

## The Phantom Author of an Unfathomable Land: *Ali and Nino*

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“The desert is the gate to a mysterious and unfathomable world.” Ali Khan describes his homeland with those words in the novel *Ali and Nino* (91). Baku of the 1910s is indeed a mysterious and unfathomable land, as is the identity of the novel’s author. *Ali and Nino* is considered one of the pioneering texts of modern Azerbaijan literature. The undiminished interest in the novel with its nearly 100 editions or reprints, and translations into 33 languages, indicates its importance as a universal as well as a national narrative. However, it has a rather intriguing mystery about its authorship since it has first been published in German in Vienna in 1937 under the pseudonym Kurban Said.

Although the German version and the succeeding English translation of the novel bear the name Kurban Said, it is published in Azerbaijan also as the novel of Yusif Vəzir Çəmənizəminli, a prominent Azerbaijani-Turkish writer and public figure. According to some researchers, the author is yet Lev Nussimbaum who worked in Berlin as a journalist and an “expert on the Orient” under the name Essad Bey for a decade between the two World Wars. Nussimbaum is believed to have grown up in a Jewish household in Baku, converted to Islam and then fled to Berlin. Hence an Italian edition, *Ali Khan*, appeared in 1944 under the name Essad Bey. Furthermore, an Austrian baroness Elfriede von Ehrenfels registered Kurban Said as her own pseudonym, but no proof has been found that she was practically involved in the writing of the novel.

One of the contemporary researches about the identity of Kurban Said has been made by Tom Reiss and published in 2005 under the title *The Orientalist: Solving the Mystery of a Strange and Dangerous Life*. While Reiss insists on Nussimbaum’s sole authorship of the novel, the latest research conducted by Betty Blair, the editor of *Azerbaijan International* in the current issue of that magazine dating 2011, claims that Nussimbaum was not alone in writing the novel, nor was he the core author:

Drawing on the memories and insights of dozens of Azerbaijanis, ranging from surviving relatives of Chamanzaminli to literary experts to ordinary

people concerned about the fate of their nation, Blair concludes that behind the pseudonym Kurban Said was a composite person [...] that the basic story was written by Chamanzaminli but that Nussinbaum / Essad Bey or someone else had added many parts to the novel before it reached its readers. (Goble 5)

The question of the authorship has been debated exhaustedly and is still discussed. However, this argument adds little to our appreciation of the novel as a literary text; neither does it add to Çəmənzəminli's fiction. In this paper, as a literary contribution to the subject, I propose a comparison of certain works of Çəmənzəminli and *Ali and Nino*. Therefore, setting off from the texts themselves and discarding historical documents as much as I can, I will attempt a textual analysis. My aim is to shed light on the narrative techniques of the two authors. I will follow a method starting from the broadest through the narrower features. First, I will investigate the themes and characterization of the authors, and then discuss narrative techniques and stylistic delicacies. In order to be consistent with the preset dimensions of this paper, I will not be able to go through the entire corpus of Çəmənzəminli. I will confine myself to his novel *Studentlər* and the diary narrative *Bir Cavanın Dəftəri*.

Both in *Ali and Nino* and in the works of Çəmənzəminli, as the all-encompassing theme that relates issues of geographical, cultural, ethnic and religious characteristics to one another, we may single out “identity-building.” This is also closely related to characterization. The Ali Khan of Kurban Said, as the key figure of the narrative, simultaneously depicts and questions his surroundings always from a cultural, socio-political, religious perspective, and from perhaps all the other perspectives that can be thought of, which is suitable to be inserted in this huge abstraction entitled “the East-West debate.” Starting from the first sentences of the book, however, it is clearly put forward that the point of view is hinged on how one defines himself.

At the beginning of the novel, after an introduction of the numbers and ethnicities of the students who attend the Imperial Russian Humanistic School of Baku, the reader plunges into a geography lesson by a Professor Sanin, who puts the responsibility on the students' shoulders of deciding whether they belong to “progressive Europe or to reactionary Asia” (13). A back-bench occupier, Mehmed Haidar, who is repeating the year, makes a clumsy statement that they should rather stay in Asia. When the classroom bursts into laughter, Ali proposes a firm supportive decision: “Sir, I too would rather stay in Asia” (14).

From then on, the narrative revolves around Ali's inner and outer conflicts born out of his insistence in keeping with this primary decision. He will challenge cultural, religious and socio-political differences when he wants to marry Nino Kipiani, daughter of a noble Georgian family, and despising "looks" when he does not participate in the war alongside the Czar. Despite the disheartening threats to his decisiveness, such as the betrayal of the Armenian friend Melik Nachararyan and his own psychological rise and falls, Ali pursues his journey through growing up. Indeed, the novel can be considered a *Bildungsroman*, in the sense that we witness Ali Khan's transformation from a young schoolboy into a family man and soldier along with the transformation of Baku from a peaceful town enjoying cultural diversity into a barren arena of oil bargains.

With regards to this evaluation, it is interesting to find out that Çəmənzəminli's major theme is no different than *Ali and Nino*'s. In most of his works, he focuses on the identity-building processes of his young characters, the majority of whom are male. In his novel *Studentlər*, he narrates a slice of the life of the Azerbaijan students who attend the Kiev University during 1910-1915. Çəmənzəminli typically moves from one character to another and gives the details of his or her present situation and past. Although he creates a group of characters from diverse backgrounds and shuns focusing on a central figure, unlike *Ali and Nino*, Rüstəmbəy may be considered highlighted among others. The novel begins with him seeking a room for rent and ends with him moving out of it. Moreover, his illegal affair with his married Russian landlady is given peculiar importance throughout the novel.

The diary narrative, *Bir Cavanın Dəftəri*, is quite similar to *Studentlər*. The *cavan*, the keeper of the diary named Murad, is in his twenties and eager to get out of his hometown that he considers a cage. He goes to his aunt's who lives in another city to spend a summer holiday. His ideas about cultures, traditions and love echo *Studentlər*. Both narratives feed from the same thematic reservoir and are linked to one another with the overarching theme of identity-building. While Murad despises his family's way of living and habits, comparing them with the "Europeanized" non-Muslim communities of the region, Rüstəmbəy undergoes a period of conflict between ethics and lust, both resulting in an identity crisis.

The crisis, however, is overcome. Perhaps typical of Çəmənzəminli, the characters always manage to stand up for their decisions just like Ali Khan, even if this perseverance cause them to be despised, rendered disillusioned, or even imprisoned. It must also be emphasized that no matter how much the narrator goes into the details of the characters' privacy, politics and ethnic diversity are carefully highlighted. Murad is looked down on by the girl he liked because he was a Tartar,

leading him to question his identity (33). He also joins a political organization that favors the Russian revolution (28). Rüstəmbəy, on the other hand, is a devout reader of the Old Testament and an activist of a socialist student group in Kiev, an activity that eventually causes a short term imprisonment for him. This is how the three narratives share the same generic theme and a crowded cast of young characters in accordance with it.

When we evaluate the three narratives technically, we come across certain similar features. It is Tom Reiss's observation that *Ali and Nino* is written in short chapters that resemble the miniature wheels of a fast moving gear (16). He would have been surprised to see that *Studentlər* is written in the same formal organization, with small chapters, moving fast to mimic the passing of the days for the students. This technique allows the novelist to build his narrative concisely yet comprehensively; concise in length but comprehensive in characters and events. He shortens the passages even more in *Bir Cavanin Dəftəri* by making it a diary that sometimes comprises only a few words for a day.

Another characteristic of Çəmənzəminli is that he presents his characters to the reader first in the middle of an occasion but gives background information later on. For instance, in *Studentlər* we encounter Rüstəmbəy as an ordinary student who is seeking a room for rent even before we are informed of his name. As late as at the end of the third chapter we learn his name and go into the details of his life in the following chapter. It is the same with other characters of the novel. When Rüstəmbəy chances upon a friend walking in the street, they chat and eat together. Meanwhile, the long queue in front of the dining hall and the details of the meal are narrated. It is afterwards that the reader is informed about who this friend is, where he comes from and how his family lives, and so on.

This technique resembles *Ali and Nino*'s. As mentioned previously, *Ali and Nino* begins in the middle of a geography lesson. The reader is presented with some of the characters initially in certain instances and only afterwards learns who they actually are. Similarly, Ali tells about his interest in Nino and describes how she looks first, before narrating the details of her background and family. This technical resemblance bonds the two narratives and makes the reader think that they might have come out of the same hand.

Moreover, the narrative style of the novels suggests commonness. Çəmənzəminli, probably originating from his interest in folklore and oral culture, assumes the style of a storyteller. He occasionally interferes with the narrator and tests the limits of fiction by directly addressing the reader. For instance, in *Studentlər*, he gives information about one of his characters by saying, “Yeri gəlmişkən, Səmədbəy

barəsində də bir neçə söz” (19). When the narrator is in third person it is easier to trace such stylistic peculiarities. *Ali and Nino* as a first person narrative is not expected to be easily yielding. Nevertheless, even there, at certain points of the narrative Ali Khan addresses the reader, creating the effect that he is not writing but telling us his story. When quoting his dialogue with his father over the war, instead of using indirect speech, he assumes his father’s discourse, alienates from himself, and echoes his father’s ideas by saying, “Atam qəmgin halda susdu. O mənə başa düşmədiyi üçün mənə nifrət edirdi. Onun oğlu doğrudanmı qorxaq idi? Ölkədə müharibədir, amma onun oğlu döyüşə can atmır, düşmənin qanına susadığını göstərmir, düşmən gözlərində yaş görmək istəmir. Yox, onun oğlu korlanıb, yoldan çıxıb!” (Kurban Said, *Əli və Nino* 59). This shift of narrative style creates a storyteller effect, hence relating the two novels.

As a final observation I will assert that creating dialogues must be considered one of the strongest technical characteristics of both Çəmənşəminli and Kurban Said. What makes *Ali and Nino* a panoramic narrative of Baku’s ethnical, religious and cultural diversity is perhaps its dialogues. When there is an occasion where clashing ideas must be presented, instead of narrating it the author engages the characters in a dialogue. Therefore, using direct speech, he demonstrates rather than describing. In both of Çəmənşəminli’s works, the same technique is used. In *Studentlər*, for instance, there are long passages consisting of purely dialogues between students sharing ideas or challenging each other on especially political or religious issues. Here, it must be mentioned that Çəmənşəminli is also a writer of theatre plays and scenarios that may be the source of his strength in creating dialogues.

Demonstration through dialogue instead of description is closely related to characterization and the main theme discussed here. Young persons search and question their identity by conversation. Moreover, discordant ideas are juxtaposed through dialogue but are not given a final judgment. Therefore, the reader is urged to ponder what is going on in the text. We may conclude that this attitude fosters multiplicity. This is how both authors capture the harmony of diversity. On a symbolic level it can be said that this is what they propose as a solution to the identity problem and the East-West debate: “dialogue,” where both parties alternately talk and listen.

## References and Notes

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## Summary

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The novel *Ali and Nino* is considered one of the pioneering texts of modern Azerbaijan literature. The undiminished interest in the novel with its nearly 100 editions or reprints, and translations into 33 languages, indicates its importance as a universal as well as a national narrative. Despite that, there remains the mystery about the identity of its author who published the book under the pseudonym Kurban Said. According to some researchers, the author is Lev Nussimbaum who worked in Berlin as a journalist and an "expert on the Orient" under the name Essad Bey for a decade between the two World Wars. It is known in Azerbaijan also as the novel of Yusif Vəzir Çəmənşəminli. The debates around the identity of the author and the historical documentation on the topic is without a doubt valuable and contributes to Azerbaijani and Germanophone studies; however, it adds very little, if anything, to our appreciation of the work as a literary text.

In my paper, I propose a comparison between the works of Çəmənşəminli and *Ali and Nino*. I especially focus on Çəmənşəminli's *Studentlər* and the diary narrative, *Bir Cavanın Dəftəri*. First, I investigate the themes and characterization of the authors, and then discuss narrative technique and stylistic delicacies. Therefore, setting off from the texts themselves and discarding historical documents as much as I can, I demonstrate a comparative textual analysis and also try to find new means to solve the question of authorship of the novel.

**Key Words:** Kurban Said, Yusif Vəzir Çəmənşəminli, comparative textual analysis, narrative technique and style, *Studentlər*, *Bir Cavanın Dəftəri*.