

AN ENGLISH TRANSLATION OF “TAHIR AND ZOHRA,” AN AZERBAIJINI LOVE DASTAN

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INTRODUCTION

The love story “Tahir and Zohra” belongs to a Turkic literary genre called the dastan. The dastan refers to epic stories belonging to the oral tradition of the Central Asian communities. Paksoy (2) highlights the exalted position dastans have in the Central Asian cultures when he informs us that the dastan “is revered not only as the word of the forefathers and repository of customs and traditions of the creators and their descendants, but also because it is the narration of how the enemy was defeated.” The dastans are oral celebrations of the victory of its leaders and the unity of its people in overcoming threatening enemies throughout history. In a nutshell, “[t]he dastan is the collective pride of tribes, confederations of tribes or even larger units, serving as birth certificate, national anthem and mark of citizenship all rolled into one.” (2)

Abdullayev likewise stresses the dastan’s national significance to its people and the varied themes it encompasses:

Dastans reflect, in the best way, a people’s history, life, psychological aspects and worldview as well as people’s sorrows and joys, troubles and concerns, moral conceptions, dreams about their future and their struggle for the liberation of their land. Hence the main subjects of dastans are mainly of a patriotic and humanistic character. (156)

“Tahir and Zohra” evidently falls in the humanistic category of dastans as its central theme is the steadfastness of love between a man and a woman in the face of many odds. Paksoy states that the dastan “Tahir and Zohra” is very possibly a spin-off from a larger historical epic entitled “Alpamysh,” the “prime representative of the Turkic oral literature of Central Asia” which is “known and recited from the eastern Altai to the western Ural mountain ranges and as far south as Band-e Turkestan” (1) to commemorate the struggles overcome by the Turkic people in their pursuit for freedom. Paksoy explains how love tales like “Tahir and Zohra” came to stand on their own from the monumental “Alpamysh” where these love stories were embedded:

During extended periods of relative stability (i.e., when inter-tribal hostilities and threats from Russia were on the ebb), some of the dastans may “spin off” their lyrical parts, thus allowing the creation of new romantic dastans. In this case, the motifs related to the fight to throw off the yoke of an invading oppressor are subordinated to the romantic portions of a dastan. . . . *Tahir ve Zuhre* is an example of such a romantic dastan, seemingly having been “spun off” from *Alpamysh*. (3–4)

Paksoy also describes the common plot of the romantic dastans as follows:

A young man meets a beautiful girl, they fall in love, they desire to be married. However, either the parents do not give their consent or the girl is betrothed to another. The prospective groom may undergo a series of tests or . . . severe hardships to prove his love. Success brings a happy ending and the lovers are finally united in marriage, although the “happy ending” is by no means always assured. (4)

The storyline of “Tahir and Zohra” certainly fits the typical mould of a romantic dastan as described by Paksoy. Tehmasib, an expert on Azerbaijani folklore, informs us that there are approximately twenty versions of this legendary dastan in different parts of Azerbaijan. “Tahir and Zohra” form part of the classical repertoire of the dastans and other poetical forms performed by Azerbaijani *ashiks*, that is performers who combine storytelling with poetry and dance to the accompaniment of the main traditional stringed instrument, the *saz* (Naghiyeva, Amirdabbaghian, and Shunmugam).

Regarding the formal structure of “Tahir and Zohra,” it is prosimetric in nature like other dastans. Reichl (22) explains that “the speeches of the various characters of the tale are generally in verse while the connecting narrative is in prose” and this allows for a clear demarcation between the third-person narrative and monologues or dialogues, unlike homogeneous narratives which are solely in verse form. The monologues or dialogues in verse are end-rhymed and appear either in four-line stanzas or in an irregular number of lines with a fixed number of 7-8 or 11-12 syllables.

It must be mentioned at this juncture that the story of “Tahir and Zohra” is not a fable but a true love story of two individuals whose tombstones stand side by side in the province of Xinjiang. These real-life characters who have become a part of the story in the dastans are given certain supernatural abilities or involved in supernatural encounters or taken to heavenly realms as is the common practice of dastan creators of the past. These love epics are referred to as astral love dastans and are believed to have been produced sometime between the twelfth and fifteenth centuries in the history of Turkic literature.

The English translation of “Tahir and Zohra” provided here is based on the version documented by Tehmasib, which is an astral version of the love epic, spanning 166 pages. This version was selected for its happy ending. Unlike many other versions, Tehmasib’s record of this dastan does not end tragically with the death of both the lovers. The translation here focuses only on the second half of the story (pp. 124–166) which begins with Tahir being separated from Zohra by her villainous father Hatem Sultan, the agony Zohra endures due to this separation, and the struggles Tahir faces and overcomes until he is reunited with Zohra.

The first part of the story narrates how two childless brothers, Hatem Sultan (Zohra's father) and Ahmed Vizier (Tahir's father), who rule the kingdom of Garaman, are blest with the birth of Zohra and Tahir through supernatural intervention. This blessing comes about after Ahmed Vizier has a dream where a dervish presents him with a magic apple which he asks to be shared with his brother, Hatem Sultan. Before the apple is eaten, the Vizier asks the Sultan to make a promise: if their babies are a boy and a girl, they would be betrothed to each other when they grow up. The Sultan agrees to this. Tahir and Zohra are born on the same day nine months after their fathers eat the magic apple. The children grow up as bosom friends for the first seven years of their lives until a clergy in school separates them as he deems it religiously inappropriate for them to be together. Tahir is very upset by this separation but waits till he is a young man and then asks his father to request for Zohra's hand in marriage. The Vizier goes to see the Sultan to bring about the happy union of his niece and son but alas the Sultan goes back on his word and treacherously kills his brother. Following his father's death, Tahir is exiled from his hometown. But after some time, seeing a nightingale pierce itself upon the thorn of a rose reminds Tahir of the fight he has to wage to have Zohra back in his life. He therefore returns home with a mission but is captured by his uncle and the second part of the tale ensues.

The second part was selected for translation as it highlights the deep and unwavering love Tahir and Zohra have for each other. The heightened emotions of the lovers in this portion come across in beautiful lyrical verse filled with neat phonic patterns, steady rhythms, intense refrains, and a variety of figures of speech in the Azerbaijani language. Isaxanli (12) talks about the uphill task of translating dastans because of their "double structure" of prose and poems and songs which evoke "changing mood[s] in the transition from prose to poetry." He also says that the musical rhyme and harmony which are characteristic of dastans also complicate the translation issue. All these aspects collectively do pose a huge challenge for translators, yet it is one worth engaging in because it is heartening to bring the love conquest epitomized in "Tahir and Zohra" to a larger reading audience.

The translation of "Tahir and Zohra" into English involved two stages. First, a close literal or grammatical translation was carried out. As with most literary works, faithfulness to each word of the source language invariably leaves the creative text paler in the target language. But this was done anyway as a first draft to get a clear flow of the storyline in English. The second stage started with working over the parts in the near word-for-word draft which showed a distinct loss of tone, atmosphere and aesthetic beauty expressed in the original Azerbaijani language. While the prosaic narratives proved to be more straightforward and so, less difficult to transpose into English, the poetic parts which comprise laments and songs had to be modulated to incorporate rhythm and sound unity as much as was possible.

In order to produce a steady rhythm for the parts in verse, we managed to keep the lines between eleven to fourteen syllables in length throughout. It was difficult to retain the usual octosyllabic (7–8) and hendecasyllabic variations (11–12) in the Azerbaijani dastan due to morphological differences between the source and target language. Likewise, it would have been a feat to duplicate the perfectly looping end-rhymes of AAAB, CCCB, DDDDB, etc., in the original without giving up faithfulness to the content. But with fidelity to the story being priority, efforts were made to compensate what could not be achieved in echoing a similar rhyme scheme. The compensations included other phonic options like alliterations, internal rhymes, and end-rhymes with generally an ABAB rhyme pattern. The depth and wide array of emotions expressed by the male and female protagonist as well as the supporting characters was also repeatedly worked through to ensure that vibrancy in the original storytelling was not dulled in translation.

The English translation of “Tahir and Zohra” is not a free translation as there are no omissions of any important details in the tale nor additions, which change the progression of the plot in the slightest way. At the forefront of our translation process was a mindfulness to present the storyline intact as intended by the source author and to reflect, where possible, its poetic beauty. In this sense, our translation has adopted a combination of methods that Nord refers to as exotic documentary translation and an instrumental and equifunctional one.

Nord (“Skopos and (Un)certainly” 32) states that an exoticizing translation strives to “reproduce form, content and situation of the source text emphasizing cultural otherness.” The English version of “Tahir and Zohra” documents the exotic in that the setting, (i.e., place names, character names, and cultural references) in the source are preserved and not adapted to a near equivalent target setting. Our consistent application of Nord’s (*Translating as a Purposeful Activity*) exoticization, which is synonymous with Venuti’s concept of foreignization (i.e., a translation method which aims to bring the reader closer to the unfamiliar), is evident in the literal transfer of the source language idioms and metaphors used by the protagonists when expressing the conflicts they face in their pursuit to be united in love. Two such instances of retaining the Azerbaijani idiomatic expressions in the English translation are Tahir’s “dipping my bread in venom,” which vividly evokes Hatem Sultan’s deadly antagonism that he has to suffer for loving Zohra, and Zohra’s “Upon my forlorn head, I will wear a black shawl / Upon my lovelorn breast, a crosswise brand of fire,” which depicts Zohra’s state of mourning (as one would for a departed soul) mingled with a self-punishing, defiant stubbornness to wear the unquenchable fire of her love like a garment upon her breast. The rhetorical discourse of the Azerbaijani dastan is thus carried through to the English reader.

Overall, our decision not to domesticate or find cultural equivalents in English for the Azerbaijani onomastics or figures of speech relates to our *skopos* (Vermeer cited in Venuti) that is, the purpose of our translation, which, as stated earlier, is to provide as close a reflection of the original as possible in terms of its formal structure, style, diction, etc., while constantly keeping in mind to avoid any jarring awkwardness to the English reader. The not-so-easy tight-rope-balancing act between fidelity to the core message and the marked linguistic and stylistic patterning of the source text, and a spontaneous communicativeness to the receiving culture is the “double-loyalty” in translation that we sought to fulfill in our present translation task.

To complement our exoticizing stance, the strategy of providing footnotes is utilized in our work to provide what Nord (*Translating as a Purposeful Activity*) refers to as a philological method of translation, that is, a translation which provides background information on unfamiliar aspects to enlighten the reader and promote new knowledge. Haslina refers to footnotes as one of the most commonly used types of paratextual elements in literary translations to “facilitate intercultural communication” and “bring the translation closer to the readers” (141). We have ensured that the reader of our English translation is not left in the dark about especially, the “alienating” references in the story. Place names which exist in Azerbaijan (e.g., Garaman and Gilan), address forms and titles unique to the Azerbaijani culture (e.g., Khanim, Khan, Pasha, Ajam), cultural objects (e.g., the *saz*), cultural gestures (e.g., a black head scarf worn on women), etc. are provided with brief explanations in the footnotes. We have also taken care to be minimalistic in our footnoting so as not to unduly distract the reader from being absorbed with the tale itself.

As mentioned earlier, our translation of “Tahir and Zohra” is also instrumental as it “serves as an instrument for communication in the target culture which uses the “material” provided by the source text but takes the form of a target-culture text” (Nord, “Skopos and (Un)certainly” 32). In other words, it is not a literal translation attempting to be faithful to the words of the source author but to his sense. In addition, it is also an equifunctional translation as we have attempted “to achieve the same communicative functions for a target-culture audience which the source text achieves or achieved for a source-culture audience” (Nord, “Skopos and (Un)certainly” 32). We believe we have fulfilled the main communicative function of conveying a heroic tale of love in an engaging prosimetric mode.

All in all, as translators, we believe in achieving the “*ethical aim*” in the act of translating literary works which is “receiving the Foreign as Foreign” (Berman cited in Venuti 285–286). Berman, who vehemently championed the cause of the foreign in translation, states that to be true to a noteworthy work of art, the

conscientious translator would have to avoid a number of “deforming tendencies” (288) that is, practices in literary translation that tend to “usurp and conceal” (285) the genius of the first production. In our work, we particularly strove to avoid the following three “deforming tendencies”: (i) qualitative impoverishment, referring to “the replacement of terms, expressions and figures in the original with terms, expressions and figures that lack their sonorous richness” (Berman 291); (ii) the destruction of rhythms, referring to the “multiplicity of rhythms in poetry” that are “fragile” (Berman 292) and thus, can be easily sacrificed; and (iii) the destruction of linguistic patternings, which relate to style and form as well as “rationalization [recomposition of sentences and sequence of sentences], clarification, expansion, etc. [which] destroy the systematic nature of the text by introducing elements that are excluded by its essential system” (Berman 293).

Finally, we wish to state that we adhere to Samed Vurghun’s (1906–1956) dictum that “a translator must be a creator” (cited in Isaxanli 11) and so, we subscribe to the principle that poetry must be recreated as poetry. However, we also concur with Isaxanli (4) that “[f]ine poetry, especially pure national poetry, seems to be difficult to copy into other languages while maintaining the same content and strength.” We have given the translation our utmost and we hope that our “Tahir and Zohra” has not turned “the rhymes [that] are wings” in the ornate Azerbaijani tongue into “heavy dumb-bells” (Akhmatova 441 cited in Isaxanli 4) in the English rendition.

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THE ENGLISH TRANSLATION OF “TAHIR AND ZOHRA”

Hatem Sultan was like a raging bull when he found out that Tahir, whom he considered as the dust under his feet, was back in Garaman¹ to seek out his daughter, Zohra. Thus, the heartless Hatem Sultan plotted to put an immediate end to this amorous endeavour. Being afraid of public prying and protest, he secretly ordered his men to sequester Tahir in a crate and cast him out to the cold callous seas. A large crate was promptly built and helpless Tahir with his only worldly possession, the *saz*,² was forced into the crate. As Tahir was being locked away, he caught sight of Zohra weeping inconsolably by the crate. Seeing his beloved struck by such steep sorrow, Tahir plucked the silent strings of his saz and broke into sweet, soothing song:

My blue-eyed darling, my steadfast moon,
Let the flood take me away, what can it do to me?
My life I would lay down for you, my eternal boon,
Let the flood take me away, what can it do to me?

Kissing your lips awakened me to this new world,
Like a moth flitting by your candle's calm fire.
This oilcloth-wrapped crate will soon be cast upon the swirl,
Let the flood take me away, what can it do to me?

Why are you, my sweet love, so sick with grief?
Whatever has happened, is all by Chance, the thief.
The man who pulled Joseph³ out of the deep sodden well
Might just save your Tahir too, what can the flood do to me?

1 A city that was located in central Azerbaijan (presently the Goychay district)

2 A stringed musical instrument considered as the national musical instrument of Azerbaijan.

3 Refers to Joseph (from the Book of Genesis in The Holy Bible) who was thrown into a pit by his jealous brothers and afterwards rescued by travelling Egyptians.

As Tahir Mirza⁴ came to the end of his words, the crate was sealed tightly and dropped into the fierce sea. The wild waves spun the crate in unruly circles for hours until it passed the sea overlooking Zohra Khanim's⁵ formidable abode. Zohra Khanim catching sight of the crate, upon her solemn saz, beseeched the sea:

Oh, sordid sea, why do you meander into a muddy groove?
Where, oh, where are your willful waters planning to brood?
I beg you, let not the crate by a whirlpool be sucked below,
But prithee take it with you wherever you go!

Behold, floods of bloody tears my eyes do raid,
Delay not, my Khan⁶ of Khans to come to my aid!
I wish my sorrow would suck dry the flood to the last
And take the beloved crate to Astrakhan Oblast!⁷

I am Zohra, and for Tahir Mirza, do I sorely grieve
Whose gentle company I graced but for a time so brief.
Oh, crate, why are you being tossed and turned on Gilan's⁸ sands?
I bid you now, take Tahir to Suleyman⁹ and so leave this land.

When Zohra Khanim had spoken her last words, the sea picked up the crate again and went on its way. As the crate disappeared out of sight, Zohra Khanim's heart broke, and she wept sore while venting these words:

4 A Persian surname used as a suffix in Azerbaijani. *Mirza* literary means "Son of the Lord."

5 Khanim (Xanim) is a salutation in Azerbaijani for females which is similar to Ms., Miss, Mrs., etc.

6 A title used in medieval Central Asian societies referring to a ruler or military leader.

7 A federal subject in southern Russia.

8 A province in the north of Iran.

9 The prophet Sulaiman, an equivalent of King Solomon in the Hebrew Old Testament who was known for his exceeding wealth and wisdom.

Oh, bloody sea, how dare you flow away
Keeping my beloved under your sway?
My hands cannot touch you; my sighs cannot reach you
And, all my pains reside
deep within your watery breach.
With my Tahir alone was I truly blissful,
You added fuel to the fire and left me mournful.
The winds have waned and laved my luck,
And, all my fortunes within your waters are stuck.

Upon my forlorn head, I will wear a black shawl,
Upon my lovelorn breast, a crosswise brand of fire,
I am Zohra, I will shed tears of blood and howl,
My beloved has left me to follow you, to my ire.

Zohra's tears fell heavily and she could not hold back her words and so her ranting continued:

The sea has snatched Tahir from his ardent devotee.
He, my Khan Tahir is gone, is gone far from me.
May God on high free him from the unfeeling sea!
He, my Khan Tahir is gone, is gone far from me . . .

My Tahir was flung into the unseeing sea,
My bangle on thy wrist, I wish remains on thee,
Who I wonder would find and set my dear love free,
He, my Khan Tahir is gone, is gone far from me . . .

Tahir has left me running back and forth by the river,
My searching eyes are weary and burning with a fever.
I pray a storm breaks not over the foaming sea,
He, my Khan Tahir is gone, is gone far from me . . .

Let us for a brief while take leave of Zohra Khanim's painful lament to look upon Tahir Mirza's lonely state upon the high seas. It has been forty torturous days for Tahir Mirza but Zohra's desperate prayers had proven potent as the sea-beaten crate was being washed up the shores of Astarkhan Oblast. A wide waterway could

be seen leading from the sea to the pompous Pashalik¹⁰ garden. The sea, weary of its burthen, finally shoved the crate into the welcoming waterway and the crate safely reached the edge of the palatial garden.

A bevy of forty exquisitely clad ladies could be seen strolling in the cool of the garden alongside the impeccable Sona Khanim, Pasha's¹¹ daughter. A strange object swirling in the waters leading to their garden caught their charming, inquisitive eyes. With bated breath, Pasha's daughter excitedly asked: My dear ladies, could this crate floating towards us be a trivia sent our way for our play? Come quick and gather around . . . let us gamble for what lies within. Who guesses right, will be the sole owner of its unseen prize.

A resounding cry of gleeful agreement rang through the garden. The Vizier's daughter stepped forward and eagerly said:

If it is money within, it will be mine.

The Lawyer's daughter chimed in next and said:

If it is wealth within, it will be mine.

The Pasha's daughter with a gleam in her eyes, said:

If it is a young man within, he will be mine.

As the crate touched the golden edges of the garden, the ladies unitedly summoned their brute strength, bent forward in one beautiful force, and hauled in the mysterious crate till it lodged itself at the bottom of the glistening garden stairs. A number of impatient bejeweled hands hurriedly pried open the crate and as all forty-one curious faces looked in, they beheld the face of a young man like the full moon, lying unconscious with a saz and loaves of shriveled bread by his side. Sona Khanim, pleasantly surprised, then said in a fluttering voice:

Behold, God has delivered me my boon. His gentle looks are that of a nobleman. Him, I will certainly never lose.

An unhappy retort echoed at once from the daughters of the Vizier and the Lawyer:

10 Royal.

11 A Turkic honorary title which can be likened to the British peerage or knighthood.

This is surely not to be. Are you not the mistress of wealth, beauty, and your father's kingdom? Is not your cup full already? We will not back down without a fight for the ownership of this sweet boy.

Sona Khanim, unperturbed by their vehemence and fully aware that they had broken their promises, replied:

This is but small matter, my esteemed ladies. Let us then speak one by one to this sleeping beauty and whoever's words can rouse him from his deep slumber, she will his mistress be.

Sona Khanim's calm and fair reply lightened the hearts of the two ladies, and they nodded in gleeful agreement. Then, the Vizier's daughter gently bent towards the moon-faced Tahir and whispered:

Dear son of Ajam,¹² wake up now and look upon me.
Come, shake off your sleep and stride tall, sweet son of Ajam.
Great is my joy that you were not drowned in the sea,
Come, shake off your sleep and stride tall, sweet son of Ajam.

Tahir stirred not a bit and the Lawyer's daughter then in her sweetest voice crooned:

So princely are you clothed, where from did you come?
From a land of precious jewels, ruby, and sweet plums?
Into the sea you were cast, why did they mean you harm?
Sweet, son of Ajam, quit the crate and walk into my arms.

Still heavy sleep like steel lay upon Tahir and Sona Khanim rapturously spoke:

Leaving your home, brought a curse upon its head,
Into a flaming fire, your dear parents are sorely fed.
Let not your fire singe Sona, Pasha's sole heiress,
Brave son of Ajam, come forth into my safe caress.

¹² An Arabic term referring to people (especially Muslims) whose mother tongue is not Arabic.

The lead weight upon Tahir's lids lifted not and Sona Khanim persisted:

For you, my precious darling, I would my life lay down.
Come, brave son of Ajam and meet my love with a crown.
For you, my sweet one, I would catch fire and burn to ashes,
Come, brave son of Ajam and meet my love with your gashes.

Unknown to me, you were drifting upon the deep dark seas,
And, now my sweet soul is sucked into a fiery passion,
How long has your home been the vast soulless ocean?
Come, brave son of Ajam, walk out of the crate and find me.

I am Sona, the doors of my soul are wide open to you,
Come, burn your soul with the flames of my worship,
I am helpless, so helpless, tell me, what should I do?
Come forth, brave son of Ajam, and claim your lordship.

Tahir suddenly sneezed and woke up to Sona's passionate words. When the daughters of the Vizier and the Lawyer saw his dazzling eyes, they could barely control themselves, and so one took hold of his right hand and the other his left hand, and in unison blurted out to Pasha's daughter:

This is most unfair. You cannot have both—your royalty and this handsome young man.
We would rather die than give him up to you.

Sona Khanim turned to Tahir and with her royal wisdom, firmly said:

Young man, the decision is yours now. Take your saz and serenade whoever your heart is drawn to, call forth her name, embrace her, and be possessed of her.

Tahir, though bewildered by this strange audience, was grateful to have been redeemed and obediently took the saz and sang:

Honored ladies, to you each, I would give my all.
May God sacrifice me to serve you each well!
I would gladly catch fire and burn for all.
May God sacrifice me to serve you each well!

Those in love alone will understand love's pain,
Lovers having kissed, understand each other's gain,
Lovely, narrow-waisted ladies, God bless your reign,
May God sacrifice me to serve you each well!

Prithee lend your ears now to Tahir Mirza's sorry tale.
Neither day nor night, has sleep stayed in his sad eyes,
For Hatem Sultan's Zohra does his brow grow pale,
May God sacrifice me to serve you each well!

Hardly understanding what Tahir had shared, the three giddy ladies began to quarrel heatedly as each believed that Tahir favoured one of them over the other. Nearby, a gardener who had heard Tahir's words, drew closer to him and spoke thus:

Young man, God has willed for you to be here. Come, take this shovel and remove the soil from the bottom of the trees planted by this wall.

Tahir, distressed further by the gardener who had mistaken him for a new help sent to assist him, pressed his saz to his pained chest and proceeded with his story:

Oh, dear God, what an ill-fated love is mine.
I am on endless roads, invisible to my darling
I fell into these waters and knew not time.
And, have flown far away like a blind starling.

My beloved's shiny black brows are like the night-sky,
The nightingale is a companion to my precious flower.
My weary eyes weep stormy tears like seas so high
The springs and lakes quiver as in sorrow I cower.

Tahir in loving Zohra, reached his perfect dream,
But his love shackled him with grievous burdens.
His luck fortunately has led him to this safe garden,
With slender-waisted beauties fawning over him.

Sona Khanim was acutely aware that Tahir had not once mentioned any of their names, but alluded to Zohra alone in his mournful song. The ladies then led Tahir to Pasha's presence and related to him what they knew. Pasha, with much compassion, then queried:

Young man, why did they cast you upon the sea? Do tell us what has befallen you?

Upon hearing Tahir Mirza's full story, Pasha felt a shaft of pain shoot through his heart and he gently asked:

Tahir, what do you propose to do as your next course of action?

Tahir strummed his saz and sang these words:

Pasha, to seek your help, God has led me here.
To my beloved, I pray, you would take me.
My heart, for Hatem's daughter, did deeply fall
And he cast me out into an endless sea.

From a blue-eyed beauty I caught the fire of love,
And my soul opened up like a book to be read.
When Zohra's tender love with my heart was shared
They issued a decree to a hangman to send me above.

I cradled Zohra in my arms when she was still little,
Little aware that I was dipping my bread in venom,
Little aware that I was digging a grave in Hatem's wrath,
So, he flung me into the sea to spare himself a bloodbath.

Pasha being acutely aware of Tahir's dolorous mood, tried consoling him with many words, but it was to no avail.

Tahir pleaded:
Zohra's seething sorrow kills me over and over,
Be my healer, dear Pasha, and find me a speedy cure.

After some moments of pondering on Tahir's agonized state, Pasha asked Tahir:

My dear young man, do tell me honestly . . . is Zohra as deeply in love with you as you are with her?

Tahir's answer shot forth like a torpedo:

Yes, Sire, I am the pivot of her universe!

Upon hearing Tahir's unshakeable declaration, Pasha immediately issued a command, and a large army was assembled. That very night, Pasha, Sona Khanim,

and the daughters of the Vizier and the Lawyer, as well as Tahir, set out, led by Pasha's well-trained army to confront Hatem Sultan. They travelled a certain distance every day and finally arrived in the Qaraman¹³ region. Pasha's army surrounded the city on all four corners. Then Pasha called Sona Khanim and the daughters of the Vizier and the Lawyer and gave clear instructions:

Go and seek out Zohra in her private chambers and find out if she indeed loves Tahir. If truly her heart is Tahir's alone, I will see to it that they are married and Hatem Sultan's head is cut off from his shoulders. Otherwise, I will not interfere in this conflict and we will return to our kingdom.

Sona Khanim summoned Tahir and teasingly unsettled him by saying:

I'm going to see Zohra. If she is indeed more beautiful than Sona, then, you will be my brother and she will be your wife. If not, I will return and deal with you myself!

Tahir far from being perturbed by these words, calmly responded:

I absolutely agree. But do take my saz with you for Zohra may not believe you.

With that, Sona Khanim, along with the daughters of the Vizier and the Lawyer, went to meet with Zohra. Zohra Khanim, aware of the royal entourage making its way to her residence, set her house in order and graciously welcomed her eminent guests. Sona Khanim stole a quick look at Zohra from afar and immediately realized that no one could hold a candle to Zohra's beauty. Tahir's Zohra was amazingly more exquisite and graceful than Sona. With a smile breaking forth at the corners of her mouth, Sona whispered to herself: "Well done, Tahir Mirza."

As for Zohra, she stood rooted to the ground and her forehead began to furrow with fear when she saw Tahir's saz in Sona's hands. She nervously plucked out a strand of her raven-black hair, and with a quavering voice uttered:

Sona Khanim, I would die for you, so prithee, tell me,
Where is the owner of this saz, Tahir, my heart and soul?
Countless rose petals have I torn to know if he loves me,
Where is the owner of this saz, Tahir, my heart and soul?

Sona Khanim, understanding Zohra's anxiety, replied at lightning speed:
Zohra, my dear, I come here bearing purely good tidings.
The owner of this saz, your love, sends you his greetings.

13 Qaraman (also, Karaman) is a village in the Goychay Region of Azerbaijan.

The rose petals surely sung that for Zohra he is fighting,
The owner of this saz, your love, sends you his greetings.

Despite Sona's assurance, Zohra responded to the news with a raging restlessness:

The mountain tops are frozen and fully snow-capped,
As icy cold is my heart with eyes that run like a tap.
Who has trapped my Tahir and made him her beloved?
Oh, where is the owner of this saz, my precious love?

Sona Khanim was not provoked by Zohra's disbelief; in fact, she knew too well the doubts that creep in when long separated from one's love and so in her gentlest voice, Sona replied:

It is indeed biting winter on the high mountain peaks,
But your bright brows have now their eyes regained,
Tahir is no sweetheart to us but a dear brother to all,
The owner of this saz is already here, behind these walls.

Zohra's mind was racing, mingled with hope and hopelessness, and out of the abundance of her confusion and pain, she poured forth these words:

A black shawl I will wear upon my tortured head,¹⁴
And burn a crosswise brand upon my pierced breast,
Bloody tears will burst forth from Zohra's wearied eyes,
Where, oh where, is the owner of this saz, my beloved?

Then Sona Khanim, taking Zohra's pale hands in her lively palms, softly pleaded:
Wear not a black shawl upon your lovely head,
And brand not crosswise your holy breast with fire,
Let not your blue eyes be tainted with tears of blood
The owner of this saz, your Tahir, is already here.

At the end of these words, Sona Khanim unfolded the happenings over the past two days to Zohra. She revealed her father's intent and why they had come to Garaman

¹⁴ In Azerbaijani culture, a black shawl on a female's head refers to mourning for a dead person.

uninvited. Then, Sona asked Zohra's opinion on Pasha's intention to confront her father. Zohra held Tahir's saz to her chest and sang:

Welcome esteemed guests, a hearty welcome to all.
Sorely has my father tortured me daily for my love.
My eyes are standing pools and springs of bloody tears,
Sorely has my father tortured me daily for my love.

Moved by Zohra's account of her suffering, Sona Khanim distracted her pain with genuine praises:

An unrivalled beauty is our brave and bold Zohra,
Her brilliant brow does demand our double-praise.
And, Tahir's pure love is hers to forever grace,
What more from Lady Fortuna can Zohra seek?

Zohra, soothed by Sona's words that felt like a balm upon her wounded soul, then made a humble request:

Come, please sit by me, my courtesy is all yours,
And, deliver this news to your kind father, Pasha.
That I would die from my painful pining for Tahir
Or be killed by my father's heinous, hateful hands.

Sona Khanim then informed Zohra:
Far and wide, your Tahir has long wandered,
And like Majnun¹⁵ has scaled the snowy mountains,
And, to my royal garden, the crate finally did bring him,
Which augurs both good and bad for you, my sweet Zohra.

Zohra's uplifted spirit took a plunge again and she responded:
Upon my oppressed head I will wear a black shawl,
Upon my suppressed breast a crosswise brand of fire.
I am Zohra who bitterly weeps and boisterously bawls,
For my father tortures me to destroy my one holy desire.

15 A male character in Nizami Ganjavi's poems who fell in love with Layla. This character is the "Romeo" of the East.

Sona Khanim, moved by Zohra's heavy tears that fell like beads of lead, then revealed her intentions to free Zohra from her misery:

I did come, Zohra to compete with you,
And judge who is the fairest of the two.
But, now, be still and allay your fears, dear Zohra,
For I have come with my able troops to fight for you.

Finally, Sona Khanim, after much words to assure Zohra that she was on her side, together with the daughters of the Vizier and the Lawyer returned to her father's presence. Sona greeted her father and said:

Dear Father, I attest to the fact that Tahir and Zohra are passionately in love.

Pasha was most delighted to hear this news. He at once dispensed messengers to Hatem Sultan, offering him two options—either to give his daughter's hand in marriage to Tahir Mirza or to prepare for a battle. To this, Hatem Sultan, much enraged, answered defiantly:

I would give my daughter to any stranger if Pasha asks, but if I had seven puppies, to Tahir Mirza, I would never give even one.

Infuriated by this arrogant reply, Pasha commanded the cavalry troops to take their positions in the battlefield. On the other side, the soldiers of Hatem Sultan stood reluctantly seeing no good reason for this battle. Tahir Mirza, to gauge the tense situation that was at hand, went before Pasha's presence. He bowed seven times before Pasha and said:

Oh most honourable Pasha, these people before you have done me no wrong. Whatever has happened, has been solely my uncle's doing. Do not involve yourself in unnecessary bloodshed. Grant me permission to go down to the battlefield and to challenge my uncle to a one-to-one duel. Either he will kill me, or I will vanquish him and revenge my father's blood.

Pasha tried to dissuade Tahir, but he was persistent. At last, permission was granted to Tahir to enter the battlefield. The custom during that time was that when two kings come to fight, they would bring either two Ashiks¹⁶ to debate on the cause of conflict or two heroes to wrestle on their behalf. However, in this battle, there were no such representatives. Tahir stood in the middle of the battlefield and called out to his uncle with a loud voice:

¹⁶ Traditional singers whose songs—be it a dastan or a short composition—are accompanied with a long neck lute in Turkic cultures.

Hear now, Hatem Sultan, there is no need to shed innocent blood. This contention is between you and me alone. Come now and face me in the battlefield. Which of us kills the other, that side will be the victor.

Hearing these words from a nephew he sorely despised threw Hatem Sultan into a mad rage. He summoned for a horse and rode into the battlefield that was crackling with tension. Uncle and nephew were immediately locked into a fierce fight. As their razor-sharp spear heads came dangerously close to each other, Tahir's eyes fell upon Zohra and he saw her tearful eyes and her hands raised in prayer for him. Zohra prayed:

Dear God, consider Tahir's youth in your great mercy and forbid it that my cousin should ever grow weak before this wicked unbeliever.

Seeing Zohra pleading before God sparked a violent vehemence in Tahir's heart and he summoned all his strength and rode his horse towards Hatem Sultan while declaring loudly:

Cursed one! Face your doom today! It is the day of my dear father's revenge.

Hatem Sultan, who had retreated for a split second, was unprepared for Tahir's sudden assault. He realized that he was near death, but in his confusion, he could not raise his shield in front of the spear that was aimed at his chest. Tahir Mirza plunged the spear into his uncle's chest until a quarter of its blood-soaked tip came through his back. Hatem Sultan's body held by the spear was dragged to the middle of the battlefield while still hanging down from the horse's waist. The ground was stained with the tyrant's blood. Volleys of "Bravo! Bravo!" rang in the air coming from the armies from both sides. This was accompanied by the beating of vibrant tunes of victory on their delighted drums. The battlefield was filled with unspeakable joy.

On the evening of Tahir's victory, Pasha ordered the whole city to be lit up. The city shone like a million diamonds. Zohra was given in marriage to Tahir and the wedding feast went on for forty days and forty nights with pomp and fabulous festivity. Pasha made Tahir the ruler of Garaman, and at the end of the forty days, he returned to his own kingdom by the sea. Tahir continued to celebrate his wedding and invited many Ashiks to his generous feasts. The Ashiks brought the hands of the lovers together and blessed them with many kind words. This is the epic tale of how Tahir and Zohra were finally united forever.