

MAKHTUMKULI - POET AND THINKER

A. Vozrozhdenov



Hally Annachary: Hiva

The world is an "executioner" who, "having spilled blood, goes away"; the world is "a prostitute for sale" who, "having once embraced you, goes away"; the world is "evil deeds", "base", "false", "cunning", "mad" - this is how the world and his attitude towards it are described by the founder and leading figure of Turkmen classical poetry, Makhtumkuli.

"Who knows this old world? Oh God, how old is it? Mixed in it are the pure and polluted, witches and good spirits". A frightful, bloody fate holds sway over it. "From red blood your teeth turned red", the poet angrily addresses fate.

The old world is frightful and monstrous. In this attitude to the world of the poet there is much from the mystical philosophy of the Sufis. Makhtumkuli should have and did pay tribute to the mystical aspect of the work of the great Iranian poets of the first half of the second millennium AD. At that time in the east they were completely the "dominant influence". They were not yet entirely opened up to Europe. Goethe was later to call seven of them the greatest of the greatest, placing them above himself for creative genius. Makhtumkuli, brought up on their work, must have absorbed much of their philosophy. But he absorbs not all of it, not whole, but with his own selectivity.

Yes, he takes from the great materialist nihilist Omar Khayam something of his "rotation of time", something of his rejection of the harmony and purpose of the real. He pays tribute to the search for joy and worldly pleasures which flowed so powerfully from the work of Omar Khayam, Hafiz and Saadi. In the philosophy of Makhtumkuli one feels the fatalism typical of the work of that Pleiades of thinker poets. But, whereas for Omar Khayam:

It is not worth wondering whether this world is old or young;
When it is time to go, is it not all the same to us?

for Makhtumkuli it is not all the same: "I want to go all round the world and learn about it". For Hafiz an abstract, ironic free-thinking is typical, not taking seriously any truths, any philosophy at all. Hafiz is rejection "without passion, without tragedy, accusation without anger. Makhtumkuli is devoid of irony, his rejection of contemporary reality is tragic. His oral teachings are on the surface similar to sermons on "correct", "wise life" which are not characteristic of Firdousi, Nizami and Rumi. But behind them is a tragic perception of the frightful world, its unsteadiness and inevitably catastrophic nature.

"Evil seized the world". And from horror and shuddering "the sky will not fall, the earth will not be turned inside out!"

But to say that such a view of the world of the poet is dictated only by the influence of Sufi philosophy means telling only a small part of the truth. This view of the world was determined by the tragedy of that time. First of all the historical section of the life of the people from whom Makhtumkuli arose, and for whom he sang and created, was dreadful.

Iranian, Bukhara and Khiva historians with epic calm describe this dreadful time - the second half of the 18th Century, when Makhtumkuli was writing and the beginning of the 19th Century, when the Pleiades of poets who were his followers and continuers were writing.

Feudal chroniclers tell of the campaigns of armies of the Iranian shahs, Bukhara emirs and Khiva khans in their wars against each other, of the fratricidal struggle of the feudals inside each of those states. The bloody clashes in many cases broke out on territory occupied by Turkmen tribes. And then death and destruction fell upon them simply for being there. But

the whole horror of the position of the Turkmen tribes was the fact that at any given moment of that period they were unable not to be "traitors" to this or that state. If by bloody coercion they were subjected, say, to Khiva or Bukhara, they would then be declared "traitors" to the shah of Iran, and their villages would be put to the fire and sword. Punitive campaigns by Khiva, Iran and Bukhara against the Turkmen tribes were unending in those days.

Weeping and moaning was heard in Turkmen camps and villages from Atrek and Gurgan as far as the Kazakh steppes, from the shores of the Lebap to the Caspian. Pyramids of the cut off heads of Turkmens were signs of the victories of the enslavers . . . Crowds of captured men, women and children dragged to separation to Khiva, Bukhara, Astrabad . . . Destroyed encampments, settlements, towns . . . Mary was destroyed several times. The famous dams of the Murgab reservoirs near Mary were destroyed many times. The water flowed into the desert and the sands gained mastery over the flourishing valley; everything living was hit by the black death of famine and thirst.

Rulers came and were replaced by other rulers of the exhausted, tortured people. And the world appeared to Makhtumkuli as dreadful, nightmarish, a "roaming camp". "The world is like a caravansaray". Everyone passing through it "having embraced the black earth, departs". The world is anxious: "you have no rest or constancy, you've lost your wits, o world!" The feeling of inevitable disaster never leaves Makhtumkuli. At times it seems to him that the end of the world was upon him. For he cannot continue like this: "dire: soon this world will be destroyed". Three quarters of a century later the Russian poet Tyutchev with the same flight of philosophical mysticism has something in common with this part of the world view of Makhtumkuli.

*It seems to us the orphaned world
Has reached an implacable fate.*

Tyutchev was writing at a time when the "spectre" of communism" was stalking through Europe. He perhaps more sharply than any other poet of his time felt this spectre. Tyutchev almost physically senses the inevitability of the death of the old world. But is it his world. The new world for him is

"alien", "undiscovered", repellent and attractive. Makhtumkuli does not yet know what another world will be like. But he knows that "it is time to be renewed". And it is not his world which will die. It is that which is the evil of the world which must die: the "weighty riches will disappear".

The poet stands in the position of progressive thinking, overtaking his milieu and his era. Therein lies his greatness. If these thoughts sometimes come from a Sufi standpoint, even from the dogmas of Islam, so be it. Perhaps he is hindered by precisely this: "And friend and foe are equal in my sight". But it is only sometimes. In his songs the poet incessantly condemns precisely those who are the bearers of evil. He rails against mullahs, ishans, raises, aksakals, pilgrims, gazis, beks, shahs and khans. And he rails at them precisely because they "will not understand tears in paupers' eyes".

No, the world of those "who seized riches in this false world" is "not eternal, has no basis!"

Makhtumkuli suffered for the fate of his people. He saw their basic misfortune - the impossibility of getting rid of the knout of the enslavers as a consequence of the non-cohesion of the Turkmen tribes. His thoughts about the national liberation of the Turkmens are unclear. He only felt clearly that the national unity of the Turkmen tribes was impossible given the mercenariness of their feudal ruling clique.

That is why he is against the representatives of that clique.

It was precisely he, Makhtumkuli, the poet and thinker, who thereby defined the democratic direction of the entire later struggle of the best representatives of the Turkmen people for the unity of Turkmen tribes, for their liberation from the yoke of alien enslavers. And herein lies his greatness and his enormous service.

Makhtumkuli's democratism is also expressed in the fact that he, like the great Uzbek poet Navoi, in principle wrote his works only in his native language, even though that language is full of Chagatay. Moreover, he was able, despite the predominant views in the East at that time, to prove that the language of high belles lettres can be not only Farsi or Arabic, but also the language of the people - Turkmen.

He completed the process of getting Turkmen literature to absorb the formal riches of Arabic-Iranian poetry in all its variety. He introduced elements of Chagatay into the language of his works in such a way that the

special features of the Turkmen language sufficed in full measure. This is why his works preserve even now their exceptional ethnic flavour. This is why an almost non-writing people brought his work to our time.

The poet died without having seen the unification of the tribes of his people; not one of his wishes, desires or aspirations came to pass in his lifetime. But after all, he would have liked not only to "scatter thoughts" like a "foaming waterfall", not only to sing like a "hundred-tongued nightingale about everything I saw and heard", not only about how "secrets bubble in the people". He felt:

*As a swimmer can swim in the sea,
I, the singer, can unlock all secrets*

But the world of "evil deeds" tenaciously holds his hands. The poet saw that his hopes and expectations were not to be; he became convinced of the truth of what Hafiz once said - "give up hopes of happiness in this world". Hence the roots of the feeling of irreparability and hopelessness in the poet's work. Life so happened exactly as if in actual fact "fate tied my hands, fate did not let me go". This is why "yearning oppressed the broad bosom", this is why-

*I am tired of roaming the roadless hills,
I forgot how to understand my heart.
I lost my track and my hope,
I am too weak to seek the straight road.*

And perhaps it is precisely for this reason that at the same time one so clearly hears in his songs the deepest sympathy for human grief. The poet saw, heard and read much. He belonged to the most educated people of his day. He travelled widely. Judging from his works, the Orient of his day was known to him from the Nile Valley to the shores of the Indus and Ganges, from the Indian Ocean to the Black Sea. The "heavenly gardens of Shiraz" did not charm or deceive him like Saadi. He saw everywhere a dreadful world, everywhere he observed "torturers sucking the blood of the poor", he shuddered for seeing how "the blood flows from the torturers' whip".

The deepest love and fellow-feeling for all deprived, ill-treated and oppressed people, his great love of humanity place Makhtumkuli in the ranks of the great humanists of his time.

The poet did not see the unification of his people, he did not see his hopes and aspirations fulfilled. His pupils, continuers and successors - the poets of the generation succeeding him, Seidi, Zelili, Mollanepes, Kemine and others - did not see it. Neither did the world become a better place in the lifetime of these representatives of Turkmen classical poetry. On the contrary, the lot of the Turkmen people over many subsequent generations remained just as tragic.

Their hopes and aspirations came about only now, after the Great October Socialist Revolution, in our great era, when, in the great friendship of the peoples of the Soviet Union the Turkmen people acquired a creative and joyful life. Their banner of great humanism, love for the people and the homeland and hatred of oppressors is being carried to the people by a new generation of poets, creatures of a new culture, national in form and socialist in content.

That is why there is such vigour and assuredness in the verse of the people's poet of socialist Turkmenia, Ata Salih:

Whoever was marked by need, reads and writes himself. The path in collective farms is lit up for paupers by shining joy.

We go on, squaring our shoulders, through the triumphant fields. Time has come to meet us, we fear no obstacles.

Turkmenskaya Iskra 28 may 1940, No 119

Translated by Peter Hughes

(Source: The Journal of Makhtumkuli Studies/ Volume 1, 1997)

Sent by: Akmyrat Gürgenli