

The Synthesis of Folklore and Sufism In the Works of Alisher Navoi

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Abstract: This article explores the artistic and aesthetic features of the synthesis of folklore and Sufism in the works of Alisher Navoi. In particular, it provides a scholarly analysis of how Turkic mythological and folk images in the poet's poetics are enriched with Sufi-irfanic meanings. The study examines the poetic transformation of folkloric symbols such as the horse, dragon, demon, and samandar in Navoi's works, demonstrating how these images transcend their ordinary mythological functions and become symbolic representations of the human soul, the struggle against the nafs, divine love, the spiritual journey (suluk), and enlightenment. The article analyses the symbolic layers in the epics 'Farhod and Shirin' and 'Layli and Majnun', as well as in Navoi's ghazals, through comparative-typological and hermeneutic methods. The research concludes that Alisher Navoi did not merely reproduce folkloric motifs and images, but reinterpreted them within the framework of Sufi-aesthetic thought, thereby creating a new semantic system. Furthermore, the article reveals the mythopoetic roots of Navoi's poetics and highlights the integral connection between folk consciousness and the irfanic worldview.

Keywords: Folklorism, Sufism, mythopoetics, symbolic image, horse image, dragon, demon, samandar, irfanic interpretation, folklore and literature, poetic transformation, folk symbols.

Introduction: The works of Alisher Navoi represent the highest peak of Uzbek classical literature, in which the traditions of oral folk creativity and Sufi-irfanic thought are manifested in a profound synthesis. In the poet's artistic system, folkloric images function not merely as aesthetic elements, but as symbolic structures carrying complex philosophical and spiritual meanings.

The uniqueness of Navoi's works lies in his ability to harmoniously synthesize traditional images formed within Turkic mythology and oral literature with the Islamic-Sufi worldview. As a result, folk symbols acquire new semantic dimensions and transform into irfanic images expressing the human being's inner spiritual struggle, confrontation with the nafs, and aspiration toward the Divine Truth (Haq).

In particular, such images as the dragon, demon, horse, ring, and mirror possess multilayered meanings in Navoi's poetics. On the one hand, they preserve their folkloric and mythological roots; on the other hand, within Sufi interpretation they symbolize various stages

of the human spiritual world and mystical experience. This phenomenon necessitates the study of Navoi's works not only as an artistic legacy, but also as a holistic irfanic-philosophical system.

In this regard, the main purpose of the present article is to reveal the poetic mechanisms of the synthesis of folklore and Sufism in the works of Alisher Navoi, as well as to analyse the process of the irfanic transformation of folk images.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The works of Alisher Navoi are widely studied in world literary scholarship as one of the most complex and multilayered artistic-philosophical systems of Eastern literary thought. His poetic universe is formed on the basis of a synthesis of mythological imagination, folkloric archetypes, and Sufi-irfanic ideas, and this issue has been analysed by various academic schools from different perspectives.

In Western theories of folklore and mythology, the universal nature of symbols and archetypes has been

extensively explored. Mircea Eliade, while revealing the cosmic function of myth and ritual, connects folkloric images with ancient concepts of life–death, spiritual journey, and the sacred space [1.193]. Annemarie Schimmel, at the intersection of Islamic mysticism and Eastern aesthetic thought, highlights the spiritual and aesthetic function of symbols and substantiates the role of poetic imagery in the process of spiritual purification [5.424]. G.Sarbassova, in turn, emphasizes the sacralization of the horse image in Turkic culture and its role in the formation of national identity, interpreting it as a historical and cultural symbol [4.6].

In Eastern and Uzbek folklore studies, the images of oral folk literature, mythological layers, and their artistic interpretations have been extensively researched. J.Eshonqulov examined the semantic foundations of dreams, demons, and mythological figures in Uzbek folklore, revealing their functional and symbolic nature within the aesthetic consciousness of the people [15]. A.Tilavov analysed the genesis of the horse image in Turkic mythology and its cultural and cosmological meanings [6], while H.Eshonkulov explored the folkloric roots of celestial and symbolic imagery in the poetry of Alisher Navoi [16]. Z.Mamadaliyeva, in turn, investigated the system of symbolic and allegorical images in the epic poem *Lison ut-Tayr* as a complex structural whole [13].

In the field of Navoi studies and Sufi literary criticism, the philosophical, irfanic, and aesthetic foundations of the poet's work have been deeply examined. M.Muhiddinov analysed the concept of the human being in Navoi's works [14], while A.Abduqodirov explored the issue of *vahdat al-vujud* in relation to Navoi's writings from a philosophical-irfanic perspective [8]. In addition, other Navoi scholars have extensively studied the system of symbols, poetic style, and Sufi imagery in the poet's works.

However, despite these studies, the issue of Sufi reinterpretation of folkloric images—namely, the transformation of archetypes formed in folk mythology into irfanic meanings within Navoi's poetics – has not yet been systematized as a coherent theoretical model. In particular, the question of how images such as the horse, demon, and dragon simultaneously carry folkloric and Sufi semantic layers, and how this synthesis functions as an aesthetic system in Navoi's artistic thinking, remains a relevant scholarly issue.

Therefore, the present study aims to examine the synthesis of folklore and Sufism in Navoi's works as an integrated artistic-philosophical paradigm.

METHODOLOGY

This study employs an integrated set of scientific approaches to reveal the artistic and philosophical

mechanisms of the synthesis of folklore and Sufism in the works of Alisher Navoi. During the research process, oral folk tradition, mythological thinking, and Sufi-irfanic sources were first analysed in a unified framework in order to identify the semantic layers of folk images and their reinterpretation within Navoi's poetics.

The article primarily applies comparative-typological, hermeneutic, structural-semantic, and mythopoetic methods. Through the comparative-typological approach, the original meanings of folkloric images (such as horse, demon, dragon, etc.) in Turkic mythology were compared with their Sufi interpretations in Navoi's works. The hermeneutic method was used to interpret symbolic and irfanic meanings within the texts and to uncover the inner (Sufi) essence of folkloric images.

Structural-semantic analysis was employed to examine the internal relations between folkloric archetypes and Sufi concepts in Navoi's poetics, as well as their functional role within the artistic system. Through the mythopoetic method, the process by which images derived from folk mythology acquire new semantic layers and undergo irfanic-aesthetic transformation in the poet's artistic thinking was analyzed.

These methodological approaches enable a comprehensive analysis of the mechanisms through which folkloric images in Alisher Navoi's works are re-coded within a Sufi framework and transformed into an integrated irfanic-artistic system.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

In the works of Alisher Navoi, the folkloric mythological layer and Sufi thought merge into a profound semantic transformation of the system of images. In this process, symbols preserve their external folkloric form while being enriched with inner irfanic meanings. As a result, images function not merely as aesthetic means of expression, but as artistic models of the human spiritual world and its internal contradictions between the Divine (Haq) and the *nafs*, as well as between worldly life and the afterlife.

Within this system of images, the symbol of the horse occupies a particularly significant philosophical position, forming a multilayered symbolic structure in Navoi's poetic worldview. On the one hand, the horse is connected to the central elements of Turkic mythopoetic thought, reflecting the people's lifestyle, martial spirit, and concept of freedom. On the other hand, within Sufi interpretation, it becomes a metaphorical representation of the spiritual journey of the human soul, known as *suluk*. Therefore, in Navoi's works, the horse is not merely a means of transport or an epic detail, but a symbol of inner movement,

spiritual journey, and moral elevation.

One of the most important manifestations of the horse image in Navoi's ghazals is the depiction of the beloved as a horse-riding horsewoman (shahsuvor). In this representation, external epic movement merges with internal lyrical depth. In the ghazal with the radif "horse," the depiction of the beloved riding into the battlefield to "slay her lovers" creates a semantic harmony with the poet's philosophical reflections on time and the world:

Chobukekim qatl uchun surdi yana maydong'a ot,
Odamiy qolmas tirig solg'an zamon javlong'a ot...
Davrdin ko'p ranjamen, usruk chiqib mayxonadin,
Raxshi himmat uzra solmoq istaram davrong'a ot [11.65].

[Interpretive meaning: As the swift rider once again drives her horse into the battlefield to execute people, no living human remains under her charge... I have suffered much from the cruelty of time. Therefore, leaving the tavern in a state of spiritual intoxication, I wish to mount the horse of spiritual aspiration (himmat) and ride against the world.]

In the second couplet, the poet expresses deep sorrow over the injustice of his era. Thus, he leaves the tavern—understood in Sufi interpretation as a spiritual gathering place of divine lovers and gnostics – "intoxicated," meaning spiritually filled with divine love, and wishes to ride the "horse of aspiration" (himmat oti) into the arena of time. Through this image, the poet conveys his desire to struggle against social injustice and to offer moral healing to the wounds of oppression.

In this ghazal, the third couplet further expands the horse image into a cosmological and existential dimension. Here, life is symbolically represented through the metaphors of dawn and dusk, while the movement of the horse becomes equated with the flow of time. The horse's motion reflects the passage of human life, and its eventual halt signifies the inevitability of destiny. Thus, the horse rises to the level of a universal symbol expressing the connection between the microcosm and macrocosm:

Shomi tufroqqa kirardin chora yo'qtur, garchi subh
Kimki, sekritkay quyoshdek bu biyik ayvong'a ot [11.65].

[Interpretive meaning: Although the dawn rises like the sun into the vast celestial palace, ultimately there is no escape from entering the soil of dusk—no one can avoid this fate.]

Similarly, in the epic 'Layli and Majnun', Navoi brings the horse image into a deeper psychological and

philosophical dimension. In the episode describing the night, the imagination is depicted as riding a black horse, which becomes lame upon reaching the Valley of Love (Ishq vodiysi). Here, the horse is no longer a physical means of movement but a symbol of human imagination and cognition. Its inability to continue the journey signifies the limitation of human intellect in the face of divine love:

Chun vodiysi ishq topti manzil,

O'tmakligi mushkil erdi, mushkil [9.34].

[Interpretive meaning: When the Valley of Love is reached, passing through it becomes extremely difficult.]

This scene is directly connected to the Sufi concept of the "path," where the horse symbolizes the traveller's spiritual means of progression, and the path itself represents the journey toward the Divine Truth. The lameness of the horse expresses the endless difficulty of this path and the inability of human intellect to fully comprehend absolute truth.

The colour of the horse – black – carries additional semantic weight in this symbolic system. Black simultaneously represents majesty, mystery, and inner depth, as well as sorrow and tragedy. Therefore, the image of the black horse embodies a dual meaning, reflecting both the grandeur of the spiritual journey and its suffering and difficulty.

In Turkic folklore, the black horse is often associated with martial power and heroism. Navoi preserves this folkloric foundation but enriches it with a new irfanic layer. As a result, the black horse becomes not only a symbol of epic strength but also a complex metaphor expressing the inner struggle of the human soul between darkness and light, weakness and power.

Thus, in Navoi's poetics, the image of the horse integrates multiple semantic layers: movement, time, spiritual journey, willpower, and cosmic order. This multilayered transformation demonstrates the synthesis of mythological thinking and Sufi philosophy in Navoi's works, elevating the image from a simple descriptive element to the status of a universal symbol.

In general, one of the key features of Alisher Navoi's poetics is the simultaneous use of multiple symbolic layers within a single artistic image. This phenomenon is especially evident in the title of the ninth chapter of 'Layli and Majnun', dedicated to the depiction of the night. Here, a complex symbolic system is integrated into a unified poetic landscape, including expressions such as the Desert of love (ishq dashti), lightning bolts of calamity, storms of affliction, flames of passion and love, the lamp of love, the candle of guidance, and the field of discourse (so'z maydoni). From the very

structure of the title, the intensity of figurative thinking demonstrates the poet's mastery in creating multilayered meaning through symbols: "Ul tun mahobati ta'rifidakim, savdoyi ishq ajdarhosi dami o'tining buxori va anjumi ul olamso'z o'tining sharori erdi va mundoq tunda xayol musofiri savdo adhamig'a minib, har yon azm etmoq va ishqning yuz ofatliq dashtig'a yetmoq va ofat yog'inlaridin balo to'foniga qolmoq va balo choqinlari aning jonig'a shavq va muhabbat harorati solmoq va ishq duri shabcharog'in ul kecha topmoq va ul sham'i hidoyat bila so'z maydoni javlonig'a chopmoq va Layli xayoli bila ko'rushmoq va Majnun savdosig'a tushmoq" [9.33].

Within this complex poetic structure, one of the central semantic nodes is the metaphor of the "dragon of love" (ishq ajdarhosi). The image of the dragon in Turkic and regional mythological thinking has long been associated with evil, destruction, supernatural power, and trial. Its origins can be traced back to ancient religious-mythological systems, including the Avestan Aji-Dahhak and the transformed figure of Angra Mainyu as the spirit of evil. This image is widely spread across world mythologies. As James Frazer notes, mythological narratives often describe a multi-headed monster threatening humanity, which is eventually defeated by a heroic figure in a rite of passage or trial of courage [2].

In Turkic folklore tradition, the dragon image possesses a dual semantic nature: on the one hand, it represents calamity, nafs (lower self), pride, and destruction; on the other hand, it may also carry positive metaphorical meanings associated with beauty and vital power. Therefore, in Navoi's works, the dragon is not a simple mythological creature but is elevated into a complex irfanic symbol.

In the above chapter title, the metaphor of the "dragon of love" reveals the dual nature of love itself: at once a sublime force and a destructive trial. Love's burning yet purifying essence is expressed precisely through the semantic field of the dragon image. This metaphor transforms love from a purely emotional state into a divine force that tests and refines the human soul.

In the following couplet, the dragon image is further enriched with concrete mythopoetic characteristics:

Ishq naqdi dog'i g'am kirmish Navoi ko'ngliga,
Vahki, bir dam ajdarhodin xoliy ermas maxzanim" [10.326].

[Interpretive meaning: When the treasure of love and sorrow enters Navoi's heart, alas, this inner treasure is never free from the dragon, even for a moment.]

Here, the dragon is depicted as a mythological guardian of treasure, where the heart represents the treasure

itself, and love and sorrow function as its guarding forces. As a result, love and grief appear as inseparable entities. From a Sufi perspective, this indicates that love cannot exist without suffering and trial; grief purifies and deepens the inner essence of love.

At the same time, the dragon also functions as a protector of the heart from worldly and carnal desires. When divine love settles in the heart, it detaches from worldly attachments and attains spiritual stability. Thus, the dragon performs a paradoxical semantic role: it is simultaneously danger and protection, trial and purification.

In Navoi's works, the dragon image also acquires a profound irfanic meaning as a symbol of the nafs (lower self). In the epic 'Farhod and Shirin', Farhod's confrontation with the dragon is intertwined with folkloric heroic tradition but is reinterpreted through Sufi metaphysics. This episode is not merely a physical battle, but a symbolic representation of the inner struggle between man and his nafs on the path to spiritual perfection.

The episode in which Farhod is equipped by Suhaylo with samandar oil carries additional semantic significance. The samandar is a mythical creature in Eastern tradition that does not burn in fire but instead derives strength from it. In Sufi interpretation, this reflects the nature of divine love: the true lover does not perish in the fire of love but gains strength from it. Thus, samandar oil symbolizes readiness for divine love.

Farhod's acceptance of samandar oil signifies his complete spiritual preparation for divine love. As a result, the dragon's fire cannot harm him. In this symbolic system, the dragon represents the nafs as a trial force, while samandar oil represents divine love as a transformative power. The struggle is therefore elevated to a metaphysical opposition between nafs and love.

Farhod's victory over the dragon and his acquisition of treasure, as well as the sword and shield inscribed with the Greatest Name of Allah (Ismi A'zam), also carry symbolic meaning. The treasure represents spiritual reward, while the sword and shield symbolize spiritual protection. Together, they signify that overcoming the nafs leads to attainment of both worldly and otherworldly felicity.

In the subsequent episode, Farhod's battle with the demon continues this symbolic system. The demon motif, studied extensively by J.Eshonkulov in the context of Uzbek folklore, functions in oral tradition both as an obstacle and occasionally as an assisting force [15.8–23]. In Navoi's poetics, however, the semantic function of the demon is further deepened,

becoming a symbol of the second level of the nafs – namely pride and arrogance.

The depiction of Ahraman-dev also evokes its mythological roots in the figure of Ahriman from the Avesta. Through this association, the demon is interpreted not only as a folkloric being, but also as a symbol of cosmic evil. Farhod's confrontation with the demon thus represents a more complex stage of spiritual trial—namely, the test of pride (ghurur), which follows the struggle against the nafs.

The demon's attack with the mace (gurzi) and its continual resurgence symbolize the progressive and self-reinforcing nature of human pride. In this process, whenever the seeker (salik) perceives himself as victorious, pride re-emerges in an even more subtle and intensified form. Consequently, this struggle is interpreted as an endless spiritual process rather than a finite conflict.

Thus, in Navoi's oeuvre, the dragon and the demon form a unified symbolic system: the dragon represents the nafs, the demon signifies pride (ghurur), and Farhod embodies the figure of the spiritual seeker (salik). Through this triadic structure, the poet expresses the path of human spiritual perfection as a gradual and complex metaphoric system.

Ultimately, in Navoi's poetics, mythological images are not merely epic elements, but symbolic maps of human spiritual evolution. This elevates his artistic worldview to a synthesis of folk mythology and Sufi philosophy.

CONCLUSION

In the oeuvre of Alisher Navoi, folklore and Sufi thought are intrinsically intertwined, constituting a complex artistic and philosophical system. The poet reinterprets mythological imagery shaped by folklore not merely as conventional plot elements, but as symbolic markers carrying profound irfanic meaning. Consequently, traditional folkloric tropes acquire a new aesthetic and spiritual dimension, transforming into an integrated poetic system harmonized with Sufi philosophy.

Analyses indicate that in Navoi's poetics, archetypes such as the horse, dragon, demon, and samandar converge within a unified semantic space, forming a symbolic framework that sequentially delineates the path of human spiritual perfection.

Concurrently, the Sufi transformation of folkloric figures within Navoi's works gives rise to a dual-layered semantics: on one hand, they preserve the continuity of folk mythological thought; on the other, they encapsulate the internal dynamics of the human spiritual realm through gnostic undertones. This phenomenon further deepens the dialectical correlation between the universe and humanity,

external reality and internal truth, within the poet's literary heritage.

Overall, Navoi's poetic framework represents a sublime synthesis of folklore and Sufism. Within this system, symbolic images serve not merely as artistic devices, but as spiritual guides illuminating humankind's quest for perfection. In this regard, the poet's creative legacy is evaluated as one of the most mature stages of mythopoetic thought in Classical Eastern Literature.

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