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BELOVED
Article by **Johannes Thomas Pieter de Bruijn**

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BELOVED (*maʿšūq* in Arabic and Persian) belongs, together with Lover (*ʿāšeq*) and Love (*ʿešq*), to the three concepts that dominate the semantic field of eroticism in Persian literature and mysticism. The interrelation among these concepts makes it almost impossible to treat any one of the concepts separately. In this article only the most important characteristics of the concept of the Beloved in the Persian tradition can be mentioned.

Apart from *maʿšūq*, which can be found especially in theoretical expositions, many other words were in use to designate the Beloved, e.g., *maḥbūb*, *ḥabīb*, *yār*, *dūst*, *delbar* (ravisher of hearts), *negār* (image), and *bot* or *ṣanam* (idol).

The concept was personified in various genres of erotic literature: the prologues (*nasīb*s) of *qaṣīda*s (a convention taken over from Arabic poetry), independent *ḡazal*s, romantic *maṯnawī*s and prose romances. It also appeared in the love stories contained in heroic epics, in didactic works (romantic stories used as illustrative tales) and in representations of pairs of lovers used as *exempla* in lyrical poems. In addition, since the early 6th/12th century, several prose works were written that deal with Beloved, Lover, and Love in a theoretical way. The earliest of these treatises was *Sawāneḥ* by Aḥmad Ḡazālī (d. 520/1126), which was composed in an epigrammatical style imitated by many later writers.

As the meanings attached to the theme of love in general expanded, Beloved could metonymically be applied to figures other than those that were the objects of erotic desire. In court poetry, the amorous *nasīb*s leading up to the

actual panegyrics were often meant to reflect the relationship of devotion and loyalty between the poet and his patron. Similarly, the goal of a mystical quest could be described in terms borrowed from the poetry of profane love. As a result of this expansion of meaning, the boundaries between “metaphorical” (*majāzī*) or profane love and “real” (*ḥaqīqī*) or transcendental love tended to blur. This provided the concept of Beloved with a particularly ambiguous character. Both in literature and in mysticism, the Beloved could be interpreted as a *šāhed*, i.e., a “witness” of immaterial beauty as it was exemplified in the perfection of the human form.

The writers on the theory of love put the emphasis on the sublimation of erotic affection. The most appropriate example of this attitude was Majnūn’s love for Laylā, which precluded all possibilities of fulfillment. The mystic Rūzbehān Baqlī (d. 606/1209) began his treatise *ʿAbhar al-ʿāšeqīn* with the description of a “plaything from Paradise” (*jannatī loʿbat*), its function being merely to point up the esoteric intention of the author (ed. H. Corbin and M. Moʿīn, Tehran, 1958, pp. 4ff.). In a passage devoted to the theme of *malāmat* (criticism), Aḥmad Ḡazālī described love as a process of reduction, during which “the sword of jealousy” (*ṣamṣām-e ḡayrat*) successively cuts the ties that bind the Lover to others, to himself and to the Beloved, so that only a devotion to Love itself remains, purified from any desire (cf. *Sawāneḥ*, ed. H. Ritter, Istanbul, 1942, pp. 12ff.).

The conventions for describing the Beloved were already well established in early classical poetry. They sometimes form a pattern encompassing the entire body “from head to toe” (*az sar tā pā*). Specimens of their application can be found especially in narrative literature, e.g., the descriptions of Rūdāba in the *Šāh-nāma* (ed. Moscow, I, pp. 157, 165), of Vīs in Gorgānī’s *Vīs o Rāmīn* (ed. M. J. Maḥjūb, Tehran, 1337 Š./1959, pp. 74-76) and of Šīrīn in Neẓāmī’s *Ḵosrow o Šīrīn* (ed. W. Dastgerdī, Tehran, 2nd ed., 1333 Š./1954, pp. 50-53). The pattern is also demonstrated in a small treatise, entitled *Anīs al-ʿoššāq*, which was composed by Šaraf-al-Dīn Rāmī in 826/1423 (ed. ʿA. Eqbāl, Tehran, 1325 Š./1946; French tr. C. Huart, Paris, 1875). The hair, the face, the eyes, and the mouth are by far the most important among the items in this catalogue of beauties. In lyrical poems the attention is often exclusively focused on them. Particulars of these four areas of interest are: the locks on the forehead and the cheecks; the mole, the skin below the ear (*bonāgūš*), the chin with its dimple; the lashes and the brows; the lips and the teeth. As to the other parts of the body, the stature and the waist are most prominent, less so the neck, the breast, the arms, and

the fingers. Comparisons are most frequently drawn from vegetal nature (the hyacinth for locks, the rose for cheeks, the narcissus for eyes, the cypress for stature, etc.), the heavenly bodies (in particular the sun and the moon) and luxurious goods (precious metals and stones, perfumes and rich textiles). The aggressive character of the Beloved and the frequent association of the concept with soldiers called up comparisons involving weaponry such as swords, daggers, and arrows. Psychological aspects of the relationship between Beloved and Lover are usually implicated in these descriptions, e.g., the contrast between a light face and dark locks symbolizing the alternation of revealing and concealing in the behavior of the Beloved; the curls forming a lasso to catch the Lover or a chain to keep him as a captive; the eyelashes and the glances wounding his heart; the dimple as a pitfall on his way.

The lack of individual traits in such descriptions is typical of the tradition as a whole and can even be noticed in romances where the Beloved is identified by a personal name. In the early *nasībs*, the figure introduced was an anonymous and probably imaginary partner of the poet. The situation understood in these poems was the convivial life at an Iranian court. The beloved person is sometimes specified as a servant, an artist performing at a social gathering, or a young soldier from the sultan's army. Ethnic specifications were added occasionally: most often a Turk is referred to, more rarely an Arab or a Hindu. The Beloved's behavior toward the Lover was frequently depicted as whimsical and quarrelsome. The former was "the one who disturbs the town" (*šahrāšūb* or *šahrangīz*); this motif developed into a genre, based on playful references to the occupations of "sensational" young men, which was especially common in quatrains (cf. A. Goḷčīn-e Maʿānī, *Šahrāšūb dar šeʿr-e fārsī*, Tehran, 1346 Š./1967). In the *ḡazal*s the Beloved might be represented as a debauched *qalandar* who frequents the wine houses and is often associated with religious cults alien to Islam (*kofrīyāt*).

As Persian grammar lacks a distinction of gender, the sex of the Beloved is often linguistically unspecified. References to the breasts (usually compared to pomegranates or to lemons) do occur, but are much more seldom than indications pointing to the male sex. This is especially the case in lyrical poetry. Such indications are, for instance, the mention of the first trace (*ḵaṭṭÂ¡-e now*) of a beard, the use of the word *pesar* or references to occupations normally associated with male youngsters (cupbearers, musicians, craftsmen, etc.). A boy on the verge of puberty embodied the ideal of human beauty. There is a clear contrast, in this respect, to the Arabic tradition of the pre-

ʿAbbasid period, in which the Beloved was not only invariably a female, but also tended to be individualized through the mention of a personal name.

In narrative literature, on the other hand, heterosexual relationships were the rule in the Persian tradition. The role of the Beloved in a pair of lovers was usually assigned to the female protagonist, but there are notable exceptions, e.g., the romances of Rābeʿa and Bektāš (in which Rābeʿa, a princess and a poet, venerated the reflection of transcendental beauty in the person of a male slave) and of Yūsof and Zoleyḵā. The most famous pair of homosexual lovers was Maḥmūd and Ayāz, a favorite example in didactic and lyrical poems. However, the stories about their love derived their poignancy, not from this erotic characteristic, but from the reversal of social roles involved, the mighty sultan subjecting himself to the whims of a beloved slave. In the literature of the later Middle Ages romantic narratives became more directly allegorical than before. This development reached its final stage in romances featuring personifications like Ḥosn and Del (Beauty and Heart), in Fattāḥī's *maṯnawī* (completed in 840/1436-37).

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