthermore, their physical ability comes into the picture. Shirin is the strongest woman of all that era that has been characterized³⁶. Shirin, a governor, a fighter, and a rider, next to being loyal, knowledgeable, and a pious woman, can easily be compared to the hero of any epic. Given the importance and influential style of Nezami in literature, and his talent for characterization, Shirin’s potential, sweet loyalty in love, perseverance, and self-sacrifice shows exemplary and ideal woman. Next to Shirin, Mahin Banu is the second most courageous and powerful female being in this story.

Obviously, Nezami was sensitive to feminine questions and literary issues. Perhaps, he altered the real characters to create the amiable portrayals of women from a liberal point of view in the classical period. In this complex story, women are presented with multidimensional portrayals. The female flaws are there to help other characters to ascend to a higher virtue. Nezami’s personal experience and understanding of women should not be neglected. Talattof determines that Nezami’s romances are unique in terms of female characterization and he emerges as “an anachronism” within the periods of classical literature regarding his characterization of women³⁷.

³⁵ K. Talattof, *Nizami’s Unlikely Heroines*, p.58.

³⁶ N. Aminejad, *Women in Shirin and Khosrow of AmirKhosrow Dehlavi*, p.5.

³⁷ K. Talattof, *Nizami’s Unlikely Heroines*, p.77.

CHAPTER TWO: A SYNOPSIS OF THIS ROMANCE

This chapter will be dedicated to the plots of *Khosrow and Shirin* in order to provide a clear description of different characters' positions together with the depiction of Shirin, Mahin Banu, Maryam, and Shekar that are the main focus of this thesis. The story takes off with a very long introduction of almost seven hundred verses. Typical of Nezami, the introduction unfolds with praising God and his prophet, Muhammad (570-632). By understanding the introduction of the poem, the readers become acquainted with Nezami's mind and the structure of his poem. Out of thirteen different parts of this introduction, one is about the prominence of love. Nezami explains how love can detach man from egocentrism and arrogance. He emphasizes love as a powerful tool in life. In the last part of his introduction, Nezami apologizes in advance for any misstep taken accidentally in his book.

Reading this poetry, the reader is introduced to the exploitation of several plots simultaneously through intense verbal and lyrical exchanges. All the story revolves around the love adventure between Khosrow and Shirin which takes long after they could be together.

The story is narrated in the time of Hormozd the Great. Historically, the Sasanian dynasty is an ancient Iranian dynasty that ruled an empire and was destroyed by the Muslim Arabs. Hormozd IV (579-590) is the Sasanian King whose accession displeased everyone. In struggling to control his position, he resorted to harshness, denigration, and execution³⁸. In contrast, Hormozd in *Khosrow and Shirin* is known as Chelkowski interprets, "the light of the world's justice³⁹". He has been waiting long before he is blessed by a son called Khosrow Parviz (implying victory). Chelkowski renders Khosrow a wizard with the sword, the spear, and the arrow who soon masters the art of war and whose skills would one day make his beloved Persia the glittering mistress of the East⁴⁰. Historically, in addition to the antagonistic spirit of Khosrow, he is as well known for his intellect as for being an art and culture lover. As a young prince, he repeatedly causes anger in his father's court. One night in his dream,

³⁸ See *Hormozd IV* in Encyclopaedia Iranica.

³⁹ P. J. Chelkowski, *Mirror of the invisible world*, p. 21.

⁴⁰ *ibid*, p.21.

his grandfather appears and predicts his possession of four things; a black horse, a beautiful woman, a glorious throne, and a unique musician. Khosrow's confidant, Shahpur is a great painter, an adventurer and a wise man. While entertaining Khosrow, he is describing his new journey to Armenia by introducing Mahin Banu and her niece Shirin. Mahin Banu is the Queen of Armenia who has not married but is content ruling with nothing but justice. Shahpur praises her only niece, Mahin Banu's heir, Shirin, who will be the princess after Mahin Banu's death. Immediately, Shahpur is ordered to bring Shirin to the throne. It took Shahpur many attempts to persuade Shirin to visit King Khosrow. There is a long story before Shirin and Khosrow can finally be in the same place.

While Shirin is heading towards Persia with her splendid black horse Shabdiz, Khosrow, accused of plotting against his father, flees his country to Armenia. Khosrow and Shirin happen upon one another incognito during this journey. Their first encounter is by a lake while Shirin is bathing naked in a spring, washing herself in the water. At the appearance of Khosrow, Shirin uses her hair to cover her body and Khosrow turns his face so as not to discomfort her. There are long and erotic couplets depicting this encounter. Unsuccessful, Shirin takes her horse and disappears. Meanwhile, word comes to Khosrow of the death of his father. He hurries to Persia to claim his rightful throne. Bahram Chubin, a commander in Persia, devises a treacherous scheme to seize the throne and turn the people against him. Khosrow flees Persia for a second time. He interrupts his exhausting journey and there, Shirin and Khosrow run into each other for the second time in the hunting grounds. They fall on the ground gazing at one another in silence not daring to move. Everyone gathers to see them. During the blissful times that Khosrow is in Armenia with Shirin, each night is embellished with music, song, wine, and poetry in praise of love. Shirin is mindful about her promise to Mahin Banu, and resists consummating her love for Khosrow before marrying him. Khosrow's feelings and questions for Shirin and Shirin's patience and pure love for Khosrow are communicated delicately through their minds.

After several struggles between Khosrow and Shirin, for instance Khosrow asking her for a kiss and Shirin's rejection, the words of power and throne are spawned. Shirin starts lamenting about Khosrow's behavior, stimulating him to gain his throne back. Khosrow, under Shirin's spell, gets on Shirin's horse,

Shabdiz, and goes back to Persia. Asking for the Byzantine emperor's support to regain his throne, he has to consent to marrying his daughter, Maryam. Nezami in these couplets, refers the readers to the *Shahnameh*⁴¹ if interested in historical and political matters. He does not wish to re-narrate what has already been said in this romance.

Khosrow is back on the throne, but his heart is not in ruling the country. He is still madly in love with Shirin. Mutually, Shirin is mourning for the loss of Khosrow. She is regretting losing him. Then, Mahin Banu falls ill, dies and Shirin becomes the princess of Armenia. Throughout the land perfect peace prevails due to a just and gracious ruler like Shirin. She compensates all those who have lost property. She learns that Khosrow has regained his throne but with unbelieving ears, she finds out that he is married to the Byzantine Queen, Maryam. Shirin is not sure whether she could govern her country righteously while longing for Khosrow. She appoints a regent in her place and chases after Khosrow. Word arrives to Khosrow about Shirin's presence in Persia. Emboldened, Khosrow asks Maryam to have Shirin over as her servant. Maryam refuses with jealousy. Khosrow learns that Maryam and Shirin cannot be together, therefore, he remains patient. Later, he sends Shahpur to Shirin to beg her to meet him secretly at night in Moshku. So shocked, although she respects Shahpur a lot, she gets outraged from his suggestion of seeing Khosrow covertly. Disappointed responds with bitterness to his proposal. There is a long monologue where Shirin complains about everything that has happened between her and Khosrow so far.

Soon after, Shirin thirsts for milk. She consults Shahpur about this, and Shahpur asks his friend Farhad who is accomplished in engineering, art, and sculpture to build a channel of milk from a pasture to flow to Shirin's palace, several kilometers long. So successful is the channel that Shirin gives two of her pearl earrings to Farhad to thank him. Farhad falls madly in love with her, and flees to wilderness longing and weeping for Shirin. The word of Farhad's love for Shirin reaches Khosrow's court. He calls upon Farhad and orders him to do an impossible task, cutting a road through Mount Bisotun, after which he can have Shirin as a reward. To this he consents, while Khosrow knows how impossible the task is. Farhad begins his fearful work, thinking day and night about Shirin

⁴¹ Ferdowsi's *The Book of Kings* completed 1010.

while he digs the mountain. He becomes a legend throughout Persia. Once Shirin hears of the story, she visits him with a bottle of milk. When she is ready to depart, her exhausted horse cannot climb down the mountains. The strong Farhad carries both Shirin and her horse on his shoulder until they reach Shirin's palace. When the road is nearly completed, Khosrow fears and sends a cunning messenger to falsely inform Farhad about Shirin's sudden death. Farhad throws himself from Mount Bisotun. When Shirin learns of his death, she mourns greatly as she understands how true Farhad's love was.

Shortly after, princess Maryam dies as well. Khosrow, knowing that he is no longer bound by his promise to Byzantium, sends a messenger to tell Shirin that he wants to finally marry her. But this is not to be. For a while they are sending messages to each other while Khosrow is feasting and drinking. He demands the most beautiful women in the world and this is when the courtesan Shekar from Isfahan appears in the story and they get married. Khosrow, lost in the beauty of Shekar, forgets all about his love for Shirin. Shirin discovers this, grieves and mourns, once again in despair. Khosrow after a while tires of his companion, and begins to think about Shirin again.

One day Khosrow rides with his companions to Shirin's palace in haste. Shirin asks for all the doors to be locked. She goes on the roof to watch Khosrow arriving. Khosrow arrives and to his surprise finds all the doors locked. He claims that he is here to beg for her forgiveness and he will remain until Shirin shows herself. Shirin appears from the roof and announces that she will only reunite with him if he intends to marry her; otherwise it is better that he goes back to Shekar. Khosrow in despair goes back to his tent.

Shirin feels deep remorse, and finds her way to Khosrow. Shahpur appears and she asks him two things. First to hide her and second to accompany her to her palace safely if Khosrow refuses to marry her. Next day by sunset, Khosrow dismisses everyone except Shahpur and Barbad. As there is another musician except for Barbad, Shirin urges Shahpur to bring Nikisa as well. The two musicians sing as if Khosrow and Shirin are singing their love to each other. Khosrow is overwhelmed, asks a hundred times for forgiveness and speaks of his devotion to Shirin. Hearing all this, Shirin bursts into tears. Khosrow realizes that Shirin is there, and approaches her. However, Shirin withdraws. Khosrow orders a marriage settlement without hesitation. The feasting and drinking is greater than ever before and the lovers are finally

united. For many years the reign was a happy and successful one. It so happened that the son of Maryam and Khosrow, Shiruyeh, grew up a stranger to his father, and plots to seize the throne. He invades the palace, claims the throne and Khosrow is put into a dungeon. Shirin also goes to prison with him.

One night while both are sleeping, a man sent by Shiruyeh stabs Khosrow in his liver and runs off. Khosrow, wounded, does not wake Shirin and breathes his last. Shirin disturbed by the blood, awakes. In deep sorrow, she bathes Khosrow. Now, Shiruyeh, the only son of Khosrow, desires Shirin. Shirin consents but on the condition that they distribute all Khosrow's possessions to the poor. After this is done, the funeral march takes place while the bier is carried inside the palace. Shirin asks to be left alone to say her farewells to Khosrow. She locks the door and lies next to him and stabs herself in the same spot. A year of mourning is decreed throughout the land of Persia. Buried next to one another, they are united for all eternity.

CHAPTER THREE: SHIRIN TORN BETWEEN LOVE AND MARRIAGE.

In the book of *Mirror of the Invisible World* Chelkowski characterises the women in Nezami's works as "strong, subtle and virtuous, and at the same time, tender, passionate, and enchantingly beautiful; they have sharp educated intellects; [...]women are also arrogant, deceitful, cantankerous vacillating, lonely and despondent⁴²". In the subsequent chapters I will analyse the four women, Shirin, Mahin Banu, Maryam, and Shekar. I will begin with examining Shirin's character aiming to analyse her depiction with regard to the notions of love and marriage and how her opinions contrast those of Khosrow.

Shirin, in Persian language, is a name and an adjective signifying, according to Steingass' Dictionary as something "milky" or "sweet", "pleasant" or "gentle", or "delicate". Shirin, a free spirit female character, is studied as an independent and good-natured throughout the story. The readers are led to follow her in order to comprehend the plots of this romance. Chelkowski labels Shirin's character as "democratic, companionable⁴³". Meneghini interprets the character of Shirin in this story, "One of Nezami's intentions in the composition of this mathnavi is therefore to build an extraordinary and honest female character, capable of indulging herself in passion and accepting pain, responsible and courageous simultaneously, faithful and consistent with her own destiny, beyond the forces that life and love for Khosrow restrict her⁴⁴". Does Nezami's intention of Shirin's depiction represent an ideal human being or an idol to be worshipped? Meneghini justifies Nezami's portrayal of Shirin's character as an ideal and a perfection. Shirin has been defined with qualities such as extraordinary, capable, courageous, faithful, and patient. It is indeed challenging to notice any flaws in this character conveyed by Nezami.

In the poem, the description of Shirin's character emerges while Shahpur is recounting his adventure to Armenia. He introduces Shirin to the readers,

⁴² P.J. Chelkowski, p.4.

⁴³ *ibid.* p.47.

⁴⁴ Meneghini explains, "Uno degli intenti di Nezami nella composizione di questo masnavi, è dunque quello di costruire un personaggio di femminile di straordinaria e rettitudine, capace di abbandonarsi alla passione e di accettare di dolore, responsabile e coraggiosa al contempo, fedele e coerente col proprio destino, al di là delle prove cui la vita e l'amore per Khosrow la sottopone" (Intro. XX).

A girl born from fairies, no, not fairies, she was a moon,
under her veil she was the owner of a crown.

Nezami portrays a perfect picture of Shirin, which links up closely with the ideals of female beauty in Persian romances. Shirin is perfect in every aspect. Nezami compares almost all of his female protagonists to a *parī* (fairy). In the article *Magic in Classical Persian*, Seyed-Gohrab describes how the beloved is likened to a *parī*. “The *parī* is a winged creature [belonging to pre-Islamic Persia] became the model for an ideal female beauty⁴⁶”. It indicates a beautiful, elegant, and ethereal woman.

Shahpur continues defining Shirin’s appearance metaphorically in detail. The verses of Shirin’s description commence here and never stop until the end of the story. As Meneghini translates Shahpur’s speech: “And what did I see? A very fine intelligence, a fresh face, a life-giving breath by every hair! Her pinkish face is a rare fine silk, her body is made of an almond with two hearts; between her thighs and her head, there is a waist as thin as a hair that unites the two worlds; her very tiny mouth seems fitted beyond all limits, like a Khuzestan⁴⁷ in the eye of an ant her lip has never smacked a living being, perhaps the mirror, but only if it is dazed by the wine; her hand never reached out to anyone except for her curl but just for fun⁴⁸”.

In Persian literature, the beloved’s external beauty is usually depicted through the garden imagery. As Seyed-Gohrab defines, “The beloved’s slim and tall stature is compared to a cypress, her eyes to narcissi, cheeks to roses, teeth to acacia blossoms, etc. Under these flourishing flowers lives, however, a world of insects and serpents as in a natural garden⁴⁹”. Shahpur associates Shirin’s beauty with a breath, a world, an almond, and an ant. Seyed-Gohrab, in an

⁴⁵ V. Dastgerdi, p.50.

⁴⁶ A.A. Seyed-Gohrab, *Magic in Classical Persian*, Oxford, p.74.

⁴⁷ Khuzestan, a province in the south west of Iran, is known for its production of sugar cane.

⁴⁸ Meneghini translates, “E cosa ho visto? Un’intelligenza finissima, un volto fresco, un respiro vivificante alla base di ogni capello! Il suo volto di rosa è rara seta finissima, il suo corpo è mandorla da due cuori; fra le cosce e la testa la sua vita sottilissima è come un capello che ha annodato i due mondi; la sua bocca piccolissima sembra stretta oltre ogni limite, come un Khuzestan nell’occhio di una formica; il suo labbro non ha mai bacchiato essere vivente, forse lo specchio, ma solo se intontita dal vino; la sua mano non si è mai allungata su alcuno se non sul suo ricciolo, ma solo per gioco” (79).

⁴⁹ A.A. Seyed-Gohrab, *Insects in Classical Persian Literature: The Case of the Ant*, p.135.

article called, *Insects in Classical Persian Literature*, analyses the metaphorical usage of an ant in Persian poetry. “In the hierarchy of animals, insects have their own special place in Persian literature. They occur in various genres as a metaphor to express a higher reality⁵⁰”. The beloved’s body parts are repeatedly compared to an ant like their small mouth, fragile limbs, and small waist. Insects have many connotations in Persian literature. Nezami along with other classical poets base their images and metaphors on the ant several times in their works. Nezami advises the readers to look at ants and learn to eat little, to work hard on their spiritual provisions, to act justly, and also to linger over the theme of injustice. He also benefits from this comparison to express the fine hair of the beloved or the ideal mouth of the beloved which refers to an extremely small and fine feature of it. Sometimes, even the beloved’s mouth is equalled to the mouth of an ant. Therefore, Nezami idealises his female character Shirin by metaphorically describing her physical beauty.

In the Persian aesthetic canon, the beauty of the beloved is established from a pattern encompassing the entire body. De Bruijn indicates in his article entitled *Beloved*, “The hair, the face, the eyes, and the mouth are by far the most important among the items in this catalogue of beauties⁵¹”. In this paragraph of Shirin’s description, the attention is mainly focused on the curls and tiny mouths. The curls, as De Bruijn states, form a lasso to catch the lover or they are associated with a chain to keep the lover captive⁵².

The description of Shirin by Shahpur asks for a lot of attention. The reader is not yet confronted with her but it is clear how the poet praises this character and how he is demanding respect from the reader to finally bring her to life. By defining Shirin’s appearance in detail, Nezami attempts to depict a protagonist that can be easily visualized. Nezami’s poetic couplets are not merely telling a romantic story but they are also valuable as visual aids. The reader benefits from Shirin’s portrayal “from head to toe” along with comparisons in order to imagine her easily. This technique helps the poet to create everlasting protagonists in the readers’ mind.

The next episode where Shirin appears as a character is in a green field where she is surrounded by all her female companions. The ambience of this

⁵⁰ A.A. Seyed-Gohrab, *Insects in Classical Persian Literature: The Case of the Ant*, p.109.

⁵¹ J.T.P. de Bruijn, *Beloved*, p.128.

⁵² *ibid.* p.129.

setting is described in a lively, cheerful, and content fashion. Shirin falls in love with the portrayal of King Khosrow, without any hesitation or further explanation for Mahin Banu, unaccompanied, towards an unfamiliar place. On the way, after some hours of journey, she feels exhausted and being aware that nobody is around, she decides to bathe naked in a river. This journey shows independence, confidence, and strength in this character.

Eventually, she arrives at Khosrow's court. According to what Khosrow has already ordered, a new palace is built for Shirin. Except, the palace is placed in an unhealthy environment since all Khosrow's maids and girls are so intimidated and jealous when confronted with Shirin's beauty. However, Shirin remains patient and calm. When finally, Shirin and Khosrow can be together, Khosrow is amazed by the ability and the prowess of Shirin. In Persian literature, the beloved is usually portrayed as haughty and quarrelsome. Chelkowski translates Nezami's words, "Shirin's skill with the bow and her mastery of her horses' reins matched that of any man. She was a lioness not a gazelle⁵³". As accordingly, Seyed-Gohrab mentions, "To depict the hostile nature of the beloved, poets employ hunting and military themes. Both the lover and beloved can be hunter and the prey⁵⁴". In all the episodes of meeting, missing, searching, and waiting, the portrayal of Shirin remains the same, a strong, skilful, and able woman of that era.

Following the story, Shirin matures from a beloved to a leader in the story. Nezami narrates the scene in which Mahin Banu dies and Shirin becomes the princess of Armenia.

چون بر شیرین مقرر گشت شاهی
فروغ ملک بر مه شد ز ماهی
به انصافش رعیت شاد گشتند
همه زندانیان آزاد گشتند
ز مظلومان عالم جور برداشت
همه آیین جور از دور برداشت
زهر دروازه‌ای برداشت باجی
نجست از هیچ دهقانی خراجی
مسلم کرد شهر و روستا را
که بهتر داشت از دنیا دعا را
ز عدلش باز با تیهو شده خویش
به یک جا آب خورده گرگ با میش⁵⁵

When Shirin was appointed as the princess,
the light of the kingdom rose from the [earthly] mist to the moon.

⁵³ P.J. Chelkowski, p.31.

⁵⁴ A.A. Seyed-Gohrab, *The Ideal Beloved*, p.220.

⁵⁵ V. Dastgerdi, p.181.

The peasants became content from her justice,
all the prisoners were released.
She put an end to the oppression upon the oppressed people
she lifted any kind of oppression.
She stopped all the courts from bribery
she did not ask for taxes from any peasants.
She defined all cities and villages
may the world be a better place with praying.
Her justice brought falcon and see-see partridge together
wolf and sheep drink water from the same place.

Shirin is now appointed as the ruler of Armenia. She knows how to spread justice and fairness throughout the land. She condemns all acts of violence, restores prosperity to cities and countryside, since she prefers people would pray for her good deeds rather than for her wealth⁵⁶. Shirin, beyond any help or benefit of a masculine power, is ruling the country with nothing but justice and care. Equality is her principle. She is aiming to promote equality not only between male and female status but also among different social classes and poor and rich people. Chelkowski interprets, “The falcon drank together with the quail and the wolf lay with the lamb⁵⁷”. It is manifest that animals tend to stay with their own biotype. The metaphorical example that a wolf can lay next to the lamb without harming it, connotes how a fair land could possibly be like.

Shirin blesses her people with equality and prosperity that is beyond an imagination. Throughout the land peace prevails. Nevertheless, she cannot hold on to her court so long. Since it is her principle to be a correct ruler, she finds out that being a lover takes her heart from her people. Therefore, she appoints a regent in her place and leaves to pursue Khosrow.

Later on, Shirin responds to Khosrow’s lack of loyalty when she learns that he has married Maryam. In a scene where Khosrow plans to meet Shirin secretly because of Maryam’s jealousy, Shirin’s response is long, intense and sometimes sarcastic. She speaks out, “I am princess Shirin, I am not a child who can be stolen the sweet in exchange for dates” and continues, “Now I am far from my wealth and my land, but this does not mean that I forget all my principles: it is not possible to give two contradictory orders, on one hand

⁵⁶ Meneghini translated, “condannò ogni atto di violenza, ridiede prosperità a città e campagne, giacché preferiva che pregassero per il suo bene piuttosto che per la sua ricchezza” (126).

⁵⁷ P.J. Chelkowski, p.34.

renouncing the desire and on the other hand feeling free⁵⁸". Shirin is deeply hurt when Khosrow desires to see her secretly. She is outraged. She exclaims, "Am I beneath the princess Maryam that I must crawl to Moshku in the dark" then "Is Queen Shirin not as royal as Maryam and Khosrow? Khosrow has Shabdiz; if he would see me, let him ride to me!⁵⁹". And, so she refuses to meet Khosrow, and she affirms that she will speak no more of him. Although she is deeply in love, she does not follow his desires as a matter of her principle. Proving patience and self-control, she remains in power. It is worth noting that this romance of the twelfth century manifests clearly monogamous relationships. Khosrow, even as a king, takes one wife at a time. He is forced to marry Maryam for a political reason and he does not break his promise until Maryam dies.

Evidently, Shirin has been brought up patiently under the teachings and instructions of Mahin Banu since she does not act upon Khosrow's requests except being married to him. This is what Mahin Banu advised her before her death. It is indeed remarkable that a character like Mahin Banu, unmarried and independent, accentuates *marriage*. Seyed-Gohrab interprets Nezami as a poet who condemns sexual relations outside the bonds of marriage. He further explains:

Khosrow goes to a brothel in Isfahan where he wants to have intercourse with a courtesan Shekar ("Sugar"). She is chaste and virgin. She fools him by making him totally drunk and taking him to a room where he has sex with another woman. Shekar will have intercourse with Khosrow only after marriage. So for Nezami, intercourse should always take place within the context of love and a mutually caring relationship. In Layli's case, such a context is missing and Layli is very much aware of this, when she emphasizes to Majnun that she is still a virgin: [Although my imposed mate is my husband, he has not slept with me one single night. I have been touched but my pearl is not pierced; no-one's diamond has tried it]⁶⁰.

In Nezami's works generally sexual consummation appears only with mutual consent which happens often after an official marriage. Unlike protagonists such as Shirin and Shekar, who choose marriage over love, Layli prefers chaste love to marriage⁶¹. Nezami depicts different types of marriage in this romance. Khosrow and Maryam's marriage is not a love marriage but a political marriage

⁵⁸ Meneghini translates, "Ora sono lontana dalle mie ricchezze e della mia terra, ma non per questo sono libera nel mio agire: non è possibile infatti dare due ordini opposti, da una parte di rinunciare al desiderio e dall'altra di essere libero" (144).

⁵⁹ P.J. Chelkowski, p.35.

⁶⁰ A.A. Seyed-Gohrab, *Longing for Love The Romance of Layla and Majnun*, p.864.

⁶¹ A.A. Seyed-Gohrab, *The Ideal Beloved*, p.250.

owing to the Byzantium emperor. Moreover, Khosrow and Shekar's marriage is only to consummate sexual relationship. Contrary to all, Khosrow and Shirin's marriage, since their love for each other is indeed profound, symbolises a true connection between the lover and beloved. No matter what kind of relationship Khosrow appears in, in order to consummate love or to have a sexual relationship, he is bound to follow a marriage accordingly.

Nezami narrates the consequence of Maryam's death for Shirin who feels both pain and joy at the same time. She rejoices at her death, as it frees her pure soul of jealousy, but also she is saddened, since she is intelligent and fears that day will come for her too. Nevertheless, this is not meant to be for Shirin and Khosrow to reunite. Word of Khosrow's marriage to Shekar reaches Shirin. Shirin breaks down again. She complains and prays to God, "Oh God, command my night to become a day, let me reaffirm my victory in the world! Through my black nights there is no sign of hope in the mornings, light up my face as you do with the sun! I have a pain in my heart that would kill the bravest men [in the world], bring me joy instead of this much pain and make me victorious⁶²". Shirin's refuge from all this pain is to pray and beg for mercy. It is obvious that Shirin has faith in God and she is depicted as a religious character.

After a while, when Khosrow grows tired and his passion for Shekar ebbs, his love for Shirin carries him to her palace. Shirin refuses to see him, "Oh friend, you say you love me, but what have you obtained from wealth and honours, except for power and dominion? When did you think of me? What day did you make me happy? What was the garment you tore up while suffering for my love? What was the humiliation you endured in my name? What was the messenger you sent me with a greeting? And what night did you send it to me? You were happily drinking wine with your friends, while Shahpur used the quill and Farhad the axe⁶³". Though Shirin's cynical questions and sarcasm demonstrate her vulnerability, she is confidently addressing Khosrow's attitude. Her talks reveal how much she has suffered in silence. Even when she was in anguish in Armenia, somehow, she managed to hide her extreme sensitivity

⁶² Meneghini translates, "O signore, fai che la mia notte diventi giorno, che io, riaffermi la mia vittoria nel mondo! Nella mia notte nera non c'è speranza nel mattino, illumina tu il mio volto come fai col sole! Ho nel cuore un dolore che ucciderebbe gli uomini più coraggiosi, rendimi tu vittoriosa come l'allegria su tanta sofferenza!" (196).

⁶³ Meneghini translates, "O amico, dici di amarmi, ma che cosa hai ottenuto da ricchezza e onori, che cosa se non potere e dominio? In quale momento hai pensato a me? In quale giorno mi hai resa felice? Quale è stata la veste che hai stracciato soffrendo per amor mio? Quale è stata l'umiliazione che hai sopportato in mio nome? Quale è stato il messaggero che mi hai inviato con un saluto? E quale la notte in cui l'hai spedito presso di me? tu bevevi allegro la coppa di vino con gli amici, mentre Shapur usava il calamo e Farhad l'ascia" (206).

towards Khosrow. Ironically, she compares Khosrow's accomplishments to that of Shahpur and Farhad's. This may be that Shirin regards Farhad's axe as an analogy for the efforts he made to reach her. This is indeed incomparable to Khosrow amusing himself with his companions. It also conveys that Khosrow has made no effort to conquer Shirin's love except for sending messages through Shahpur. Farhad's axe symbolises the accomplishment, the effort, and his true feeling for Shirin.

It also could be that quill and axe represent professions. In this way, Shirin devalues and mocks Khosrow's success in life and she clarifies what job and achievements mean to her. She prolongs her complaints by presenting herself, "It is I who inspire pride in the panthers, I who teach the gazelles how to play, I who inspire rivalry among antelopes with a quick glance of mine⁶⁴". Shirin repeats how strong and powerful she is, as if Khosrow might have forgotten or even not been aware of. It seems that she demands her pride back.

On the contrary to what Shirin wishes to communicate, her strong feeling of disappointment is revealed. We learn that Shirin feels relieved when Maryam dies, which was considered her first barrier to reunite with Khosrow. With the appearance of Shekar, she is crippled again. Though Shirin is identified as a *par excellence* heroine, her envy of Maryam and Shekar is still evident. There is no mention of Shirin's jealousy by Nezami but, this might be lucid when she forbids Khosrow, "Don't brag about Shirin and Shekar, we are two things as far apart as a linen weaver and a butcher⁶⁵". It may be that since she knows how famous and beautiful shekar is, she competes with her which shows her jealousy. The envious Shirin considers herself very high and incomparable to Shekar.

Additionally, proud and stubborn Shirin, aware of the situation, is trying to educate Khosrow. It is possible to understand that Shirin, in these verses, is teaching him what love represents mentioning herself and Shekar at the same time. Later in chapter four, I examine Shekar and Shirin's character in depth.

We learn by the end of this romance, Shirin's pure love for Khosrow brings her to Persia, to an unhealthy palace, to pain and jealousy, to his throne, and eventually to her death. However, Shirin's struggle to spread equality is consistent all through the story even after Khosrow's death. Just before she kills

⁶⁴D. Meneghini translates, "Sono io che ispiro fierezza alle pantere, io che insegno a giocare alle gazzelle, io che instillo invidia alle antilopi con questi miei occhi dal rapido sguardo, [...]" (210).

⁶⁵D. Meneghini translates, "Non vantarti di Shirin e di Shekar, siamo due cose lontane come un tessitore di lino e un macellaio" (215).

herself, she orders that all Khosrow's possessions shall be distributed among the poor.

Ferdowsi's Shirin versus Nezami's Shirin

Nezami has been influenced a great deal by Ferdowsi, yet they treat and reflect on their characters according to their genres. Ruymbeke, in her article, *The Story of Khusrau and Shirin as a Case-Study*, explains that the *Shahnameh* passage is itself a rewriting, as Ferdowsi indicates in the introduction to the *Dastan-i Khosrow and Shirin*. Nezami rewrote the story, mentioning what must be in Ferdowsi's *Shahnameh*, but denying that his work is a rewriting⁶⁶.

Even so there is a significant difference between Ferdowsi's depiction of Shirin in his story and Nezami's version. Nezami's Shirin is affectionate, strong, and straightforward and can be better appreciated, contrasting to Ferdowsi's version of the story, in the *Shahnameh*, in which Shirin is assigned negative characteristics. *Shahnameh* deals with Shirin's story only briefly, as a sub-episode within the reign of two kings, Khosrow Parviz and his heir Shiruyeh⁶⁷. Early in King Khosrow's life, the trace of his love for Shirin is revealed. Ferdowsi expresses nothing about Shirin's origins and family background. The reader only gets to know her as part of the harem and then she disappears for the majority of the story. The more Khosrow's power looms, the more he forgets Shirin.

Meanwhile, within the alliances, Maryam and Gurdiya, the sister of Khosrow's enemy, Bahram Chubin, appear in the story. Much later, the king has a surprise meeting with Shirin again and the meeting seems to have been engineered by Shirin. Shirin has made careful preparations for her appearance. "With a cunningly moving speech and a few crocodile tears", she reawakens Khosrow's passion. Khosrow marries her and soils his kinship and his heredity with this impure woman. Nevertheless, Shirin is not yet satisfied and poisons the king's respected queen, Maryam. Efficiently in her cruelty, she also targets Maryam's son, Shiruyeh.

Khosrow's reign, though splendid, turns the people against him and a conspiracy eventually brings Shiruyeh into power. The contemptible king, who acts on his wife's advice, is imprisoned. Then, Shirin is accused of sorcery which

⁶⁶ C. van Ruymbeke, *The Story of Khusrau and Shirin as a Case-Study*, p. 273.

⁶⁷ *ibid.* p.274.

was one of the most serious crimes in Sasanian law, carrying the punishment of execution. She faces the judges with courage, tricks the council and the new king. Like father like son, the infatuated Shiruyeh marries Shirin. As weak as it is Shiruyeh's reign, Shirin is disappointed to gain power again, poisons herself in Khosrow's mausoleum. Thus, Ruymbeke distinguishes Ferdowsi's depiction of Shirin as a scheming, ambitious courtesan, whose origin remains obscure, whose beauty ensnares Khosrow, inspiring him to inglorious, un-kingly attitudes⁶⁸.

This may be the result of romanticized or historical narrations of the two poets in their observations of the story and their unique motivation in creating this poem. Ruymbeke believes that Ferdowsi's interest does not nestle with the romantic potential of the story, but with the legal, social, and political implications of the king's love affair⁶⁹. Ferdowsi's Shirin is not present in the whole story and is not powerful, but in Nezami's version, she is the centre of the story, and the heroine. Love, for Ferdowsi, is there only to perform in the tragedies, and women do not play essential roles. As Talattof justifies, "This does not mean that Ferdowsi's book is antifemale. Nor does it mean that the poet practiced male dominance in his personal life. As is evident in the book, he benefited from his wife's cooperation in the versification of the stories⁷⁰". However, it might be that Nezami's Shirin is not a historical character. Although in Ferdowsi's version of *Khosrow and Shirin*, Maryam is killed by Shirin since she was a barrier between her and Khosrow, Nezami does not refer to this matter⁷¹. In short, Ferdowsi did not feel the urge to express his concern toward women's topics. He was mostly focused on the language and the epic. Nezami, himself, assumes that Ferdowsi's age prevented him being preoccupied by a character like *Shirin*. In other narrations, Shirin is not as perfect as she emerges in Nezami's version.

Nezami's personal experience enables him to grow sympathy for issues like gender. He contemplates *Shirin* as an ideal female role model who stands for her principles and desires, who manifests dignity and self-control, and whose main concern is to spread equality in her society. This could also be the reason for Nezami's great respect for women.

⁶⁸ C. van Ruymbeke, *The Story of Khusrau and Shirin as a Case-Study*, p. 275.

⁶⁹ *ibid.* p.276

⁷⁰ K. Talattof, *Nizami's Unlikely Heroine*, p.64.

⁷¹ N.Hematyar, *Women's position in Nezami and Chauser*, p.209.

Chapter Four: The Great Lady, Mahin Banu

In this chapter, I am directing my attention to the portrayal of Mahin Banu in the story. In contrast to the character of Shirin, Mahin Banu's character has not been studied as much. There is almost no article devoted specifically to the depiction of this role. There are only few couplets describing Mahin Banu's character compared to those portraying Shirin, and as a consequence, readers only know her alongside Shirin and as a ruler of Armenia.

Mahin Banu's character dies and disappears very soon, long before the end of the story. She is a mature, rather aged, and extremely independent female character of this romance. She is introduced to the readers shortly after the beginning of the story, even before Shirin has been depicted.

In the same scene where Shahpur describes his adventure with the intention of introducing Shirin to Khosrow, Nezami begins with the depiction of Mahin Banu and her territory.

زنی فرماندهست از نسل شاهان
شده جوش سپاهش تا سپاهان
همه اقلیم اران تا به ارمن
مقرر گشته بر فرمان آن زن
ندارد هیچ مرزی بی خرابی
همه دارد و مگر تختی و تاجی
هزارش قلعه بر کوه بلند است
خزینهاش را خدا داند که چند است
ز جنس چاربا چندان که خواهی
به افزونی فزون از مرغ و ماهی⁷²

A woman is the ruler from the royal lineage
whose army's impetus has pushed all the way to Isfahan.
All the territories between Arran and Armenia
are subject to her dominion.
There is no defect in her territory
she has everything, even a throne and a crown.
She has a large number of castles on the top of mountains
only God knows how much treasure she possesses.
She has quadrupled as much as you desire
even more from birds and fish.

Nezami depicts Mahin Banu as a person who does not care about wealth, throne, and position. She has everything that anyone could ever desire and all the lands are subject to her command. In the previous chapter, there was a

⁷² V. Dastgerdi, p.49.

stress on fairness and the justice spread by Shirin, nevertheless, in this part, Mahin Banu's capability and power is highlighted. Shirin and Mahin Banu as leaders cultivate distinctive factors. The representation of Mahin Banu continues,

ندارد شوی و دارد کامرانی
به شادی می‌گذارد زندگانی
ز مردان بیشتر دارد سترگی
مهین بانوش خوانند از بزرگی⁷³

She has no husband yet she is gratified
she passes her life with delight.
She is rougher than any men
she is called Mahin Banu (The Great Lady) due to her greatness.

Mahin Banu has never been married; nonetheless she is content with her life. The first verse demonstrates one of Nezami's unique viewpoints about marriage in that era. We know that Shirin suffers in her love for Khosrow because she demands marriage before they can be together. Perhaps marriage can solve her pain and fulfil their love, on the other hand, Nezami depicts Mahin Banu as an unlikely single woman who does not wish for any men or marriage and she is pleased though she does not have any husbands.

To marry is one of the main purposes of many Persian romances. Women in the twelfth century Persia, and their privileges were dependent on what type of wife they were. Women were expected to accept domesticity as daughters, wives, and mothers rather than seeking public recognition. They had to always remain under the authority of a guardian like father, husband, son, or a male relative. Marriage was highly expected and regarded for a woman⁷⁴. Unlike women in that era, Nezami portrays Mahin Banu, Shirin, and their attendants differently to what is expected from them. Women do not seek marriage to fulfil their lives.

عروسانی زناشوئی ندیده
به کابین⁷⁵ از جهان خود را خریده⁷⁶

Brides who had not known marriage,

⁷³ V. Dastgerdi, p. 49.

⁷⁴ See *Women in Pre-Islamic Persia* in Encyclopedia Iranica. (A. S. Shahbazi)

⁷⁵ The word "کابین" (kābīn) means a marriage-portion or settlement which a husband is obliged to pay to his wife if he divorces her without sufficient cause.

⁷⁶ V. Dastgerdi, p.59.

who bought themselves from the world as marriage contract⁷⁷.

The uniqueness of Mahin Banu's character lies in her portrayal, an unlikely single woman who is physically and emotionally able and capable of governing a huge land without any mention of a king next to her. Next to Mahin Banu's singlehood and her greatness, Nezami depicts other female companions as strong and independent women who are undeniably self-sufficient and do not seek a marriage to make their lives meaningful.

Following the portrayal of Mahin Banu, the reader becomes acquainted with who Shirin is. After this point, Mahin Banu is mentioned only if Shirin has something to do with her.

Once Shirin wishes to leave with Shabdiz⁷⁸, she enquires about the horse, and Mahin Banu responds,

مهین بانو جوابش داد کای ماه
به جای مرکبی صد ملک در خواه
به حکم آنکه این شیرنگ شبدیز
به گاه پویه بس تند است و بس تیز⁷⁹

Mahin Banu responded: "O Moon!
you could ask for property instead of a horse".
To the fact that this night- coloured Shabdiz
can sometimes behave fast and sharp.

In Persian literature and art, horses are very much celebrated. They are primarily used for war and transport. They have qualities such as swiftness, fleetness, endurance, and sharp eyesight. A good example of such a horse is Shabdiz, Shirin's horse in this story, which according to E. Herzfeld is immortalized in "the representation carved at Tāq-e Bostān and in early Islamic poetry⁸⁰".

In the first verse above, Mahin Banu addresses Shirin as a moon. The frequency of the usage of the moon in creation of beautiful and superior images is seen enough in the poetry of Nezami. Women in *Khosrow and Shirin* are all considerably positive figures, even if their beauty does not have a special role in

⁷⁷ Meneghini translates, "Quelle giovani erano tutte vergini che non avevano conosciuto matrimonio, avevano infatti riscattato se stesse dal desiderio di altri" (49).

⁷⁸ "Shabdiz" is the most important horse in the story.

⁷⁹ V. Dastgerdi, p.73.

⁸⁰ See *Asb in Pre-Islamic Iran* in Encyclopaedia Iranica

the scheme and plot. Nezami describes these girls who gathered at the court of Mahin Banu,

ز مهتر زادگان ماه پیکر
بود در خدمتش هفتاد دختر
بخوبی هر یکی آرام جانی
به زیبایی دلاویز جهانی

Among the noble descendants, beautiful with a moon face,
seventy girls belong to her entourage.
Each of them was a solace for the heart in loveliness
each of them was an attraction for the heart of a world in beauty.

بخوبی در جهان یاری ندارند
به گیتی جز طرب کاری ندارند⁸¹

They have no equal in the world for their grace and beauty
they pursue no other occupation in the world than the pursuit of joy.

Alavi holds that in ancient Iran, women were highly esteemed and they were considered as a full member of the family. They were active in all the affairs and business of married life, equal to her husband⁸². Contrary to this, Mazdapur believes that a matriarchy flourished in the pre-Indo-European period, but that after the immigration of the Aryans and their settlement on the Iranian plateau, the matriarchal system declined and was replaced by a rough, patriarchal structure in which the women were isolated, marginalized, and commodified⁸³. These two main views hold strongly opposing opinions about the status of women in ancient Iran; however, Nezami maintains the first view explicitly in the depiction of the character of Mahin Banu.

The mother-like caring behaviour of Mahin Banu already teaches the reader how Shirin is dear, close, and the only person that Mahin Banu holds, though she acts independently and freely from all her emotions for her. She believes in Shirin's individuality and her freedom of choice. She does not interfere in her decisions. However, when she hears that Shirin has already left the court to pursue her love, she cries and grieves. She complains that Shirin

⁸¹ V. Dastgerdi, p.53.

⁸² H. Alavi, *Zan dar Iran-e Bastan*, p.9-11.

⁸³ K. Mazdapur, *Dagh-e gol-e sorkh*, p.87.

prefers to be with others, rather than her aunt. Her attendants and companions suggest going after Shirin yet Mahin Banu refuses.

مهین بانو چو بشنید این سخن را
صلا در داد غمهای کهن را
مهین بانو به رفتن میل نمود
نه خود رفت و نه کس را نیز فرمود⁸⁴

When Mahin Banu heard this
she yelled all her old sorrows.
Mahin Banu did not accord with leaving
neither did she go after [Shirin] nor did she request anyone to do so.

It is obvious that although it is indeed hard for Mahin Banu to lose Shirin, as it is for any combination of mother-child situations, she decides to embrace her sorrow and respect Shirin's decision. This attitude of a parent-like Mahin Banu is so unique. She has all the power and authority to stop Shirin and act as a protective parent but in this situation she decides to let go of her and allow her to make her own choice. She does not project her feelings and emotions on Shirin nor does she try to prevent her. On the other hand, when she sees Shirin again after some time,

مهین بانو نشاید گفت چون بود
که از شادی ز شادروان برون بود
چو پیری کو جوانی باز یابد
بمیرد زندگانی باز یابد⁸⁵

It is hard to explain how Mahin Banu was
out of happiness, she was out of her royal cloth.
As if an old person regains her youth
as if she would die and comes to life again.

Mahin Banu's sentiment and her love for Shirin is clearly observable. The reader can deduce from these couplets how important Shirin is to Mahin Banu. The intensity of her love and care for Shirin is undoubtedly emphasized through an image of an old person who regains his youth. It seems in the story of *Khosrow and Shirin*, Nezami repeatedly accentuates youth and youthfulness. He considers youth as a treasure or superiority that one will lose over time.

⁸⁴ V. Dastgerdi, p.74.

⁸⁵ *ibid.* p.111.

When Mahin Banu realizes the affection between Khosrow and Shirin, she does not mention anything⁸⁶. She does not make Shirin feel shy or ashamed by revealing her secret. She understands her love for Khosrow since she knows that her unreliable behaviour was due to her falling in love. She has understood the clues of her love for Khosrow and has heard about it from the girls. Mahin Banu acts accepting, supportive, and respectful for their love. She attempts to support Shirin to rationalize the situation and not to become insecure about herself. She reminds Shirin of her beauty and kindness, of her destiny and future. She declares that if Khosrow is the moon, we are also the sun, and if he is of Kay Khosrow's lineage, we are of the lineage of Afrasiyab⁸⁷. In the Persian epic book, *Shahnameh*, Kay Khosrow is a legendary king of Iran of the Kiyanian dynasty. Before he was born, his father was murdered by his maternal grandfather Afrasiyab. Thus, Afrasiyab's lineage was indeed powerful and older than Kay Khosrow's succession.

Mahin Banu urges Shirin to recognise her value next to a great king like Khosrow. She acknowledges Shirin's pure love for Khosrow and she advises Shirin to maintain her virginity and not to fall for him before marriage.

تو خود دانی که وقت سرفرازی
زناشوئی بهست از عشقبازی⁸⁸

You know better that at the moment of holding head high
marital status is better than the game of love.

It is already well known that Nezami prefers marriage over love affairs in his romances. In the role of Mahin Banu, he encourages Shirin to be thoughtful before consummating her love with Khosrow. It is worth examining some possible reasons for this. It might be that Mahin Banu is afraid that Khosrow does not love Shirin enough and this affair might end with a broken hearted Shirin. Thus, Mahin Banu's supportive action might be underlined. She urges Shirin not to take actions emotionally and make logical decisions. She inspires

⁸⁶ Menghini translates: "Mahin Banu non fece menzione della condotta di Shirin, non inflisse la piega della vergogna ai suoi capelli, giacche sapeva che il suo comportamento mendace aveva come causa l'innamoramento: di questo amore aveva colto degli indizi in Khosrow e ne aveva sentito raccontare delle fanciulle dal petto d'argento" (86).

⁸⁷ Menghini translates, "È vero che lui è luna, ma anche noi siamo sole, e se lui è della stirpe dei Kay Khosrow, noi siamo della stirpe di Afrasiyab" (91).

⁸⁸ V. Dastgerdi, p.121.

her to be patient and make the best decision for herself to avoid any regret. It might also be that Mahin Banu is a conservative person and bound to tradition. Nonetheless, reflecting on marriage in this romance, as I already pointed out in the previous chapter, we may conclude that Nezami criticizes sexual relationships outside of marriage, and marriage can take place out of love, lust, or benefits.

It is worth noticing another Mahin Banu's key quality. While Shirin is mourning in despair, Mahin Banu sympathises with her and encourages her to be patient.

که صابر شو درین غم روزکی چند
نماند هیچ کس جاوید در بند⁸⁹

Be patient in this sorrow for a few days
no one remains eternally in the trap of suffering.

She softens Shirin's great suffering from losing Khosrow, advising her, "Be patient and support this pain well for a few days, as no one remains forever in the traps of suffering; you don't need to be in a hurry to gamble your luck, just like rose does that, because the water, when it flows impetuously, breaks down the bridge! Just like the movement of the ball, it is better that the affairs have ups and downs, since whoever falls then rises again: there is no seed that grows if it is not first unravelled in the earth and there is no affair that is resolved before it is knotted. The most satisfying thing is that what you desire occurs after a patience⁹⁰". Patience is one of the most definitive factors that Mahin Banu insists on. She constantly invites Shirin to be patient and persistent. She reasons and rationalises how patience works and what it results in.

Until now, Mahin Banu has been looked at alongside Shirin. Regardless of the character of Shirin, Mahin Banu rules a very peaceful country where women are free and active. They are occupied with activities such as hunting and horseback riding. Women in the middle ages in Iran, as we read in Ferdowsi and Nezami's works, were experts in horseback riding, shooting, sword fighting,

⁸⁹ V. Dastgerdi, p.173.

⁹⁰ Meneghini translates, "Sii paziente e supporta questo dolore be alcuni giorni, giacché nessuno rimane per sempre nei lacci della sofferenza; non bisogna avere fretta di giocarsi la fortuna, come fa la rosa, perché l'acqua, quando scorre impetuosa, abbatte il ponte! Come per il movimento della palla, è meglio che le faccende abbiano alti e bassi, giacché chi cade poi si rialza: non c'è seme che cresca se prima non si è disfatto nella terra e non ce vicenda che si risolve che prima non si sia annodata. La cosa più bella è che ciò che desideri arrivi dopo un'attesa" (121).

hunting, and other kinds of martial arts. Perhaps, this may convey an androgenic view of women.

In the land of Mahin Banu, there is no mention of the existence of any male character though Mahin Banu behaves consistently to both sexes. When king Khosrow visits Armenia, Mahin Banu hosts him as perfectly as possible. When she learns that Khosrow is arriving at her land, she appears before him excellently.

مهین بانو چو زین حالت خیر یافت
به خدمت کردن شاهانه بشتافت⁹¹

When Mahin Banu became aware of this she rushed to serve him [Khosrow] in a royal fashion.

مهین بانو به درگاه جهانگیر
نکرد از شرط خدمت هیچ تقصیر⁹²

Mahin Banu in front of the king did not fall short in serving accurately.

Readers already know Mahin Banu as a strong queen who is independent and self-sufficient. Yet, in these verses we learn that she also cares about honouring the king and presenting her splendid court and welcoming palace in front of the eyes of King Khosrow. Her watchfulness for serving a male king is worth noticing. She does her best to serve him without any shortcomings and defects. Historically, King Khosrow was known as an important governor, therefore, it may be interpreted that Mahin Banu wishes to make peace with Persia and profit from the situation.

It is not even halfway through the story that Mahin Banu falls ill and dies. She does not appear much in the story, but without a doubt, she is depicted as a heroine of the romance. And for Nezami, the portrayal of Mahin Banu is an ultimate depiction to initiate the reader to the existence of an independent

⁹¹ V. Dastgerdi, p.93.

⁹² ibid. p.95.

queen, to reflect the power and justice and thus to dive into the ocean of feminine capability to raise a new ethic about gender.

CHAPTER FIVE: MARYAM AND SHEKAR, LUST OR LOVE

In the former chapters, I looked at two of the most unlikely heroines of the twelfth century. Shirin, the protagonist of the romance, and Mahin Banu, the great lady, are two of the most unique representations of a female role in any stories of that era. It is clear that in Nezami's *Khosrow and Shirin* poem, there is an indication of Shirin's courage everywhere. As Taheri states, Nezami's ultimate goal of this romance is to personalise strong women. Women used to be an instrument and a means of entertainment for rulers and kings and they had no value in that era. But women in Nezami's work are seeking their true and lost identity⁹³.

In this chapter, nonetheless, I focus on the other two female characters who have some roles in this story. Obviously, as I will analyse in this chapter, these two characters are not as heroic as Shirin nor Mahin Banu, yet, they are depicted as powerful and compelling.

In the scene where Khosrow becomes furious with Shirin withdrawing, he returns to Persia and claims his throne back. In return for political and military support of the Emperor of Byzantium, Khosrow is married to his daughter Maryam. Historically Maria (Maryam), is the daughter of the Byzantine emperor Maurice, and wife of the Sasanian Persian king Khosrow II⁹⁴. She is a figure of legend who was a member of Khosrow's harem. She was neither a queen, nor an imperial princess⁹⁵.

Earlier, we learned that Shirin, struggling with her love for Khosrow, was demanding marriage as an act of confirmation for their love, but, in this episode, Nezami introduces a new ethic of a loveless marriage. Marriage between Khosrow and Maryam is due to the compensation for a co-operation, the price of an alliance. Marriage is introduced as an act of legitimization of Khosrow's succession in order to secure his throne. Nezami does not judge, he portrays a loveless marriage between Maryam and Khosrow in which they remain loyal to each other. Several cases attest to the marriage of the Sasanian

⁹³ H. Taheri, *Review and analysis of Nezami's Khosrow and Shirin with Vahshi's Farhad and Shirin*, p.13.

⁹⁴ This is known according to the 12th century chronicle of Michael the Syrian.

⁹⁵ W. Baum, *Shirin: Christian-Queen-Myth of Love: A Woman of Late*, 2004. P.27-28.

king with non-Persian women due to political alliances, and, intriguingly, the sons of these unions often succeeded to the throne⁹⁶. Seyed- Gohrab in his article *Longing for Love* notes, “Nezami’s ethical norms on love, sex, and marriage are that a loveless marriage is doomed to fail⁹⁷”, specifically in the story of *Layli and Majnun*. Although Khosrow remains faithful to Maryam, all this time, his heart is longing for Shirin.

Nezami depicts Maryam as opposed to the portrayal of Shirin. This is noticeable when Khosrow demands Maryam’s permission to have Shirin in his court and Maryam responds,

جوابش داد مریم که ای جهانگیر
شکوهت چون کواکب آسمانگیر
[...]
اگر حلوائی تر شد نام شیرین
نخواهد شد فرود از کام شیرین
ترا بی رنج حلوائی چنین نرم
برنج سرد را تا کی کنی گرم
رطب خور خار نادیدن ترا سود
که بس شیرین بود حلوائی بی دود
مرا با جادوئی هم حقه سازی؟
که بر سازد ز بابل حقه بازی
هزار افسانه از بر پیش دارد
به طنازی یکی در پیش دارد
ترا بفریبد و ما را کند دور
تو زو راضی شوی من از تو مهجور⁹⁸

Maryam answered him: O conqueror of the world,
your greatness is equal to the stars that dominate the sky.
If the name of Shirin becomes a fresh *halva*⁹⁹
it will not sweeten your palate.
You have here without pain a tender soft sweet
for how much longer do you want to heat some cold rice?
Eat these dates¹⁰⁰ you will have the advantage of not seeing the thorns
it is indeed sweet and does not cause damage.
You want to put me in the same box with a sorceress
who is capable of the hoax of Babel?
She knows more than a thousand legends
if she starts playing she will always have a disposition.
She will deceive you and push me away,

⁹⁶ See *Women in Pre-Islamic Persia* in Encyclopaedia Iranica.

⁹⁷ A.A. Seyed-Gohrab, *Longing for Love*, p.864

⁹⁸ V. Dastgerdi, p. 196.

⁹⁹ Literally, *Halva* is a name that indicates anything sweet. It is also a special preparation based on sesame seed paste and sugar spread with many variations throughout the Middle East, India and the Mediterranean. In Persian poetry, it is a metaphor for the sweetness of a beloved.

¹⁰⁰ *Rotab*, the date, is the favourite fruit in *Khamsa*. A beautiful dark colour fruit described as growing at the top of the palm-tree, between thorns, containing a stone and constituting a much appreciated sweet. It is also used in a metaphoric sense for the lips or the mouth, or for the sweet words it proffers (C. van Ruymbeke, *From Culinary Recipe to Pharmacological Secret for a Successful Wedding Night*, p.130).

so you will be happy next to her and I will be separated from you.

Maryam insists on Shirin's supernatural power who enchanted Khosrow and will do so again to separate them. Seyed-Gohrab observes, "In Persian literary tradition, magic is often related to love and how the lover contrives various magical devices to attain the beloved¹⁰¹". Shirin, being already portrayed as a *parī* (fairy) is demonstrated as a beloved who can easily exercise her influence over Khosrow's soul and body through her supernatural power. Therefore, Maryam adds a mystical dimension to the relationship between Khosrow and Shirin. Speaking powerfully, she entices Khosrow to let go of Shirin and enjoy with the sweet wife that he already has. Though Maryam's utterance in *Khosrow and Shirin* is completely against equality, she has a confident voice in front of Khosrow, not fearing only directing her thoughts.

من افسونهای او را نیک دانم
چنین افسانها را نیک خوانم
بسا زن کو صد از پنجه نداند
عطارد را به زرق از ره براند
زنان مانند ریجان سفالند
درون سو خبث و بیرون سو جمالند
نشاید یافتن در هیچ برزن
وفا در اسب و در شمشیر و در زن
وفا مردی است بر زن چون توان بست
چو زن گفتی بشوی از مردمی دست
بسی کردند مردان چاره‌سازی
ندیدند از یکی زن راست بازی
زن از پهلوی چپ گویند برخاست
مجوی از جانب چپ جانب راست
چه بندی دل در آن دور از خدائی
کزو حاصل نداری جز بلائی
اگر غیرت بری با درد باشی
و گر بی‌غیرتی نامرد باشی
برو تنها دم از شادی برآور
چو سوسن سر به آزادی برآور¹⁰²

I know these deceptions very well,
I myself know how to pronounce them!
There are many women who do not know how to distinguish one hundred from fifty
[but] they know how to remove Mercury from its orbit with magic.
The women are like ceramics decorated with basil designs
inside, they are impure but the outside is beautiful.

¹⁰¹ Seyed-Gohrab, *Magic in Classical Persian Amatory Literature*, p.72.

¹⁰² V. Dastgerdi, p.197.

It will never be possible to consider
reliability in a horse or a sword or a woman.
Loyalty arises from a man, is impossible to connect it to a woman
as soon as you talk about a woman, you have to forget the male virtues.
Men have been reasoning a lot
it has never seen anything good in a woman.
In fact, it is said that the woman was born from Adam's left side
do not look for the right side on the left side.
So you want to tie your heart to that woman far from God
you gain nothing from her but misfortunes.
If you are jealous you will suffer
if you are not, you will not be a real man.
Go and in solitude breathe the joy
like a lily raises its head in full freedom.

Getting acquainted with Nezami and his female roles so far, Maryam's words may be surprising. There is huge opposition communicated to all forms of femininity through these verses. As is apparent, Maryam conveys a different understanding of women than Shirin does. Maryam first draws a strong border between male and female existence and then denies equality between them. This is completely beyond what Shirin believes. Not only does she not encourage respect for women, but she also devalues them. She mentions the incapability, impurity, and unreliability of women. She calls them sorceresses who achieve what they desire through trickery. She attempts to discourage Khosrow's love for Shirin. In this manner, she underestimates herself as well. Out of her jealousy, she diminishes all women at the same time.

Later, she swears to the Crown of the Emperor of Byzantium that if Shirin sets foot on her territory, she will put a black rope around her neck and hang herself because of Khosrow's injustice. Previously, I mentioned that historically, Shirin poisons Maryam in order to become Khosrow's wife but Maryam is depicted differently in this story.

As I referred earlier, in the loveless relationship between Maryam and Khosrow, there is an indication of power which is gained by marriage. Marriage, in this romance, functions much stronger than love. Marriage occurs for a lot of reasons while love stays the same. This can be proved also in the story of Khosrow and Shekar.

The very last female character targeted in this thesis will be Shekar. *Shekar* meaning "sugar", is one of the characters who plays a very short role in this poem. She appears only in one scene when King Khosrow desires a woman

in his court after Maryam's death. It is indeed a unique act for a king to turn to a courtesan who is famed throughout the country because of her well-known brothel.

یکی گفتا سزای بزم شاهان
شکر نامی است در شهر سپاهان
به شکر بر ز شیرینیش بیداد
وزو شکر به خوزستان به فریاد
به زیر هر لبش صد خنده بیشست
لبش را چون شکر صد بنده بیشست
قبا تنگ آید از سروش چمن را
درم واپس دهد سیمش سمن را¹⁰³

One said according to the worthy of the king's palace,
in the city of Isfahan there is a woman named Shekar.
Sugar is humiliated on the sweetness
that is such as to make the Khuzestan scream with rage.
Her lips hide a hundred and more smiles,
for this reason, they have a hundred slaves to adore them or perhaps more.
Her cypress stature makes the lawn feel inadequate
while her silver body returns the jasmine drachmas¹⁰⁴.

Shekar is introduced in these verses as uniquely sweet as Shirin was described at the beginning of the romance. Their sweetness and beauty can be comparable and they are associated with nature. Both fame has already enticed hundreds of people. This sub-story of Khosrow's lust for Shekar, or better to say the love of the king for a courtesan, who is also chaste, is a disgrace for Khosrow. Zarrinkoob believes that the history of Shekar Isfahani (from Isfahan), who has a brothel in Isfahan and is also known as a beautiful prostitute, seems to be a picture of Shirin's history in Ferdowsi's source.

« ... اما در روایت نظامی که شیرین می بایست ملکه ارمن باشد و تا پایان ماجرا پاکدامنی خود را حفظ کند ، ناچار سابقه باید به يك خوبروي ديگر - که نامش هم بتواند احتمال خلط با نام وي را توجیه نماید - منسوب می شود ... »¹⁰⁵

(In Nezami's narrative, Shirin had to be the Armenian queen and remain chaste until the end of the story, the poet had to inevitably introduce another beautiful woman whose name could also justify the possibility of confusion with Shirin's name).

¹⁰³ V. Dastgerdi, p.278.

¹⁰⁴ Meneghini translates, "Nella città di Isfahan c'è una donna che si chiama Shekar, Ella è degna del palazzo del re: Lo zucchero è umiliato sulla dolcezza che è tale da fare urlare di rabbia il Khuzestan; le sue labbra nascondono cento e più sorrisi e per questo hanno cento schiavi ad adorarle o forse più la sua statura di cipresso fa sentire il prato inadeguato mentre il suo corpo d'argento restituisce le dracme gelsomino" (186).

¹⁰⁵ H. Taheri, *Review and analysis of Nezami's Khosrow and Shirin with Vahshi's Farhad and Shirin*, p.11.

In fact, in Nezami's version of the story of Khosrow and Shekar, Shekar can be attributed to Shirin's character in Ferdowsi's version. This makes it possible to perceive Shekar and Shirin as one identity.

Shekar's depiction as a virgin courtesan, Khosrow as a king, and their loveless marriage all raise turmoil in this scene. Nezami portrays Shekar, a well-known prostitute who does not share her bed, even with the king without marriage. This image again affirms Nezami's high regards for women as persons who determine their own desire and react to any kind of obligation. Even when sleeping with a courtesan, one might accord and respect the woman's choice.

Thus, from the description of marriage, one out of lust and the other out of political advantages, we may conclude that Nezami reveals his concerns and condemnation of consummating love outside of marriage. He gives these versions of female roles: Maryam who he defines as powerful but anti-female, the other as Shekar, a chaste self-reliant courtesan, a very clear voice. Through these roles, Nezami rejects the literary traditions of female characters.

CHAPTER SIX: CONCLUSION

As I reflected on the present collection of studies taken on Nezami's *Khosrow and Shirin*, the portrayal of women in this romance raises new possibilities for launching new ethics in medieval literary traditions. It is manifest that Nezami's knowledge of female representations is the most captivating element for this research.

Nezami's work of *Khosrow and Shirin* has long been admired for its dense and oblique language that allows the reader to simultaneously engage multiple layers of meanings without being constrained to any single interpretation. As Talattof insists, "Equally important, I argue that Nezami was preoccupied with more than issues of jurisprudence, or any other Islamic concerns, but with the art of speech itself. For him, this art was sublime. These characteristics explain why a Marxist, a Zoroastrian, a feminist, and a Muslim theologian may all find ideological interest there¹⁰⁶". This proves the multiplicity of understandings represented by Nezami in the work of *Khosrow and Shirin*. To push the notion of Nezami's respect and regard for women further, I curiously studied the poem from the women portrayal perspective so that this might have something to offer its readers.

Taken together, all these analyses offer coherent evidence of various aspects of the portrayal of women in *Khosrow and Shirin's* romance. In the course of exploration, I tackled the portrayal of Shirin, Mahin Banu, Maryam, and Shekar figures. By portraying Shirin with utmost beauty, Mahin Banu with her deliverance of capability, Maryam with her influence, and Shekar with chastity, Nezami breaks the traditional representations of female characters in the stories. By idealising Shirin and by comparing her to a fairy, Nezami emphasises on female beings and their influence on the society and eventually on the culture.

It is worth emphasising that Nezami's affinity toward women causes him to depict them positively even when the original stories are different. He expresses his views on women through characters, leaving room for diverse interpretations. He discusses the harmony between men and women in which

¹⁰⁶K. Talattof, *Nizami's Unlikely Heroines*, p. 59.

women can recognize their truth and obtain knowledge. Such perceptions underpin his carefulness for women.

The analysis of this thesis, is about recognizing gender and their roles. It is to have a better understanding of how power operates so women have more room in accordance with their wishes. The notion of who gets to speak powerfully and who gets to represent something, were my main concern throughout the thesis. I revealed that a female representation is speaking and I tried to locate that depiction. As a result, in this work, deep understanding of women is evident and strongly expressed. Nezami made room in his romance for the true existence of women, recognizing them as complete strong beings who do not need to get married to fulfil their lives. They are women with their own perspective, with their own voices, speaking up for themselves. Shirin, a well-educated, independent, fearless, resourceful, imaginative, erotic, and humorous¹⁰⁷ figure, is portrayed not only as a beloved but also a true lover, who at times, takes initiatives to pursue her love. She sheds tears, endures agony, yet she never abandons her principle and beliefs. She is so extremely chaste in her love for Khosrow that even educates the reader about the principles of being a lover. Next to Shirin, the character of Mahin Banu, a single, mature, supportive, and patient figure, confirms the ideal portrayal of a just queen. The depiction of a powerful woman like Maryam and a self-sufficient courtesan like Shekar, demonstrates an exceptional appreciation for female beings by the poet no matter what kind of roles they play.

In fact, to name these four of Nezami's female characters, Shirin, Shekar, Maryam, and Mahin Banu, all in their own way, try to teach the male protagonists ethical, social, and moral lessons. Shirin teaches Khosrow chastity and honour. She educates him about monogamous marriage when she avoids sharing her bed with him as long as he is with another woman. Nezami through Shirin rejects the possibility that one may have two objects of love. Maryam, being married to Khosrow because of political reasons, teaches Khosrow to spread peace in the country. On the other hand, Shekar teaches Khosrow to honour integrity and virginity, avoiding going to bed with him before marriage. And lastly, Mahin Banu serving Khosrow kingly teaches him the notion of equality.

¹⁰⁷ P.J. Chelkowski, p.47.

Such portrayals of women and the centrality of their roles lend the poet's work a modern quality. Without denying that women's subordination is effected and experienced in the societies, Nezami's depiction of female figures acknowledges women as persons. His clear view on women is not very similar to the closed and feudal society of that time. His female characters found ways to exist in a world that makes it difficult to exist autonomously. Nonetheless, Nezami's *Khosrow and Shirin* is a place where he communicates the behavioural matter and his mind and thoughts on relationships. It is bound to refer to Nezami as equally holding on to the progressive tools which carry forward human thinking.

In Nezami's work, the concepts of oppression, sexism, and male chauvinism cannot be noticed in a hero and a king such as Khosrow. In close attention to the relationships between Khosrow and other women, it is evident that Khosrow never shows his superiority or power to gain a woman.

Identifying the depiction of women in this work is to a great extent applicable to the notion of equality. Looking at what women wear and what kind of activities they are involved with, there is some uniformity among men and women. Both sexes are engaged the same way in activities such as hunting or drinking. Nezami, in this work, accommodates gender issues in concrete terms. He uses words as tools which find ways to relate to women. Nezami, with this innovative perspective on women in that era, defines a new way of connecting not only to women but to all the members of one society.

In sum, it should be mentioned that Nezami was sensitive to the portrayal of women, gender equality, and relationship issues. However, the exigencies of his genre, his experience in his personal life, and the impact of general understanding of the culture of his time, without a doubt, influenced his work. Although he characterizes women in positive aspects, he alters to present the most amiable and charming portrayals of women from humanistic and liberal point of view in the classical period¹⁰⁸. Nezami's poetry is a reflection of his idea and his high esteem for the women with whom he was involved next to his deep understanding of the human psyche that plays upon it. It is a reflection of his tolerance and of his acquaintance with several cultures. Nezami's *Khosrow and Shirin* is therefore unique in terms of female characterizations and he

¹⁰⁸ K. Talattof, *Nizami's Unlikely Heroines*, p.76.

stands out in Persian poetry and among great Persian poets for his progressive and liberal portrayal of women.

In contrast to Ferdowsi, Nezami does not remain faithful to the historical sources. He seems to be concerned with the culture and the problem of gender delineation. Nezami inherited the rich literary tradition from former poets and creatively altered to produce new pieces. He nevertheless extols the moral and intellectual capacity of women. I consider *Khosrow and Shirin* thematically a prompt to be sensitive to the cause of women and it necessarily gives rise to portraying femininity highly.

The issue under discussion in this thesis is not whether *Khosrow and Shirin* can be identified as a feministic revolt. The important point is that this romance has been portrayed as an honourable act for women. We can thus conclude that what Nezami wrote in terms of representation of female characters is indeed laudable. All things considered, it may be possible to ponder Nezami's *Khosrow and Shirin* as a radical work of literature in twelfth century of Persia.

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