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## A BEAUTIFUL GIRL

At the dawn of the fourth day the soul of the departed passes over the Činwad bridge and meets the personification of his deeds<sup>1</sup>. If he is righteous, a beautiful maiden appears to him amidst the sweetly-perfumed breeze, but if he is a wicked man, the smell is foul, the wind is cold, and the girl appears in the shape of a wretched stinking whore.

No mention of the beautiful girl (or the ugly one) is made in the Gathās. It is only in the later Avesta, and in the Pahlavi texts that we meet them. The beautiful girl who is the subject of this article is described in detail in texts dealing with the destiny of the soul, and a clear picture of her body, face and character is given<sup>2</sup>.

The girl is the manifestation of one's own *daēnā*, Pahlavi *dēn*. In Zoroastrian writing *dēn* also denotes religion and scripture. But the beautiful maiden is one's own inward consciousness, the internal being, or the internal realization of the Zoroaster's message. *Dāēnā* coheres with one's will and choice.

If a man improves his thoughts and deeds, his *dāēnā* improves likewise, while the *dāēnā* of the man whose thoughts and deeds are contrary to the teachings of Zoroaster becomes malevolent (Y. 48.4).

The religious books of medieval Iran represent the *dāēnā* to the laymen in the body of a girl for didactic purposes. The idea may have come from the description of the most beautiful woman in the Avesta, namely Arədvī sūrā Anāhitā (*sūrā* 'strong, mighty', *anāhitā* 'undefiled, immaculate'). She is the river goddess, and a whole *yašt* is devoted to her. There she is described as a maiden, plump, beautiful, and strong, straight in her bearing, with her belt tightened in order to emphasize her beautiful well-shaped breast. Of noble lineage and well-formed, she has

<sup>1</sup> In some texts after the third day.

<sup>2</sup> *Arđā Virāf Nāmak (AWN)*, IV, 15-36; XVII, 4-28, ed. Haug-West, Bombay, 1872; *Minōy-i Xrad (MX)*, II, 123-157, ed. Tafazzoli, Teheran, 1975; *Dādistān ī dēnīg*, pursišn V, ed. Anklesaria, Bombay, 1887; *Hādokht Nask (HN)*, II, 18-33; III, ed. Haug-West (see *AWN*), Bombay 1872; *Škand gumānīg vičār*, IV, 89-99, ed. West, Bombay, 1887; Pahlavi *Rivāyāt*, XXIII, ed. Dhabhar, Bombay, 1913; *Videvdād (Vend)*, XIX, 30, ed. Anklesaria, Bombay 1949; *Zādspram*, XXX, 5, ed. Anklesaria, Bombay, 1964.

shoes with gold buckles, a necklace, earrings, a diadem, and a cap of beaver skin (Yt.V. 64,78,126-128).

Such a woman who meets the soul of the departed is described as follows in Pahlavi texts:

*AWN*, IV, 15-36 (= K 20, fols. 5r. 5v.)<sup>3</sup>

*pad ošbām ī sidīgar ōy ruwān ī ahlawān andar urwar <ī> bōy xwaš be gašt u-š xwaštar sahist ān bōy čiyōn harwisp bōy <ī> xwaš ī-š pad zindagān pad wēnīg abar šud ud ān bōy wād az rapihwintar rōn az nēmag ī yazadān be āyēd u-š ān ī xwēš dēn ud ān ī xwēš kunišn <frāz āmad> kanīg kirb ī nēk pad didan ī \*hu-rust kū pad frārōnih rust ēstād frāz-pestān kū-š pestān abāz nišast \*dargand angust kē-š kirb ēdōn rōšn čiyōn did hu-dōšagtar nigerišn abāyišnīgtar.*

At the dawn of the third <day> the soul of the righteous went about among the sweet-scented plants, and to him that scent seemed more pleasant than all the sweet smells that had come into his nostrils <when he was among> the living. And that scented breeze came from the southern direction, from the region of God. Then his own religion and his own deeds <approached> in the shape of a girl beautiful in appearance, well-grown <that is> she was full of virtue, with prominent breasts <that is> her breasts jutting out, with long fingers and a body as brilliant as her appearance most loving and <her> demeanour most fitting.

*HN*. K 20. fol. 44v.<sup>4</sup>

*rōšn ī \*abarag-tan ī arus bāzū ī amawand ī hu-rust ī ul stādag kū juwān ud buland stīy pestān ī nāzuk tan ud āzād kū rād rāyōmand tōhmag kū-š tōhm az yazadān pānzdah sālag u-š kirb ēdōn nēk čiyōn dāmān dōšagtar nigerišn abāyišnīgtar.*

Brilliant, with superior body, white arms, strong, plump, of great stature, that is young and tall, with prominent breast, delicate skin (lit: body), noble that is generous, with royal lineage, that is she was descended from gods, her body so beautiful as the most lovable of all creatures, her appearance most fitting.

<sup>3</sup> *The Pahlavi Codices K20 and K20b. Published in facsimile by the University of Copenhagen, Copenhagen, 1931, 7-8.*

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, 86.

*Bd. XX. 12*

*hu-kirb ī spēd-wastar ī pānzdah sāl<ag> kū az hamāg kust nēk.*

Well-shaped, with white garment, fifteen years of age, pleasant in every aspect.

*Vend. XIX, 30.*

*nēk pad didan hu-kard kū-š ī abar nē abāyēd kardan tagīg kū tuwāngar hu-rust kū pad frārōnih rust ēstād rasēd sag-ōmand kū-š ēdar wizarišn-ōmand kū paydāg kū kadār az kadār pus-ōmand kū wēš-bačag ēdar kāmago-mand kū čiyōn mard abāyēd hunarōmand.*

Beautiful in appearance, fine shaped that is <so perfect that> nothing could be added. Swift, that is able, well-grown that is full of virtue. Accompanied by a dog, thus protected, with the ability to discern who is who, with sons, that is with many children, lusty as is appropriate for a man, skilful.

*MX. II, 125-26.*

*... pad kanīg kirb ō padīrag āyēd ī az har kanīg ī gēhān hu-čihrtar ud weh.*

... receives him in a form of a maiden, more beautiful and better than any other maiden in the world.

[Thus all the beauties inherent in Anāhitā, as well as her image of fertility, are reflected in the girl who welcomes the soul of the departed].

Some masterpieces of classical Persian literature are based on pre-Islamic sources. They enable us to visualize precisely what must have been the aristocratic ideal of woman in ancient Iran. The *Shāhnāma* of Firdowsī (died c. A.D. 1025), the *Vis u-Rāmīn* of Gurgānī (A.D. 1010-1074), the *Khosrow u-Shīrīn* and *Haft paikar* of Nizāmī (A.D. 1141-1204) are all examples of epic poems of courtly romance, brilliantly

<sup>5</sup> The personification of good deeds in the world beyond is seen in Islam, probably borrowed from Zoroastrianism. Not in the form of a beautiful maiden, but as a beautiful man. Al-Ghazzālī (*Ihyā al-'ulūm*, IV, 499), quoting the traditions, writes: 'Then comes to him (to the soul of the departed), a beautiful young man, well scented, with beautiful garment and says: "Joyful tidings to you for God's mercy and for the paradises with everlasting delights". (The soul) says: "God's blessing to you, who are you?" He answers: "I am your good deeds".' See also M. Wolff, *Mohammedanische Eschatologie*, Leipzig, 1872, 64.

depicting the lives of kings and of their courtiers<sup>6</sup>. In these works we find details of majestic banquets, of carousals, music, dancing, games, and polo, as well as of hunts and warfare. We find women present at these festivities, and sometimes in the wars. We are told of their love-affairs, their sentiments of affection, their hatreds, pleasures and agonies, and of course we learn about their appearance.

In the *Shāhnāma* we encounter women both from the legendary past, and from known historical times. There are stories of love and affection between Zāl and Rūdāba, Rustam and Tahmīna, Bīzhan and Manīzha, Siyāwush and Sūdāba, and there are descriptions of other similar beauties. Yet in appearance the women are almost all alike. The same stereotype of beauty is expressed in different ways.

Rūdāba, mother of the legendary Rustam, is a good example. Her face is brighter than the sun, her skin is white ('*ājgūn* 'like ivory'), she has silvery (*sīmīn*) shoulders, long black hair, a rosy complexion (*ču gulnār* 'like pomegranate-flowers'), red lips (*lāb nārdān* 'like the colour of pomegranate-juice'), firm, prominent breasts (*do nārvān* 'two pomegranate fruits'), eyes like narcissus, black eyelashes, and arched eyebrows. She is adorned with Paradise from top to toe, opulent in beauty, (promise of) pleasure, and good fortune<sup>7</sup>.

Firdowsī's women are regularly surrounded by sweet smells. Their bodies, hair, and necks are perfumed, as are their houses. Generally the odours referred to are those of musk (*mušk*), amber ('*anbar*), saffron (*za'firān*), aloe-wood ('*ūd*), ambergris ('*abēr*), and wine (*may*). When Rūdāba invites Zāl for the first time to her house, the abundance of perfumes and flowers 'causes the sweet smell to reach to the sun'<sup>8</sup>.

Fakhr al-dīn Gurgānī, the master of Persian narrative poetry, relates in his romance *Vis u- Rāmīn* the story of two lovers whose passionate mutual love breaks the bonds of the loyalty they both owe to King Moubad, Rāmīn's brother and the husband of Vis<sup>9</sup>. The story (composed between A.D. 1040 and 1054) may have its historical background in events associated with a branch of the Parthian dynasty

<sup>6</sup> There are other romances that borrow their titles from the names of two lovers in a particular story. The motifs are mostly borrowed from popular works, and sometimes several legends are merged. See Khājū-ye Kirmānī (A.D. 1290-1353), *Humāy u-Humāyūn*, edited by Kamāl Aynī, Tehran (Iran Culture Foundation), 1970; Salmān of Sāwa (A.D. 1308-1376), *Jamshīd u-Khurshīd*, edited by Jes. P. Asmussen and F. Vahman, Tehran, 1969; Ayyūqī, *Warqa u-Gulshāh*, edited by Z. Safā, Tehran, 1965.

<sup>7</sup> *Shāhnāma*, Moscow, 1960, 157.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, 171.

<sup>9</sup> *Vis and Rāmīn*, translated by George Morrison, Columbia University Press, 1970.

(247 B.C.—A.D. 224)<sup>10</sup>. It is translated from Pahlavi into Persian language, metre and rhyme. The poet declares that this had been done 'so that it would become as pretty as a treasure full of gems'. The poem can rightly be considered one of the earliest Persian romantic epics. Here the description given of the appearance of Vīs, the heroine of the story, will be useful for our purpose.

Vīs was brought up with a nurse, and her mother had not seen her since her birth. As she grows up the poet describes her:

"When Vīs, fair of face as an idol, had so grown in stature that she was as tall as the cypress of the garden, her radiant (*čūn bilūr* 'crystal-like') arms filled out, her locks became long like a halter, the end of her tresses threw a shadow on the rose, a letter went from the nurse to her mother"<sup>11</sup>.

Vīs was brought from Khūzān to Hamadān to her mother:

'When her mother saw her daughter's face, her straight posture and her gorgeous form, she dispersed much gold and many jewels, and praised the blessed name of God. When she placed her on the throne before her, she could not tell her face from the gleaming moon; she scented her hair with ambergris and musk, and put jewelled bracelets on her arms. She made her blaze with brocade of gold, and burnt fumes of aloes and musk under her breast; she adorned the enchanting beauty as the spring breeze decks out the garden'<sup>12</sup>.

Vīs is described throughout the story, by her admirers or by the poet, with varying attributes. Her slender form is like a 'noble cypress'. She is 'like a garden in spring', for 'her lips are like brilliantly-coloured tulips; her hair is as smooth as the violet; her eyes are as languorous as the eyes of lilies; her cheek has the colour of the rose and the tulip'. Sometimes she is likened to a garden in autumn, in which are found the fruits of the equinox: 'her black hair like clusters of grapes, her chin an apple, her breasts two pomegranates'. And yet again she is 'a royal treasure towards which man's glance gazes with longing; her cheek is brocade, her body like silk, the perfume of her curls and tresses resemble musk and ambergris, her body is silvery, her lips the purest ruby, her teeth pearls of the finest water'<sup>13</sup>.

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<sup>10</sup> Op. cit., foreword by E. Yar-Shater.

<sup>11</sup> Op. cit., 27.

<sup>12</sup> Op. cit., 29.

In historical times, we meet a similar girl in the Sasanian court of medieval Persia. As upholders of the Zoroastrian religion, the Sasanian kings must have known of the existence of such a creature in the world beyond.

It is not surprising that she is mentioned in connection with the life of Khosrow Parwēz (Abharvīz, A.D. 590-628). Parwēz maintained the most gorgeous court, and his fabled eagerness to accumulate wealth and to collect women for his harem is unsurpassed in the history of Sasanians. Not only had he been eager to gain for himself the most beautiful woman of his realm, but had also been anxious to provide here on earth the sweet smell of Paradise in the midst of which such a maiden should appear. According to al-Tha'ālibī<sup>14</sup>, the King asks his wise page (*rēdak*) Khush Ārzū to tell him about the fragrance of Paradise. He answers:

'If you combine the aroma of the royal wine with the aromas of the apple of Syria, the rose of Fārs, the basil of Samarkand, the citrus of Tabaristān, the narcissus of Maskī, the violet of Isfahān, the saffron of Qum and Bawān, the water-lily of Širwān and the triple combination of the odour of the aloe-woods of India, the musk of Tibet and the ambergris of Shihir, then you get the fragrance of Paradise as promised to the righteous'<sup>15</sup>.

The King asked: 'Tell me about the best and most desirable women'. He answered:

The best is the girl in the age between childhood and adulthood, not too big, not too small, not too thin, not too fat, well-built, with a beautiful face, beautiful in all aspects, with an even forehead, with arched brows, almond-shaped eyes, well-proportioned nose. Her lips thin and red like rubies, her mouth small and her teeth like pearls, with a gracious smile, rounded chin, a round and elegant neck, rosy cheeks, silken skin, jet black hair, breasts round like apples, wasp-waisted, with a well-formed belly, a navel formed as an ointment jar, large buttocks, small feet, well scented, of gentle voice, of few words, shy'.

The King laughed and said 'Bravo!'<sup>16</sup>.

Al-Ṭabarī<sup>17</sup> and Ibn-al Athīr<sup>18</sup> have another account. They tell

<sup>13</sup> Excerpts from different parts of the book.

<sup>14</sup> Al-Th'ālibī, *Ghorar akhbār moluk-i furs wa siyarahum: histoire des Rois des Perses*, ed. Zothenberg, Paris, 1800.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, 709.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, 710-11. A slightly different description appears in a Pahlavi text. See Davoud Monchi-Zadeh, 'Xusrōv i Kavātān ut Rātak', *Acta Iranica, Monumentum Georg Morgenstierne*, II, Leiden 1982, 47-91.

<sup>17</sup> Al-Ṭabarī, *Tāriḫ al-rusul wa-'l mulūk*, ed. Barth and Nöldeke. Prima series, II, Leiden, 1881-2, 1025-6.

<sup>18</sup> Ibn-al Athīr, *Ta'riḫ al-Kāmil*, I, Cairo, 1303/1887, 173.

us that Khosrow I Anōsharvān (A.D. 531-579) had ordered the description of one of his most beloved slaves to be written down in detail. This document was kept in the treasury, and the King advised his successors to acquire such a girl wherever they could. The desired girl matched in beauty the one described a few decades later by the page to Khosrow Parwēz. Notwithstanding the three thousand wives who formed his harem<sup>19</sup>, Khosrow Pawēz used to send eunuchs to all parts of his kingdom to find women to match that description<sup>20</sup>.

The love-story of Khosrow and Shīrīn, niece of Queen Mahīn Bānū of Armenia, is immortalized by Niẓāmī of Ganja<sup>21</sup>. Khosrow falls in love with Shīrīn before even seeing her. A close friend of his, Shāpūr, who had met her in Armenia, had described Shīrīn to Khosrow, and his resultant love for her is the beginning of a story full of incidents. Shīrīn's appearance, as skilfully depicted by Niẓāmī in his verses, is no other than the description of the favourite woman previously discussed. As an example we quote the scene in which Shīrīn washes herself in a fountain. Khosrow, who had set out for Armenia in search of Shīrīn, arrives one day at a spring of cool water, where an unclothed beauty is bathing and washing her flowing hair:

'When her hands poured water over her head it was as if the firmament was raining down stars on the moon. Her body was resplendent as a mountain covered with snow. ...

As he looked on this fair crystal, the prince's heart was all on fire as if it were the sun. ...

The fair one with the jasmine breasts did not see his glances, for the hyacinths of her curls obscured the lily of her eyes. But when her moon-like face emerged from the musky cloud of her hair, Shīrīn discovered the king. Bashful she shivered like rippling moonlight on the spring waters. The sweet Shīrīn hurriedly spread her hair. The black night covered the silvery moon and in broad daylight the night eclipsed the sun<sup>22</sup>.

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<sup>19</sup> Arthur Christensen, *L'Iran sous les Sassanides*, Copenhagen, 1944, 475.

<sup>20</sup> According to Ṭabarī (op. cit., II, 1026-37), and Ibn-al Athīr (I, 173-4) one such expedition was met with the refusal of Nu'mān III, the Christian King of Arab Hīra to send his daughter Ḥadīga to Khosrow's harem. Because of that and the anger occasioned by the misinterpretation of Nu'mān's message to the King, the latter summoned him to his court and sentenced him to death. Nu'mān was thrown under the feet of elephants (some time between 595-604) and his daughter, who did not at all match the description, fled to a monastery where she died.

<sup>21</sup> Now Kirovabad in Soviet Union.

<sup>22</sup> *Khosrow Shīrīn*, ed. Bertels, Baku, 1960, 152-3.

Islam brought a great changes in the ethics and morals of Iranian society. Women disappeared from public life. Several centuries of metaphysical speculation and the interpretation of the moral codes of Islam resulted in a more genteel way of writing about love.

The two great romances which engaged many poets and writers were *Yūsuf and Zulaikhā* and *Leilā and Maǧnūn*. The former is the old story of Joseph and Potiphar's wife, retold in the Qurān. The latter, also borrowed from Semitic legend, is the romance of a couple whose passion is not of this world. Maǧnūn is the prototype of a true lover: patient, chaste, and consumed by his longing for Laylā. Yūsuf also perfectly embodies chastity, and is a figure of supreme beauty and perfection. In both these stories we observe the sublimity of non-sensuous devotion, the achievement of spiritual perfection, and the manifestation of love for the divine.

Mystical poets like Khayyām, Sanā'ī, Rūmī, and Ḥāfiz have elaborated on this theme of 'divine love'. The object of their adoration, the loved one, is not named. He or she is an unknown person who is either created in the mind of the poet, or exists in flesh and blood<sup>23</sup>. The poet sees in a beautiful face at once a privilege for the owner and an omen of good fortune. 'The fair face' writes Khayyām 'has the same influence on human affairs as a lucky star in the ascendant'<sup>24</sup>. Thus beauty, even in flesh and blood, is at the same time a symbol of divine beauty.

In one of the most sought-after documents of Sufī scripture, the *Book of ecstasy or the Ball and the polo-stick*, by 'Arifī (died c. A.D. 1494)<sup>25</sup>, the poet depicts the tragic passion of a dervish for a prince who was fond of playing polo. The dervish sees the fresh-complexioned prince engaged in the game:

'When he gave one glance at the Shāh from afar, he became perplexed, and saw his state changed. He became enamoured of the Shāh and dismounted from the steed of wisdom'<sup>26</sup>.

<sup>23</sup> Ḥāfiz is a good example. In classifying his verses, three categories of 'beloved' can be distinguished: (i) a living contemporary of his time—young man or woman—in flesh and blood; (ii) one without clear identity, free from time and place, of indeterminate sex and age, who may be dead or alive, real or imaginary. A union with this being, who has an elevated station, is the ultimate desire of the seeker; (iii) the mystical beloved, centre of creation, essence of all that is beautiful, source of light, life and love, the one who is not created and shall exist forever.

<sup>24</sup> Khayyām, *Naurūz-nāma*, Tehran, 1962, 92.

<sup>25</sup> *Hāl Nāme yā Gūy o chaughān*, by 'Arifī of Herāt, text and translation, translated by R. S. Greenshield, London, 1980.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, 17. In the preface of the book it is stated 'This work goes further than many mystical treatises in that it not only deals with the matter of spiritual ecstasy, but also



To these poets, and many others, love generally means the elevation and purification of the human soul, a way (*tariq*) of becoming united with God.

It is beyond the scope of this article to discuss the nature of such 'love' and its sublime character. Yet it should be emphasized that to depict the adoration of divine beauty, and the mystical experience of spiritual union with the Beloved, poets have used metaphorically the same language, and the same stock phrases, that were used to describe the damsel of the after-life, and the beautiful women of ancient Iran. The same height of the cypress, the same white delicate skin and rosy complexion, the same long black hair and sweet smell of perfumes, which were described by the page to Khosrow are recapitulated. It is only the more explicit physical description of the body, which in Zoroastrian Iranian literature had likewise achieved the status of a stereotype, that disappeared with the advent of Islam. Whether the writer invoked the goddess Arədvī Surā Anāhitā, or the Beloved of the mystics, the language of love employed remained the same.

emphasizes that when attunement with the macrocosmic element is attained, even mystical experience is dwarfed'.