



## THE AVESTA AND ITS ARTISTIC FEATURES

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### ABSTRACT

This article discusses the distinctive semantic scope of the sacred Zoroastrian text Avesta, the artistic ideas reflected in it, and its system of imagery.

### KEYWORDS

Avesta, Gathas, Yashts, Vedas, Vendidad.

### INTRODUCTION

In the Avesta, information can be found about the life of the peoples of Central Asia, the territories they inhabited, their customs, way of life, history, philosophy, culture, medicine, and many other aspects. At the same time, the Avesta also has great value as a literary source. Speaking about the literary significance of this work, Professor N. Mallayev writes: “The Avesta is, to a certain extent, also a literary monument. In addition to the fact that artistic language devices and figurative expressions are widely used in it, it is also a source that has collected ancient monuments of oral literature. It narrates myths and legends about Kayumars, Yima, Gershasp, Arjasp, and others. A considerable part of it (mainly the Gathas and Yashts) is written in verse. The poetic lines are composed based on the number of syllables. The Yashts are mostly composed of lines of eight syllables (sometimes 10–12 syllables).”

It is well known that the Avesta has a distinctive structure. The main parts of the monument are written in the form of folk songs consisting of 3-, 4-, or 5-line verses. They consist of the following:

1. Gathas: texts recited during worship. This section consists of 72 chapters, the core of which is made up of hymns performed during rituals. Seventeen chapters of the book contain hymns attributed to Zarathustra and descriptions of the prophet’s dialogue with God. It is the only source for studying the life and activities of Zarathustra.

2. Yashts: hymns of the Mazda-worshippers praising and glorifying Yazdon (the divine being), performed according to special melodies. They include praises dedicated to the seven deities and angels. This section consists of 52 chapters.

3. Visperad: this book consists of 24 chapters and presents texts and guidelines related to worship rituals.

4. Vendidad: a collection of laws directed against demons and the forces of darkness. It includes passages on various subjects and contains a body of scholarly, historical, philosophical, and medical

details. This 20-chapter book provides a fairly comprehensive account of Zoroastrian religious and worldly beliefs.

5. *Khorda Avesta*: a selected compilation from the Avesta. However, it also contains independent fargards (sections). It consists of 20 chapters.

In these parts of the Avesta, various genres, myths and legends, narratives, and features characteristic of folk oral creativity, as well as images, can be found, which may be interpreted as components of belles-lettres. The relationship between the Avesta and literary art is discussed in detail in Professor H. Hamidov's book *From the Avesta to the Shahnameh*, and it was deemed appropriate to refer to it in this graduation paper. Almost all sacred religious books, while being codes of divine commandments, are also, in a certain sense, among the sources of the artistic thinking of the people (or peoples) to whom they belong. This is because the religious and theoretical foundations, rules, admonitions, calls, and appeals found in such monuments are gradually adorned with, and intertwined with, myths, legends, and narratives whose original roots go back to the most ancient oral traditions. First of all, it should be emphasized that even in the relatively most ancient part of this written monument, the *Vendidad*, as well as in the *Yashts* and *Gathas*, which consist directly of Zarathustra's poems, the most ancient myths of the peoples of Transoxiana, Khorasan, and Iran—those concerning Mitra, Ardivisura Anahita, Varahrana, Asha, and others—are reflected, and the adventures of Kayumars (Gaya Maretan) and Jamshid (Yima) are mentioned in various contexts. If the poetic passages about Mitra (sometimes conventionally referred to as an ode) are read attentively and in logical sequence, they resemble a concise epic poem. This is because Mitra, riding his two-horsed chariot and armed, at times protects the people and the land from calamities and enemies, demonstrating a true example of patriotism, and at other times destroys Ahriman, who brings disaster upon humanity. In the poems, on the one hand, Mitra is described as a possessor of such divine power, and on the other hand, he is praised as the patron of light, life, goodness, growth, progress, good morals, and righteous deeds. These texts make extensive and effective use of artistic devices characteristic of folk oral literature, such as hyperbole (exaggeration beyond belief), direct address, repetition, metaphor, rhyme-prose (*saj'*), question-and-answer, proportion, synonymy, anaphora, contrast, simile, and epithets.

Since the Persian text is presented in prose form, we limit ourselves to citing a single example from the ode to Mitra in the Russian translation by the poet Asqar Mahkam.

Some Orientalists, including Riza'ei, Bahrami, and Mary Boyce, have claimed that all of the "one million verses" (as mentioned by Pliny) contained in the Avesta belong directly to the authorship of Zarathustra, whereas A. O. Makovelsky expressed the view that a certain portion of them is the product of much more ancient oral tradition. However, all scholars of Avestan studies unanimously acknowledge that these poems emerged on the basis of oral creative sources and emphasize that they closely resemble syllabic (finger-count) poetry. All the poems in the Avesta are very close to syllabic verse; they are most often composed of lines with 8–9 syllables, and only occasionally of 11–12 syllables.

As for the mode of depiction in the hymns, it should be noted that in almost all cases the supreme deity Ahura Mazda is described and praised as "the creator and protector of the two worlds" through a wide variety of devices and names (the deity is said to have 101 names). Expressions of loyalty and devotion to Yazdon occupy a central place. At times, techniques such as direct address, appeal, and question-and-answer are also employed, ensuring that the ideas are clear and emotionally effective for

the listener or reader. Each hymn has a specific compositional structure, with a beginning and an end, and constitutes a distinct, self-contained work. The artistic and figurative devices themselves possess a kind of enchanting quality.

The Orientalist Abulqasim Ismailpur, speaking about poetry, music, and their mutual interaction during the Sasanian period, notes that the poetry of Borbad, Nekisa, and Amir emerged on the foundation of a blessed poetic tradition. In all these poems, the use of contrast and opposition as stylistic devices predominates. In the Avesta, poetic passages and stanzas are referred to by specific terms. For example, a single line is called *afsman*, meaning “pattern” or “measure”; in the Pahlavi language it appears in the form *patman*. In the Gathas, *afsman* is also used in the sense of *mavzun*, that is, “metrical (measured) speech.”

In one of the Gathas, Zarathustra addresses Ahura Mazda, saying: “...I speak to You not with unmeasured speech, but with metrical words.” In the Avesta, a single word (*kalima*) is called *vajongha* (*vajon*), and a single syllable is referred to as *pand*. Thus, in the Avesta, poetry and its structural components are expressed through special terms: the verse line, the couplet, and stanzas consisting of 3, 4, or 5 lines. At the same time, all artistic elements characteristic of the oral traditions of Eastern peoples find their embodiment in these poems.

Some researchers have concluded that the works of Zarathustra were “special poems,” that is, texts written for priests and scholars who understood the teachings of Zoroastrianism and the idea of monotheism, while ordinary people did not fully comprehend their original essence. Therefore, learned priests would explain the meaning of the hymns in fire temples before recitation and performance, and in this way “commentaries on the Avesta” came into being. In any case, in these hymns and odes, alongside praise of the Creator God, the diverse facets of human spiritual experiences are delicately portrayed. They richly express our ancestors’ reflections on life and the universe, theology, loyalty, sincerity, love, duty, contentment, and the fulfillment of these values; they promote truthfulness, purity, good deeds, and good conduct.

Most importantly, the poems of the Avesta confirm that our poetry has an extremely ancient history and that devotional literature appeared among us at a very early stage. From the beginning to the end of the monument, light is set against darkness, diligence against laziness, justice against oppression, wisdom against ignorance, fruitfulness against indifference to progeny, prosperity against poverty, and a flourishing land against a “desolate realm.” The former is praised and exalted, while the latter is cursed as a habit that leads life on earth toward depravity. The monument contains a great abundance of content and imagery drawn from the most ancient myths.

The main idea in the myths is the promotion of the central principle of Zoroastrianism: good thoughts, good words, and good deeds. All the activities of Ardivisura Anahita and Asha are directed toward this very purpose. Along with sowing the seeds of goodness upon the earth, Asha protects the rights and dignity of women, safeguards them from “evil-doers” and the attacks of demons, and ensures the purity of lineage. Striving to develop goodness and light on earth, she fights against demonic impurity and corruption. In these images, the leading ideas of Zoroastrianism—peace and harmony, the prosperity of the land and the people, and the protection of humanity from supernatural forces and calamities—are embodied.

All these figures are narrated, like folk heroes, through exaggeration and vivid description. A single example illustrates this: “Ardivisura Anahita comes from the presence of the Creator Mazda with the stature and majesty befitting a world champion. Her white and strong arms, and the ornaments on her

neck, dazzle the eye. This graceful being, who disdains arrogant warriors, is exceedingly wise and thoughtful.”

Ardvisura wears a garment made from the skins of three hundred female tigers. The female tiger is described as the most beautiful of animals, yielding abundant fur, and each gives birth to four cubs. In general, in the myths, Asha and Ardvisura are portrayed as symbols of goodness and as protectors of goodness. Both figures, while possessing divine power, also embody qualities typical of ordinary women and mothers, which shows that they correspond to folkloric images created on a realistic, life-based foundation.

The descriptions and narratives employ thousands of vivid and varied similes, inspiring astonishment. For example, well-cultivated fertile land is likened to a young bride who quickly bears children for her husband. Or, the higher the heap of harvested wheat grows, the sooner the demon's destruction approaches. The new Zoroastrian religion is compared to the mighty and sweet-watered Amu Darya River.

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