

Peerless

Bākī's Response to Sultan Süleymān

Nilab Saeedi

Author:

PhD., Research Associate, Institute for Habsburg and Balkan Studies (IHB), Austrian Academy of Sciences (ÖAW), Austria

nilab.saeedi@oeaw.ac.at

ORCID: [0000-0001-7729-9563](https://orcid.org/0000-0001-7729-9563)

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Context

Derived from the Arabic root *nazara* (نظر), the term *naẓīre* denotes a concept of equivalence, referring to something that is a match, counterpart, or parallel in form, function, or status. In the literary traditions of Turkish poetry, the term *naẓīre* denotes a poetic counterpart or imitation – a composition crafted in deliberate poetic responses to a pre-existing poem, adhering to its meter, rhyme scheme, and frequently its thematic content.¹ This practice functioned as a means for poets to exhibit their technical mastery and creative ingenuity by producing verses that mirrored the formal structure of a renowned poem. Composed as an act of homage, a gesture of rivalry, or a form of poetic dialogue, the *naẓīre*² served as a dynamic intertextual engagement with established works. This tradition was particularly evident in poetic forms such as the *gazel* and the *kaṣīde*, where the replication of quantitative meter (*‘arūz*) and rhyme (*kāfiye*) was both a challenge and a tribute.³ The abundance of *naẓīre* in response to a solitary poem was frequently regarded as an indication of the poem’s popularity and literary significance within the poetic canon.⁴

The present study examines a letter composed by Bāḳī (d. 1600), widely celebrated as *sulṭānū’-ṣu‘arā* (The Sultan of Poets) and a preeminent figure in Ottoman poetry. Notwithstanding the fact that the letter was ultimately intended for

¹ Kemal Yavuz, “Türk Şiirinde Nazire,” *Divan Edebiyatı Araştırmaları Dergisi* 1, no. 10 (January 1, 2013): 359–60, <https://doi.org/10.15247/dev.155>.

² For two key works on the *naẓīre* tradition see Edith Gülçin Ambros, “‘Naẓīre’, the Will-o’-the-Wisp of Ottoman ‘Dīvān’ Poetry,” *Wiener Zeitschrift für die Kunde des Morgenlandes* 79 (1989): 57–83; Fatih Köksal, *Sana Benzer Güzel Olmaz* (Büyüyenay, 2018).

³ Mehmet Kalpaklı, “Osmanlı Şiir Akademisi: Nazire,” in *Türk edebiyatı tarihi*, ed. Talât Sait Halman (Ankara: Kültür ve turizm bakanlığı, 2006), 134.

⁴ One of the most imitated poems in the Arabic-Islamic tradition is the *Ḳaṣīdet al-Bürde* (Poem of the Mantle) by Imām al-Buṣīrī (d.1296?), composed in the 13th century in praise of the Prophet Muhammad. This celebrated *kaṣīde* is notable for its spiritual depth, lyrical beauty, and perfectly structured meter and rhyme (ending each verse with the letter “mīm”). It became a cornerstone of devotional poetry. The poem’s profound influence is evident in the numerous *naẓīres* composed by poets across various Arabic, Persian, Turkish, and Urdu literary traditions, who sought to emulate its structure while infusing their own unique voice into the genre. Composing a *naẓīre* to the *Bürde* represented not only an artistic challenge but also a spiritual homage, and over time, entire anthologies of such responses were compiled, making it perhaps the single most widely imitated poem in Arabic verse. For more see, Al-Busiri, *Qasida Burdah: Healing Rhymes*, ed. Sayid Ashraf Shah, 3rd ed. (CreateSpace Independent Publishing Platform, 2015).

Sultan Süleymân the Magnificent (d. 1566), a marginal note indicates that, in accordance with established courtly protocol, it was first received by an intermediary before being conveyed to the sultan. Maḥmūd ‘Abdülbākī or Bākī was active during the reign of Sultan Süleymân and was the recipient of significant patronage and favor from the Sultan.⁵ Like numerous Ottoman sultans, Sultan Süleymân the Magnificent was an accomplished poet in his own right, writing under the pen name *Muḥibbī* (The Lover). He composed a *Dīvān* (a collection of poetry) in Ottoman Turkish, as well as a shorter *Dīvān* in Persian.⁶ Sultan Süleymân’s literary inclinations and poetic sensibilities are widely considered to have been the catalyst for his considerable favors bestowed upon Bākī, the renowned poet. It is widely held that Sultan Süleymân regarded his patronage of Bākī as one of his most significant and valuable undertakings, regarding the presence of the poet at his court as a symbol of both personal and cultural prestige.⁷

The document⁸ under scrutiny reveals that Sultan Süleymân, composing poetry under the penname *Muḥibbī*, dispatched two of his poetic compositions to Bākī, entrusting him with the task of crafting *naẓīre*—poetic imitations or poetic responses—to these poems.⁹ It was a customary practice among poets to submit their literary works to others, inviting them to compose poetic responses, as this served as a means of evaluating both the quality of the original poem and the poetic skill of the responder. Bākī’s decision to compose two *naẓīres* in response to a single poem from

⁵ For more on Bākī and his biography see, Haluk İpekten, *Baki Hayatı Sanatı ve Eserleri* (Akçağ Yayınları, 2017); Mehmed Çavuşoğlu, “Bākī,” in *Türkiye Diyanet Vakfı İslâm Ansiklopedisi* (Istanbul, 1991); Mahmut Kaplan, *Baki: Şiir Ülkesinin Sultanı* (Lejand, 2021); Mutlu Muhammet Aktaş, “Bākī Hakkında Bir Bibliyografya Denemesi,” *Littera Turca Journal of Turkish Language and Literature* 4, no. 4 (October 31, 2018): 876–913, <https://doi.org/10.20322/littera.470632>; Walter G. Andrews, Najaat Black, and Mehmet Kalpaklı, *Ottoman Lyric Poetry: An Anthology*, 2nd ed, Publications on the Near East (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2014).

⁶ Amil Çelebioğlu, “Turkish Literature of the Period of Sultan Süleyman the Magnificent,” in *The Ottoman Empire in the Reign of Süleyman the Magnificent*, ed. Tulay Duran, vol. II (Istanbul, 1988), 61–163.

⁷ Coşkun Ak, “Muḥibbi,” in *Türkiye Diyanet Vakfı İslâm Ansiklopedisi*, 2010; Hasan Kaplan, “Bir Yarışma Olarak Nazire: 16. Yüzyılda Ödüllü Bir Nazire Müsabakası,” *Kültürk*, no. 5 (2022): 42.

⁸ “TS.MA.e 759/116” (Istanbul), BOA.

⁹ Fatma Meliha Şen, “Kanuni Sultan Süleyman (Muḥibbi) ve Baki,” *Osmanlı Araştırmaları Dergisi* 28/18 (2006): 183–93.

the Sultan is noteworthy.¹⁰ Bākī, a renowned poet with a profound understanding of both Turkish and Persian poetry, asserts that he had never before encountered a poem of such sophistication. He goes on to describe the Sultan's use of expressions as matchless. Despite acknowledging the poem's unparalleled nature and the difficulty of composing a poetic response, Bākī chose to write two *naẓīres* because, as he states, “*a defeated player does not tire of the game*”. While Sultan Süleymān was undoubtedly a skilled poet, it is essential to recognize that Bākī's response is not directed at an ordinary poet, but at the *Padişāhı-ı Cihān* (Sultan of the World), the ruler of the Ottoman Empire, and his patron. In composing his reply, Bākī was clearly intent on pleasing his Sultan, a gesture that reflects the broader intellectual and cultural context of the early modern world, where poets, scholars, and intellectuals were often bound to imperial patronage. Bākī's response is a paradigm of this relationship, illustrating how poets navigated their roles within the structures of power and patronage, as evidenced in the letter under scrutiny.¹¹

Transcription

*Sultānum ḥazretlerinüñ ḥāk-ı cenāb-ı sa 'ādet-nişāblarına çehre-i ḥuzū '-ı mevzū ' kılınub
ed 'ıye-i izdiyād-i 'ömr ü devlet-i rüz-efzūnları kemā-yenbağī
edā vü ifā olunduğdan şoñra ma 'rüz-ı bende-i bī-miḳdār oldur ki devletlü ve sa 'ādetlü
pādişāh ḥazretlerinüñ bu cāniblere iki dāne mümtāz ü müsteşnā ḡazel-i şerīfleri*

¹⁰ Kanuni Sultan Süleyman, *Muhibbî Dîvânı: Bütün Şiirleri (inceleme- Tenkitli Metin) = Dîwān-i Muhibbî = Dîvān-ı Muhibbî = The Collected Poems*, ed. Kemal Yavuz and Orhan Yavuz, 1. baskı, Türkiye Yazma Eserler Kurumu Başkanlığı yayınları- Edebiyat ve Sanat Serisi, 69. 18 (Fatih, İstanbul: Türkiye Yazma Eserler Kurumu Başkanlığı, 2016).

<i>Hîç revā midur dilā sen böyle cāy-ı ābda</i>	<i>'Ömri zāyi ' eyleyüp bir dem kalasın ḥ 'ābda</i>
<i>Āh kim deryā-yı eşkümdē bu çeşmüm merdümi</i>	<i>Sanasın bir keştidür durmaz döner girdābda</i>
<i>Āfitāb-ı ḥüsnüñe baksam gözüm pür āb olur</i>	<i>Döstüm bir ḥāşşadur bu mihr-i 'ālem-tābda</i>
<i>Deyr-i ḥüsnüñde gören yā kaşlaruñ kec-rā didi</i>	<i>Egrilik olsa 'aceb mi kāfirī mihrābda</i>
<i>İy Muhibbî 'ışḳ bir gevherdür eksük olmasun</i>	<i>Ḳıymetin bilür bunuñ yok kimse şeyḥ ü şābda,</i>

¹¹ Murat Umut Inan, “Imperial Patronage of Literature in the Ottoman World, 1400–1600,” in *The Empires of the Near East and India*, ed. Hani Khafipour (Columbia University Press, 2018), 493–504, <https://doi.org/10.7312/khaf17436-042>; Halil İnalçık, *Şair ve Patron* (Doğu Batı Yayınları, 2022).

vārid olub bu bende-i ḥaḳīr ‘ac̣z u ḳuṣūr üzre bir dānesine iki nazīre dimek müyesser oldı
ḥaḳḳ budur ki ğazel-i şerīfūñ eger maḩla ‘ı eger maḩḩa ‘ı
eger sâ ‘ir ebyāt-ı şerīfesi bī-miṣl ü bī-hemtā vāḩi ‘ olduğundan ğayrı ḩuṣūşen “egrilik olsa
‘aceb mi kāfirī miḩrābda”¹² beyt-i şerīfi vallāhü’l- ‘azīm
bir mertebe ser-āmed beytdür ki aṣla nazīre mümkün degildür bunca zamāndur ki eger
şu ‘arā-yı ‘Acem eger şu ‘arā-yı Rūm miḩrāba müte ‘allıḩ niçe sözler söylemişlerdür
ḩaḩ’an birisinüñ ḩāḩırına bunuñ gibi taşarruf-ı ḩāşş gelmemişdür bu ḩadar devāvīn
taşannu ‘ idüb bunca iş ‘ār tetebbu ‘ itdüm ḩaḩḩ ‘alīm u dānādur ki
bu daḩıḩa-i enīḩāyı şimdi gördüm ḩaḩḩ subḩānehü ve te ‘ālā sa ‘ādetlü pādişāh
ḩazretlerinüñ ‘ömr ü devletlerin ziyāde ḩılub müdāvāt-ı dünyevīye ve uḩrevīyelerüñ ber-
āverde ber-ḩayr
eyleye bi-fazlıhi ve iḩsānihi celle zıkrühü bāḩi hemīşe zāt-ı şerīf-i melek-ḩiṣāl-maḩrūn be-
ḩıfz ü ḩimāyet-i zi’l-celāl-bād inneḩü ra ‘üf bi’l- ‘ayān
Min ‘abde’l-faḩīr
Bāḩi el-ḩaḩīr
Marginal note¹³
Eger niçün iki nazīre didüñ diyü su ‘āl buyrılursa
meşḩūr meşeldür “yeñilen oyuna ḩoymaz” dirler
bu ma ‘ḩülece beyt düşe bolay ki diyü bulsam
bir ḩaç daḩı söyledüm ammā ḩanda müyesser olur ki
benüm gibi ḩaḩīr ol ḩabaḩa şı ‘r-i şerīfe nazīre dimege
ḩādir ola hemān bir taḩlīd-i maḩẓdur ki olnur

¹² This letter has been examined in the following studies, where this particular line has also been analyzed in detail; for further discussion, see, Sadettin Eğri, “Kanunî Sultan Süleyman (Muḩibbî)’in Edebî Yönü,” in *Kanuni Sultan Süleyman Sempozyum Kitabı*, ed. Cafer Çiftçi, Asım Yediyıldız, and Nadji Djekaba (Bursa, 2018), 49–63; Şen, “Kanuni Sultan Süleyman (Muḩibbi) ve Baki.”

¹³ This marginal note was written by Bāḩi himself, added after completing the main body of his letter. As will be evident in the translated section, he uses this addition to explain why he composed two separate responses instead of one. The note appears on the right margin of the paper, written upside down, clearly in the same handwriting and with the same pen as the main text.

Post-Script¹⁴

*Bāḳī ḳuluñuzdan bu bendeñüze gelen mektûbdur
 ğazel-i dürer-bāruñuza ḥareminden iki nazîre dimiş
 ola ki birisi münāsib vāḳi ' ola diyü benüm sulṭānum
 meşhür meşeldür ki "yeñilen kişi oyuna doymaz" dirler ammā
 bir ğazeldür ki lā-nazîrdür hem ḳanda varsa müsellemdür*

Translation

After humbling myself before the exalted and blessed dominion of His Majesty, and offering supplications for the extension of His Majesty the Sultan's life and the continued prosperity of his ever-thriving reign, I hereby respectfully present that His Majesty, the prosperous Sultan, has bestowed upon me two distinguished and exceptional noble poems. In light of my own humble position and limitations, this lowly servant has been granted the honor of composing two *nazîres* [poetic response] in reply to one of these works. It is evident that the verses of this noble poem, including its opening, its conclusion, and all other noble verses within it, are unparalleled and incomparable in their grandeur, particularly the verse "*egrilik olsa 'aceb mi kāfirî miḥrābda.*" I swear by the Almighty that this verse occupies a place of the highest distinction, one that cannot be replicated. For a considerable period, numerous poets from both Persian and Rumi traditions have penned verses associated with the *miḥrāb*.¹⁵ However, none have conceived a line of such originality and singularity in their works. Over the years, I have composed many divans and written innumerable poems, but only now, by the grace of God, have I encountered such a

¹⁴ This section constitutes a postscript located at the top left corner of the document, aligned vertically along the left margin and written diagonally downward toward the center of the page. It appears to be written by another hand, most likely that of a court official or attendant responsible for receiving such letters and forwarding them to the sultan. As will be evident in the translated text below, this individual provided a brief summary of the letter's contents

¹⁵ The *miḥrāb* is a niche set into the wall of a mosque that marks the qibla, the direction Muslims face in prayer, pointing toward the Ka'ba in Mecca. Beyond its architectural function, the mihrab carries profound symbolic meaning in poetry, where its arched form is often compared to the elegant curve of the beloved's eyebrow.

remarkable expression. May God, the Glorious, prolong the life and increase the fortune of His Majesty, the prosperous Sultan. May He continue to grant divine support to him, both in this world and the hereafter, through His infinite grace and favor. Furthermore, may the noble and angelic qualities inherent in His blessed existence remain preserved and protected, for He is compassionate toward the visible world.

From the poor servant,
The humble, Bākī

Marginal Note

If it is asked, why did you compose two *naẓīres*?

There is a well-known proverb “*a defeated player does not tire of the game*”.

I thought perhaps I might come up with a couplet that fits in this manner,

And had I found more, I would have written them too — but how could it be possible?

For someone of such lowly rank as myself to compose a *naẓīre* to your noble poetry —

It is merely a pure imitation, nothing more.

Post-Script

This letter comes from your servant Bākī to this humble slave. He has composed two *naẓīres* to your pearl-laden *ġazel* from his own side, hoping that one of them might be found suitable.

O my Sultan!

It is a famous saying: “*a defeated player does not tire of the game.*” But this *ġazel* is truly without equal — Whoever possesses it is, in fact, the one defeated

Facsimile

T.C. BAŞBAKANLIK OSMANLI ARŞİVİ DAİRE BAŞKANLIĞI (BOA) ©

بانه قوتك و كرامتك بوجوه كونه كلن سلكن ببرد
 بوزن صر بار اوكون صر صندف اكر نجه و صندف
 اولاك بجه سي ملكب و اوج اولاك هجو سلكن
 سلسله سركه بگيلن كشي هيزر مد ك رقا
 بوزن سركه لا نظور صر فتح و ايسه مسكده

سلطان صفر تركيک خاک جناب سادات نصا بمرتبه جهرا خضع موضع قلندوب ادعيا از ياد مودودت و زان فزون گشتي
 اودا و اينها او نندند شکر. معدوض شين بقدر اولدک دو تلو و سواد تلو بادشا، صفر تركيک بو جانلر ايلک و انچه تلو سندن اولد
 وارد اولوب بوننده حقير خيز و قصور اذنه بردانه سنه اين نظير. ويک سبت اودس حق بودر که خذل شکرک اکر سلكي استغفر
 اکر سار ايات شکر نديسي. بي مثل و بي عتا واقع اودر غدن غيري نصوصا اکر کيل اولد عجب کافور خرابه بيت شکر سنج ايشتم
 بر مرتبه سر آه بيت در که اصلا نظير مکن دکلمر بونجه زماندر که اکر شعراي هم اگر شعراي روم خرابه شعلق بجز نور سوندر
 قطعا بر سينک خاطر بونک کسي ترف حاصل گشدر بوند دو اوين تعغ ايوب بونجه اشعار تبع ادم حق علم و دان در که
 بود قنده انقده اشمکي کوروم حق جان و دعالي سعاد تلو بادشا، ضو نيز مگر عمرو دونلرين زياد فلو بوج اوات دنوبه و نظرون
 ايد بفسله و اصانه جل ذکر باقي صبه ذات کريف کل نهال سدرن بخنط و عتاب ذل المللا لاله از رکوت بالعباد

درالدين التقي
 بايچ افقيس

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