

Japan in Azerbaijani Memoirs and Travelogues

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Abstract. This study examines the formation and development of Japan's image in Azerbaijani memoirs and travelogues. Its primary objective is to investigate how the social, political, historical, cultural, and spiritual dimensions of Japan are represented in Azerbaijani memoirs and travelogues, while also assessing the contribution of these texts to the development of Azerbaijani–Japanese cultural relations. The theoretical framework draws upon scholarly approaches to the documentary-literary characteristics of memoirs and travelogues, as well as the concepts of intercultural dialogue and cultural memory. The empirical corpus consists of Hasan Seyidbeyli's *Fifteen Days in Japan*, Bakir Nabiye's *What I Saw in Japan*, Shahin Fazil's *A Travelogue of Japan*, and Ganira Pashayeva's *Step by Step: Japan*. The research employs comparative, historical-comparative, textual, and hermeneutic methods of analysis. The findings demonstrate that Azerbaijani authors portray Japan not merely as a geographical entity but as a distinctive civilisational model characterised by advanced technological development, a strong national and cultural identity, social discipline, historical consciousness, and humanistic values. Across works produced in different historical periods, particular emphasis is placed on the value accorded to the individual, work ethic, norms of social conduct, the harmonious coexistence of tradition and modernity, and the collective memory shaped by the tragedies of Hiroshima and Nagasaki. The study concludes that these memoirs and travelogues have significantly shaped Azerbaijani perceptions of Japan while fostering intercultural dialogue and mutual understanding between the two nations. The findings may serve as a valuable resource for future research on Azerbaijani–Japanese literary and cultural relations, comparative literary studies, and the memoir and travel writing genres.

Keywords: Azerbaijani memoir literature; travel writing; Japan; Azerbaijani–Japanese relations; Hasan Seyidbeyli; Bakir Nabiye; Shahin Fazil; Ganira Pashayeva; intercultural dialogue; image of Japan.

INTRODUCTION

Memoirs and travelogues, as documentary-literary genres, perform an important cultural and intellectual function in shaping and developing relations between nations. Unlike official diplomatic documents, political reports, and normative texts, these genres present interstate relations through the prism of personal observations, subjective experiences, and cultural representations. Consequently, relations between countries are understood not only within political and legal frameworks but also through their cultural, social, and human dimensions, thereby fostering a deeper foundation for mutual understanding.

In travelogues, authors' descriptions of the geographical environment, socio-political system, customs and traditions, religious beliefs, and everyday life of the countries they visit contribute to the formation of comprehensive and systematic perceptions of different peoples. In this respect, travelogues are not merely collections of personal impressions but also important sources for the transmission of cultural knowledge. The essence of this idea is more clearly expressed by Wilfried Löschburg in *The Cultural History of Travel*: "Regardless of the purpose of a journey, travellers ultimately returned to their home countries with new ideas. They opened entirely new horizons within their own societies, enabling people to look beyond the limits of their own communities. In this

way, they demonstrated that the world consisted of far more than the country in which they lived" [1, 2].

Memoirs are particularly important because they present the political, diplomatic, and social processes between two countries from the perspective of direct participants or eyewitnesses. Memoirs in this genre clarify how diplomats, politicians, and intellectuals shape interstate relations, conduct official negotiations, and make historical decisions. Such texts are

particularly valuable because they reveal details that are absent from official documents and make an important contribution to the study of the informal dimensions of international relations. As Ben Yagoda notes in *Memoir: A History*: *"Memoirs have become a central cultural form: they are not merely narratives, but also vehicles through which arguments are advanced, products and ideas are introduced, ideas are disseminated, actions are justified, and reputations are established or preserved"* [3, p. 17]. This perspective demonstrates that memoirs serve not only as retrospective accounts of past events but also as active instruments in the construction of ideological, cultural, and political discourse.

Memoirs and travelogues possess significant scholarly potential for examining the formation and development of Azerbaijani–Japanese relations. Azerbaijani memoirs and travelogues devoted to Japan reflect not only political and diplomatic contacts between the two countries but also the processes through which cultural interaction, intellectual interest, and mutual perceptions have evolved. In these texts, Japan is represented not merely as a distant geographical entity but also as a distinctive cultural model, social structure, and system of thought. These representations, shaped by the authors' personal observations and experiences, have played a significant role in forming Azerbaijani public perceptions of Japan. Furthermore, Azerbaijani memoirs and travelogues on Japan are distinguished not only by their factual content but also by their rich intellectual and aesthetic dimensions, making them particularly valuable in fostering cultural and spiritual mutual understanding between the two countries.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

In Azerbaijani literature, memoirs and travelogues about Japan began to appear in the second

half of the twentieth century. Subsequently, they underwent significant thematic, ideological, and aesthetic development. In these works, Japan is portrayed not merely as a geographical entity but also as a distinctive civilisational model characterised by advanced technological development, a strong national and cultural identity, social discipline, spiritual values, and a profound sense of historical memory. The image of Japan, shaped by the authors' personal observations and experiences, has played a significant role in shaping and enriching Azerbaijani readers' perceptions of the country.

Within the scope of this study, four major Azerbaijani memoirs and travelogues devoted to Japan – Hasan Seyidbeyli's *Fifteen Days in Japan*, Bakir Nabiyeu's *What I Saw in Japan*, Shahin Fazil's *A Travelogue of Japan*, and Ganira Pashayeva's *Step by Step: Japan* – are examined using the comparative analytical method. By analysing the representations of Japan's socio-political life, culture, historical memory, the human dimension, and various aspects of Azerbaijani–Japanese relations in these texts, the study identifies the principal characteristics of the image of Japan as constructed within the Azerbaijani memoir and travel writing tradition.

The Image of Japan in Hasan Seyidbeyli's *Fifteen Days in Japan*

Soviet–Japanese relations entered a process of normalisation following the 1956 signing of the Soviet–Japanese Joint Declaration, which restored diplomatic relations between the two countries. This political turning point marked the beginning of official visits by Soviet delegations to Japan. At the same time, the establishment and development of cultural exchanges became one of the principal directions of bilateral cooperation. Within this context, the Azerbaijani writer, screenwriter, film director, and People's Artist of the Azerbaijan SSR, Hasan Seyidbeyli (1920–1980), was selected as one of the two members of a delegation sent to Japan on behalf of the Union of Soviet Cinematographers.

The visit, which took place in May 1966, aimed primarily to become closely acquainted with Japan's distinguished filmmakers, strengthen professional and cultural ties with them, and identify practical and appropriate avenues for expanding future cooperation between the two countries.

The impressions gained during this visit subsequently formed the basis of Seyidbeyli's travel-

logue *Fifteen Days in Japan* (1966). The work documents the author's observations of Japanese society, culture, and, in particular, the country's cinematic environment as experienced during his brief official visit. Because Seyidbeyli travelled to Japan as an official cultural representative rather than as an ordinary tourist or independent traveller, he shaped the scope of his observations and the focus of his narrative in line with the responsibilities and perspectives of his diplomatic and cultural mission.

In Seyidbeyli's account, the visit to Japan is presented not only as the fulfilment of an official assignment but also as motivated by personal interest and a desire to observe. The author notes the existence of widespread perceptions, stories, and stereotypes about Japan and emphasises that he wished to verify their accuracy through direct observation: *"Everyone talked about Japan based on what they knew or had heard. Many strange stories were told about this distant country. I wanted to see with my own eyes and ascertain to what extent these stories corresponded to reality"* [2]. This approach indicates that, in Seyidbeyli's attitude toward Japan, an investigative perspective prevailed over passive acceptance.

At this point, it is worth noting that the prominent literary scholar Bakir Nabiyeu likewise expressed a similar view in his notes written years later following his visit to the Land of the Rising Sun, stating that it is more worthwhile to see a country once than to hear about its wonders and peculiarities a hundred times [4, p. 683]. This parallel clearly demonstrates a common approach among Azerbaijani intellectuals toward Japan – one that prioritises knowledge based on personal observation over perceptions formed through hearsay.

In Seyidbeyli's observations, Japan is presented as complex and multifaceted from both historical-cultural and aesthetic perspectives. The author writes: *"It is difficult to discover Japan as a traveller. For, to understand the life of a great nation possessing an ancient and highly modern culture, and a complex historical destiny, one must live here for many years"* [2, p. 35–36]. This position reflects the author's perception of Japan as a country with both a long historical tradition and a rapidly modernising society, making it particularly difficult for a traveller to comprehend fully. For this reason, Seyidbeyli's brief official visit yielded only superficial observations and initial impressions; nevertheless, the author sought to

convey them as accurately and objectively as possible.

Individual observation and subjective impressions occupy a central place in Seyidbeyli's travelogue. The author emphasises that he does not intend to provide readers with encyclopedic information, as they can obtain such knowledge from other sources. Instead, Seyidbeyli presents only his own impressions of Japan and his personal process of discovery. According to Seyidbeyli, each person's perception of a place depends on their character and emotional sensitivity: *"Even when one hundred people observe the same street from the same point, they do not see it in the same way. Each person focuses on something according to his character and capacity for emotional perception, and for him the character of that street becomes associated with those particular things"* [2, p. 36]. This approach highlights the scholarly and aesthetic significance of subjective observation in the work. It demonstrates that, for Seyidbeyli, the process of discovery consists not only of visual descriptions but also of individual emotional and intellectual perception. In *Fifteen Days in Japan*, the image of Japan is thus constructed as a collection of subjective impressions that conveys the author's personal perspective to the reader.

For Hasan Seyidbeyli, who states, *"What interests me more than anything else is the human being"* [2, p. 37], the primary focus in understanding Japan is not its physical environment, technological development, or material progress, but the human factor. The author characterises the Japanese as hardworking, industrious, respectful toward one another, trustworthy, composed, and courteous. In his observations, he emphasises that strict ethical norms govern interpersonal relations in Japanese society. At the same time, open aggression, insults, and threats are absent from everyday communication. As he writes, *"During those fifteen days, I observed that the hardworking Japanese have great respect for one another. They trust one another deeply. Respect for human beings is one of the highest ideals they uphold"* [2, p. 31].

Seyidbeyli's descriptions foreground the social behaviour of the Japanese people and identify the human factor as one of the principal forces underlying Japan's rapid development. For the author, the discipline of the Japanese, their sense of collective responsibility, and the civilised forms of conduct they display in public constitute some

of the defining characteristics of the country's overall cultural environment. In this respect, the Japanese people function in Seyidbeyli's travelogue not merely as objects of observation but also as the principal key to understanding the country's historical destiny and its path of modern development.

The observations of the distinguished writer also resonate with theoretical approaches developed in social and cultural anthropology. For example, Albert Bandura argues that *"if human behaviour were based solely on the results of personal experiences, most people would never escape the fortuities of their early developmental experiences"* [5, p. 25]. Viewed from this perspective, Seyidbeyli's observations suggest that Japan's progress cannot be explained as accidental or solely as a consequence of technological modernisation. Rather, the institutional preservation of behavioural norms, mutual respect, and social responsibility in Japanese society has fostered a collective consciousness that transcends individual experience.

Notably, this human-centred model of development extends beyond the observations made by scholars in the mid-twentieth century. Accounts of twenty-first-century Japan preserve the same pattern. Writing about contemporary Japan, Novruz Najafoghlu emphasises: *"The human factor! For the Japanese, it is a way of life, a sacred moral responsibility. Alongside these many achievements, there are also losses, erosions, and breakthroughs arising from those very sacred moral ideals, as well as from objective and subjective causes"* [6, p. 29]. Similarly, Ganira Pashayeva states that *"mutual assistance, care, trust—in short, a sense of community – occupy a central place in Japanese psychology. For them, the greatest punishment is to be expelled from the community to which they belong"* [7, p. 98]. The views of Najafoghlu and Pashayeva align conceptually with the conclusions that Seyidbeyli reached decades earlier, demonstrating that the Japanese educational system and cultural institutions have preserved the model of social behaviour over time rather than fundamentally changing it.

Hasan Seyidbeyli's impressions of Japan extend beyond social behaviour and the aesthetics of place; he also pays close attention to the country's rich cultural life and tradition. Drawing on his personal observations, he provides detailed descriptions of elements of Japan's national and popular culture, such as *Kabuki theatre*, *sumo*, *geisha*, and *Kodomo no Hi* (Children's Day).

As can be seen, Seyidbeyli's perception of Japan extends beyond official travel notes. It is characterised by the deconstruction of stereotypes, an emphasis on the human factor, and a poetic and intellectual appreciation of the country's cultural depth. In his account, Seyidbeyli portrays Japan as neither a distant exotic land nor an idealised myth but rather as a cultural phenomenon whose every detail readers can observe, even though they find its entirety difficult to comprehend—remaining, as it were, *"beyond reach despite being in plain sight."* It is precisely this paradox that elevates Seyidbeyli's portrayal of Japan beyond a simple travel narrative and establishes it as a valuable cultural text.

Cultural and Social Observations in Bakir Nabiyeu's What I Saw in Japan

The theme of Japan in Azerbaijani travel literature is notably reflected in the travel memoir *What I Saw in Japan* (1985) by the distinguished literary scholar Bakir Nabiyeu (1930-2012). The work attracts scholarly attention as a product of both the author's personal observations and the intellectual perspective shaped by the Soviet-era cultural diplomacy.

Academician Nabiyeu visited Japan in November-December 1985 as a member of the Soviet delegation representing the Azerbaijan SSR. The official USSR Days events held in Sapporo, Japan, provided the context for the visit. This context indicates that Seyidbeyli undertook the journey not out of purely touristic interest but within an institutional and ideological framework.

Nabiyeu approaches Japan not merely as a traveller visiting a distant and exotic country, but also as a representative of Azerbaijani national culture and a literary historian. The Japan-Soviet Friendship Society organised the trip, requiring the author to present his observations within the framework of official discourse. Nevertheless, the author expressed his personal impressions and individual evaluations. In this respect, *What I Saw in Japan* may be regarded as an example of travel writing situated at the intersection of official travel records and subjective observation.

Bakir Nabiyeu's acquaintance with Japan was neither accidental nor unprepared. As the distinguished scholar himself acknowledged, *"I had heard much about the Land of the Rising Sun, situated so far from Azerbaijan, and its wonders and peculiarities over the past half century, and I had also read not a little about it. Yet, as the saying*

goes, seeing something once is better than hearing about it a hundred times" [4, p. 683]. These remarks demonstrate that Nabiyev constructed his image of Japan upon a foundation of prior intellectual knowledge and regarded his journey as an opportunity to verify and enrich that knowledge through direct experience. Consequently, Seyidbeyli presents Japan not as an "unknown East" but as a cultural space that he had already studied, contemplated, and ultimately understood through firsthand observation.

During his visits to Tokyo, Sapporo, and Kyoto, Nabiyev pays particular attention to the high level of organisation characterising Japan's urban planning and transportation infrastructure. Throughout the journey, he directly observes the country's remarkable achievements in industrial production and manufacturing. The widespread implementation of automated production processes and robotic technologies attracts the scholar's special attention, and he interprets these developments as clear indicators of Japan's advanced scientific and technological progress.

At the same time, based on his observations in Japan, the distinguished literary scholar also adopts a critical perspective on the social and economic consequences of technological development. In the chapter entitled *The Shadows of the Land of the Rising Sun*, Nabiyev argues that "The shadows of modern life in Japan are deep, and the shadow cast by its social contradictions is even darker" [4, p. 699], portraying Tokyo of the 1980s as a city characterised by pronounced social stratification.

In the author's portrayal, Tokyo emerges as a city of striking contrasts, where millionaires and the destitute, industrialists and the unemployed, the affluent and the hungry, as well as luxurious mansions and the homeless coexist side by side. Noting that the rapid automation of production and the widespread adoption of robotic technologies have profoundly affected traditional labour relations, Nabiyev emphasises that these developments have resulted in the displacement of workers and employees across several sectors, forcing many into unemployment. He describes, with deep compassion, people sleeping outdoors after fashioning pillows and blankets from cardboard boxes, individuals driven to suicide by overwhelming debt, and the tragedies experienced by families ruined by financial collapse.

The period covered by Nabiyev's observations coincided with Japan's so-called "economic mira-

cle." The decades from the 1960s to the 1980s witnessed a prolonged period of rapid economic growth during which Japan transformed itself from the devastation of the Second World War into the world's second-largest economy. A strong emphasis on education, a model of state-guided capitalism, rapid industrialisation, and the resilience of the domestic economy characterised this period. However, this remarkable economic expansion was followed by a sharp downturn in the early 1990s, triggered by the collapse of the speculative asset and real-estate bubble, commonly referred to as the "bubble economy" [8, 9].

Interestingly, the social contradictions observed by Bakir Nabiyev during the 1980s do not appear to have persisted with the same intensity in subsequent decades. Twenty-four years later, in 2009, the historian, writer, and poet Shahin Fazil, who visited Japan to participate in an academic seminar, noted in his travelogue *Journey to Japan* that he did not encounter the scenes of homelessness and poverty described by Nabiyev. As he writes: "Although the respected academician does not explicitly use the word 'beggar,' he writes that there were 'the affluent and the hungry' in Tokyo... I do not doubt the respected academician's account in the slightest. Professor Bakir would never write about something he had not seen. However, I did not witness what he had observed. Besides, I visited Japan many years after Professor Bakir. Tokyo is becoming wealthier and more beautiful not from year to year or month to month, but from day to day" [10, p. 178-179].

This observation suggests that Japanese society gradually recovered in socio-economic terms following the collapse of the bubble economy and that policymakers had, to a certain extent, brought many of the social problems highlighted during the 1980s under control.

One of the most noteworthy aspects of the work is Bakir Nabiyev's comparative interpretation of Japanese culture through the lens of Azerbaijani cultural memory. While walking through the narrow historic streets of Kyoto, Japan's ancient capital – described by the author as "a place where modernity and history are intertwined remarkably" [4, p. 694] – he associates the city with The Old City (Icherisheher) of Baku: "There are streets in this part of the city whose compactness and narrowness are exactly reminiscent of the alleyways of our Icherisheher" [4, p. 694]. Thus, the author places two cities belonging to distinct geograph-

ical and civilisational contexts within the same semantic framework, treating them as urban spaces that preserve historical memory and cultural tradition. This comparison suggests that the author views Japan not as an alien or inaccessible culture but rather as a cultural space that people can understand through shared historical and spiritual parallels.

Bakir Nabiyeu examines Japanese culture not only in the context of technological and social progress but also through the prism of its profound spiritual and symbolic codes. In his observations, the traces of Shintoism and Buddhism in everyday life, the ritual character of temple ceremonies, the moderation, order, and harmony reflected in Japanese dining culture, the aesthetic principles of Japanese gardens based on harmony with nature, and the museum culture that successfully reconciles modernity with tradition are presented as integral components of a coherent and unified cultural system. This perspective demonstrates that Nabiyeu perceives Japanese culture not as a collection of isolated elements but as a complex structure governed by its own internal logic.

One of the most prominent symbolic expressions of this cultural system is the sakura motif. The author particularly emphasises that, in Japan, the *sakura* is not merely a natural phenomenon but a spiritual value elevated to the status of a national symbol: *"For the people of the Land of the Rising Sun, the sakura carries the meaning of a national symbol. On cherished holidays and joyful occasions, they present one another with a small sakura branch, kiss it, and preserve it with great care. Unlike the blossoms of many other flowers, the petals of the sakura fall while still fresh, before they have withered or lost their beauty"* [4, p. 692].

Bakir Nabiyeu's observations regarding the distinctive nature of the sakura blossom later found poetic expression in the works of Shahin Fazil. Drawing upon his personal observations made in Tokyo in February 2009, the poet lyrically reflects on the transience and ephemeral beauty of the *sakura*:

*The life of these pink blossoms
is suddenly cut short.
They were here yesterday, gone today...
Without turning yellow,
without withering,
gathering strength
from a sudden wind,
they all at once*

*spread across the ground like tulle—
these pink blossoms,
each of them fresh and delicate.
Just as the sakura blossoms
are born in an instant,
they also die in an instant* [10, p. 61].

The final chapter of *What I Saw in Japan*, entitled *May Those Days Never Return*, provides a profoundly humanistic and tragic conclusion to Nabiyeu's observations of Japan. The distinguished literary scholar interprets the atomic bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki not merely as historical events but as an enduring trauma embedded in the collective memory and the physical and spiritual fate of the Japanese people. As he notes, *"The tragic consequences of this nightmare of death, unleashed upon the Japanese people in the blink of an eye by American aircraft, continue to be felt even today, despite the forty years that have passed since the event"* [4, p. 702].

According to the author's observations, hundreds of thousands of people whom the atomic bombings exposed to radiation continued to suffer severe physical hardships many years after the bombings. This perspective demonstrates that Nabiyeu presents Japan not only as a nation of progress, discipline, and aesthetic harmony, but also as a country bearing the legacy of one of the twentieth century's greatest humanitarian tragedies.

In conclusion, Bakir Nabiyeu's observations of Japan are shaped not only by reflections on culture, progress, and aesthetic harmony, but also by the profound human suffering caused by the country's natural and historical tragedies. In this respect, his travelogue transcends the boundaries of factual description, becoming a narrative of moral memory and human empathy.

The Historical and Cultural Interpretation of Japan in Shahin Fazil's *Journey to Japan*

Shahin Fazil (1940–2024) offers one of the most comprehensive and multilayered representations of Japan in Azerbaijani travel literature in *Journey to Japan* (2011). Transcending the conventional travelogue framework, the work brings together poetic, journalistic, and scholarly discourses into a unified narrative. Approaching Japan from the perspective of a scholar, poet, and Eastern intellectual, Fazil subjects his observations to profound cultural analysis. In his travelogue, Japan is presented not merely as a physical destination but as a philosophical concept, a cul-

tural model, and a source of spiritual attraction. The poetic passages incorporated into *Journey to Japan* further reinforce the work's generic hybridity, revealing the emotional and philosophical dimensions of the author's travel experience. In this respect, the following poetic excerpt on Japan is particularly noteworthy:

*I witnessed a different day, a different world;
In this land, I carried a burden of delight.
Just a little more than three weeks – no more than that...
Yet it felt as though I had lived an entire lifetime in this country* [10, p. 198].

In these lines, the journey to Japan transcends the boundaries of physical time, becoming a spiritual and intellectual experience. The expressions "a different day" and "a different world" indicate that the author perceives Japan not merely as a travel destination but as a distinct cultural and temporal-spatial realm. In this context, Japan is presented as an alternative civilisational model in which modernity and tradition coexist in harmonious balance.

One of the most prominent features of Shahin Fazil's portrayal of Japan is his emphasis on discipline and civic responsibility. The cleanliness of the streets, the punctuality of public transportation, and the voluntary observance of social rules are interpreted not as the result of external control but as manifestations of internal discipline. For the author, the Japanese example represents, above all, a model of society in which individuals assume responsibility for their own conduct.

At the same time, the semantic scope of Fazil's narrative extends beyond Japan itself. On a deeper level, the text activates a mechanism of comparative reflection. Although the author does not explicitly address the realities of Azerbaijan, each social norm he describes implicitly invites readers to reflect on the social practices of their own society. Because this comparison is not an overt critique but a neutral presentation of cultural differences, it avoids a didactic tone while preserving scholarly objectivity. It is within this context that Imamverdi Hamidov's interpretation of Shahin Fazil's motivation for adopting the travelogue genre becomes particularly significant. According to the scholar, Fazil's choice of this genre was driven by two principal factors: "*Shahin Fazil's turn to the travelogue genre stemmed from two main reasons. First, as a poet, he discovered – or encountered – many of the themes and motifs that later appeared in his poetry during his travels*"

[11, p. 25]. Hamidov's observation suggests that the cultural comparisons found throughout Fazil's travel writings are not incidental but rather arise from the author's intrinsic poetic and intellectual quest.

Another distinctive feature of Shahin Fazil's *Journey to Japan* is its rich network of literary references. The author does not confine his travel narrative to personal observations and analytical reflections; he also draws extensively on a wide range of Azerbaijani and international sources on Japan, incorporating factual information that broadens and deepens his interpretation of the country. This approach enriches the travelogue by endowing it with both scholarly-historical and cultural-aesthetic dimensions.

In *Journey to Japan*, Shahin Fazil presents Japan's historical and cultural realities from a multifaceted perspective, addressing complex, often controversial issues. Among the concepts that receive particular attention are *harakiri*, the samurai code of ethics, suicide, and the image of the *kamikaze*. Within the travelogue, the author treats these subjects not merely as exotic or sensational elements but interprets them as cultural codes closely associated with the Japanese concepts of honour, duty, self-sacrifice, and collective responsibility.

Interestingly, in presenting these concepts, Shahin Fazil does not limit himself to superficial descriptions; rather, he seeks to uncover the ethical and philosophical meanings that underlie them. In particular, the figures of the samurai and the *kamikaze* are portrayed as cultural interpretations of the relationship between life and death. Within this context, Japanese society understands the concept of suicide differently from the predominantly negative connotations that Western culture attaches to it, interpreting it instead within its historical tradition as closely associated with the notions of honour and responsibility.

A particularly noteworthy aspect is that the author conveys his reflections on these themes not only through prose but also through poetic expression. The poems incorporated into the travelogue illuminate the emotional and aesthetic dimensions of *harakiri*, the samurai, and the *kamikaze*, enabling a deeper understanding of their spiritual significance within Japanese culture:

The samurai, whose brave names were inscribed in history,

The samurai, who shielded their land from countless dangers.

*For years they served their homeland with unwavering loyalty,
In many battles they faced bullets and arrows alike.*

*They sacrificed their very existence and brought about revolution,
The samurai who vanished as though they had never been.*

*Though many years have passed, they are still remembered;
One cannot call them "dead" – only "aged" [10, p. 184].*

The poetic excerpts examined in this study demonstrate that the verses included in *Journey to Japan* function not merely as emotional embellishments but as conceptual elements that synthesise the author's cultural and philosophical reflections. Serving as a bridge between journalistic observation and scholarly analysis, these poetic passages elevate the representation of Japan to a more nuanced and multilayered level of meaning. The abundance of poetry throughout Fazil's travelogue intensifies the emotional dimension of his portrayal of Japan, allowing him to express his cultural admiration and his profound inner response to the country with greater vividness. Although the synthesis of poetry and journalistic prose is not unprecedented in the Azerbaijani travel-writing tradition, this fusion proves particularly effective in representing Japan.

Shahin Fazil visited Japan not by chance but to pursue clearly defined academic objectives. As a historian, Fazil participated in the international seminar entitled *Research on Historical Traditions and the Reconstruction of Research and Educational Methodologies in Post-Soviet Countries*, held in Japan at the invitation of the Centre for Northeast Asian Studies at Tohoku University [10, p. 16]. As part of the seminar, he presented a paper entitled *Twentieth-Century Azerbaijani National Historiography: Historical Experience and the Contemporary Situation* [10, p. 18], in which he examined the stages of development of Azerbaijani historiography, its ideological constraints, and the new methodological challenges that emerged during the post-independence period. This fact further confirms that *Journey to Japan* is not merely a collection of travel notes but the

product of intellectual reflections shaped alongside the author's scholarly activities.

"Japan and Azerbaijan. Their geographical locations: the Far East and the Middle East. East and East. The East studying the East" [10, p. 81] – with these words, Shahin Fazil explicitly articulates the principal methodological framework of his travelogue. Rather than portraying Japan as an exotic "Other", the author presents it as a distinctive model of Eastern civilisation. In this respect, *Journey to Japan* is not merely an account of a visit to a foreign country but an intellectual endeavour in which one Eastern culture seeks to understand another, recognising aspects of itself through engagement with a different Eastern civilisation.

A Journalistic Perspective on the Model of Contemporary Japan in Ganira Pashayeva's *Step by Step through Japan*

The acceleration of globalisation, the intensification of international relations, and the expansion of opportunities for Azerbaijani intellectuals to engage directly and systematically with the wider world in the post-independence period created favourable conditions for the thematic, ideological, and aesthetic enrichment of memoir and travel writing. Within this context, Ganira Pashayeva's (1975-2023) *Step by Step through Japan* (2021) should be regarded not merely as a collection of travel notes but also as a significant journalistic-memoir work that shapes Azerbaijani readers' perceptions of Japan, encourages the reconsideration of established stereotypes about Eastern culture, and promotes intercultural dialogue.

"To date, I have written dozens of travel accounts—some extending over many pages, others consisting of only a few paragraphs. Yet when it comes to saying something about Japan and Tokyo, I honestly do not know where to begin or how to introduce the subject. Writing even this first piece took me dozens of minutes, because Japan is not simply a different country; it is, as if, a different planet" [7, p. 19]. This confession not only expresses the author's emotional and intellectual response to Japan but also establishes the work's overarching conceptual framework. It reveals that Pashayeva approaches Japan as a cultural phenomenon that challenges conventional modes of perception and description, thereby setting the tone for the reflections that unfold throughout the travelogue.

Throughout the work, Japan is presented from the perspective of independent Azerbaijan as a model of development distinguished by a high level of cultural discipline, technological advancement, and a strong sense of national identity. The author portrays Japanese society not merely as an exotic and culturally distinct space but as a civilisational model that has successfully achieved a balance between national values and modern development. Pashayeva argues that it is misguided to regard the West as the sole locus of advanced culture and technological progress, as such an approach overlooks the developmental potential of Eastern civilisations. In her view, even a brief stay in Tokyo clearly demonstrates that *"high culture, advanced technologies, and, above all, human values are by no means inferior in the East to those in the West; indeed, in many respects, they are manifested at an even higher level"* [7, p. 20].

Step by Step through Japan combines the characteristics of memoir and journalistic essay with the conventional features of the travelogue. The author does not merely describe the places she visits; she also interprets the patterns of social behaviour, interpersonal relations, and cultural values she observes within those settings. For example, when discussing public conduct on Japanese public transportation, Pashayeva emphasises the importance of maintaining silence, respecting others' personal space, and prioritising collective comfort over individual convenience.

The work also draws particular attention to the absence of profanity, coarse language, and overt emotional aggression in public spaces, interpreting this as evidence of the high standards of linguistic culture, mutual respect, and ethical self-restraint that characterise Japanese society. These observations go beyond mere fact presentation and offer broader interpretations and conclusions.

For instance, while describing her visit to the renowned *Ginkaku-ji (the Silver Pavilion)* in Kyoto, Pashayeva first provides a chronological and informative account of its history, architectural features, aesthetic qualities, and the origin of its designation as the *"Silver Pavilion"*. She then emphasises the temple's close association with Zen Buddhist philosophy, arguing that its simplicity, use of natural materials, and emphasis on emptiness and tranquillity embody the fundamental principles of Zen thought. For the author, the

temple is not merely a historical monument but a living manifestation of philosophical tradition. Pashayeva pays particular attention to visitors' behaviour on the temple grounds, interpreting their silence, measured movements, and efforts to preserve harmony with nature as manifestations of *Zen culture* integrated into everyday life.

At one point, the author poses a direct rhetorical question to the reader: *"How did the Japanese discover the path to happiness?"* [7, p. 27]. This question serves not merely to arouse curiosity but also as a journalistic device that encourages readers to reflect upon and compare these ideas with their own life experiences. Pashayeva's answer is framed within the core principles of Zen philosophy: living in the present moment, avoiding procrastination, making time for inner peace, simplifying one's life, learning acceptance, maintaining a close relationship with nature, practising meditation, and cultivating gratitude. Throughout the work, these values are presented not as abstract philosophical concepts but as practical patterns of behaviour deeply embedded in Japanese everyday life. For the author, Zen philosophy is more than a religious or philosophical doctrine; he interprets it as a cultural mechanism that plays a vital role in fostering both social harmony and individual well-being.

One of the most notable themes in *Step by Step through Japan*, as in other Azerbaijani memoirs and travelogues devoted to Japan, is the extensive and systematic examination of the historical, moral, and humanitarian catastrophe caused by the atomic bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki. In the chapters *Japan, Close to Us Through Its Suffering* and *Hiroshima: A City That Neither Forgets nor Allows Others to Forget*, Ganira Pashayeva approaches this unprecedented tragedy in human history not only through emotionally charged descriptions but also from a journalistic perspective. She provides readers with a fact-based account of the political and military developments that preceded the bombings, the preparations for deploying atomic weapons, and the process through which the authorities selected the target cities.

The author evaluates the event not only through its consequences but also within the context of the factors that gave rise to it, an approach that renders the narrative more objective and analytically grounded from a scholarly perspective. Emphasising the magnitude of the atomic catastrophe, Pashayeva writes: *"Since 1945, the wounds of*

Hiroshima and Nagasaki have continued to ache and reopen in the conscience of humanity. In a single moment, the bright world of thousands, indeed millions, was transformed into darkness" [7, p. 102-103]. She interprets the atomic bombings not merely as a national tragedy for Japan but as a universal humanitarian catastrophe that has left an indelible mark on the collective memory of humankind.

At the same time, Pashayeva observes that "it is difficult to find another nation in the world that suffered losses on the scale experienced by the Japanese people and yet, within such a short period, regained its previous pace of development" [7, p. 129]. This statement reflects the author's admiration for Japan's post-war recovery while highlighting the decisive role of national resilience, collective responsibility, and cultural endurance in shaping the country's remarkable trajectory of reconstruction and development.

Furthermore, Pashayeva draws parallels between the tragedies of Hiroshima and Nagasaki and the mass atrocities experienced throughout Azerbaijan's history, presenting them as expressions of a shared human memory and common suffering. Through the statement, "*Japan experienced the tragedy of Hiroshima; Azerbaijan endured the massacres of Guba and Shamakhi. Japan suffered the pain of Nagasaki; Azerbaijan suffered the tragedies of Khojaly, Baganis Ayrim, Garadaghli, and Aghdaban*" [7, p. 102], the author establishes moral parallels between catastrophes that occurred in different geographical regions and historical contexts.

This form of comparison is not merely emotional but also conceptual, suggesting that readers can understand the historical traumas of different peoples through literature and cultural memory. Consequently, the themes of Hiroshima and Nagasaki are presented not solely as Japan's national tragedy but also as a shared historical lesson that fosters humanitarian empathy and spiritual affinity between Azerbaijan and Japan.

Step by Step through Japan offers Azerbaijani readers an exceptionally rich and multifaceted account of Japan. In addition to describing geographical locations, historical monuments, and scenes from everyday life, the work provides extensive insight into Japan's cultural and intellectual heritage.

One of the book's most significant features is the consistent reflection of the author's systematic

and profound knowledge of Japanese literature. This characteristic elevates the work beyond the conventional boundaries of the travelogue, transforming it into a text of cultural and literary encyclopedic value.

Pashayeva presents Japan not only as a physical space readers can observe but also as a literary and cultural phenomenon that scholars and readers have studied and intellectually assimilated. In this respect, her approach is grounded in the synthesis of empirical observation with philological and cultural analysis. Throughout the book, she refers to both classical and contemporary Japanese writers, including Yasunari Kawabata, Ryūnosuke Akutagawa, Yukio Mishima, and Haruki Murakami, as well as poets such as Kobayashi Issa, Kaneko Misuzu, Ki no Tsurayuki, Matsuo Bashō, Sugiyama Sampū, and Takahashi Shinkichi. Although these references are concise, they provide meaningful insights into the authors' works and explain their significance within Japan's intellectual and cultural tradition. These literary references serve not merely an informative function but also underscore the central role of literature in the formation of Japan's cultural identity.

Japanese poetry occupies a central position throughout the work. In a variety of contexts, the author recalls poetic works by both classical and modern Japanese poets, using *haiku* and other short poetic forms to introduce readers to Japan's aesthetic consciousness, its harmonious relationship with nature, and the literary manifestations of Zen philosophy. In this regard, the author's direct appeal to the reader is particularly noteworthy: "*If you wish to understand the spiritual world of the Japanese, you should first become acquainted with their literature and folklore*" [7, p. 97].

Developing this idea further, Pashayeva acknowledges that Japanese poetry may initially appear obscure or difficult to comprehend. However, she argues that, as readers gradually acquire greater emotional sensitivity and aesthetic experience, the poetic world of Japan becomes increasingly accessible. Poetry is thus presented not merely as an aesthetic object but also as a means of cultural cognition. The author further illustrates the Japanese attitude toward poetry and the act of writing by drawing on an example from the haiku poet Onitsura:

*Is there anyone
who, gazing at this moon,*

does not reach for a pen? [7, p. 76].

Building upon this example, the author explains the essence of inspiration in Japanese literary thought, arguing that the creative impulse in Japanese poetry arises not from transcendental or mythological sources but directly from nature itself and from the inner harmony established between human beings and the natural world. As Pashayeva observes: *"The principal difference between the poetry of the Land of the Rising Sun and that of the West is that Japanese poets do not seek inspiration from muses or divine beings, for in Japan, poetry, like everything else, was born together with the gods. The forces that create artistic wonders are rooted in the earthly world; they do not exist beyond human capacity but reside within humanity itself"* [7, p. 61].

One of the work's most significant scholarly and cultural contributions is its clear demonstration of the mediating role of literature and literary-cultural exchange in international relations. In *Step by Step through Japan*, Japan is understood not merely through political, economic, or geographical parameters but through its cultural memory and literary heritage. This perspective highlights the importance of culture—particularly literature—as a fundamental component of what scholars of international relations commonly describe as *soft power*.

By engaging systematically with Japanese literature, Pashayeva demonstrates that lasting and meaningful mutual understanding between nations is achieved not solely through official diplomatic relations but, above all, through sustained literary and cultural interaction. Her references to Japanese writers and poets, together with her presentation of their poetic and philosophical worlds to Azerbaijani readers, constitute a form of cultural translation. Within this framework, literature emerges as a universal medium that transcends national boundaries, fostering empathy and intellectual dialogue between different cultures.

Moreover, the author's interpretation of the aesthetic principles of Japanese poetry – such as simplicity, harmony with nature, transience, and inner tranquillity – enables Azerbaijani readers to appreciate an alternative cultural worldview from within. Consequently, the work demonstrates that literary and cultural relations should be regarded not merely as complementary elements of interstate relations but as an autonomous sphere of strategic importance.

Ganira Pashayeva's *Step by Step through Japan* ultimately illustrates that the cultural bridges established through literature constitute a durable and sustainable form of international engagement, one that is comparatively less constrained by ideological barriers. In the contemporary era of globalisation, such literary and cultural dialogue represents one of the most effective means of fostering mutual understanding among nations.

CONCLUSIONS

The analysis of the theme of Japan in Azerbaijani memoirs and travel literature demonstrates that these genres are not merely records of personal travel experiences but also constitute important scholarly and historical sources for the study of Azerbaijani–Japanese cultural relations. The works examined reveal how Azerbaijanis have perceived Japan across different historical periods, allowing us to trace both the evolution of these perceptions over time and the enduring characteristics that have remained constant.

The findings of this study indicate that in the works of Hasan Seyidbeyli, Bakir Nabiyeve, Shahin Fazil, and Ganira Pashayeva, Japan is portrayed primarily as a model of civilisation founded upon a highly developed culture, social discipline, a strong work ethic, national and moral values, and the harmonious coexistence of tradition and modernity. Despite the authors' visits taking place in different historical contexts and for diverse purposes, their observations consistently emphasise features such as respect for the individual, a strong sense of civic responsibility, established norms of social conduct, a harmonious relationship with nature, and the preservation of collective memory. These qualities emerge as the fundamental and enduring components of Japan's image.

The image of Japan constructed in Azerbaijani memoirs and travel literature extends beyond the depiction of a foreign country. It represents an important intellectual phenomenon that promotes intercultural understanding, literary and cultural exchange, and humanitarian cooperation. Collectively, these works have contributed significantly to the formation of an objective, multifaceted understanding of Japan among Azerbaijani readers, while also fostering cultural relations between Azerbaijan and Japan.

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