

The Jadid Theater and Ethnic Traditions

Botir Sangirov

Associate Professor at the National Institute named after Kamoliddin Behzod of Painting and Design, Doctor of Philosophy in Art Studies, Uzbekistan

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Abstract: This article explores the development of the Jadid theater as a significant cultural phenomenon in the early 20th century, particularly in Central Asia. The study analyzes how Jadid reformers utilized theater as a medium for enlightenment and modernization while incorporating local ethnic traditions and folklore to ensure cultural continuity. The research examines theatrical performances, scripts, and staging practices to highlight how Jadid theater served both pedagogical and national purposes. It also addresses the tension between traditional performance elements and modern dramaturgical innovations introduced by Jadid intellectuals. The findings underscore the role of the Jadid theater in shaping national identity, fostering social reform, and preserving ethnic cultural values through performative expression.

Keywords: Jadid theater, ethnic traditions, cultural reform, Central Asia, national identity, theatrical modernization, folklore, enlightenment movement.

Introduction: The core of Uzbek national theater art, the performance tradition, has been shaped by the interpretation of ethnic customs, various rituals, traditions, and religious beliefs — a fact confirmed by numerous scholarly studies. Academician M. Rakhmonov, Doctor of Art Studies and Professor M. Qodirov, T. Tursunov, and several other theater researchers have analyzed the stages of development and principles of Uzbek theater art in their scientific works and books on the history of Uzbek theater. However, the concept of “national theater art” began to be used only in the literature produced during the period of independence. At this point, identifying and evaluating the history of the national theater, its distinctive features, and its criteria is of great importance.

The creation and development of modern Uzbek professional theater at the beginning of the last century are directly linked to the Jadid movement, which aimed to enlighten the people and raise cultural awareness. The socio-political situation that emerged in Uzbekistan at the beginning of the last century called for the dissemination of Jadid ideas, and they effectively used education, publications, and theater to achieve this. Regarding Russian-native schools, Mahmudkhoja Behbudi stated, “Those who study in Russian-native

schools cannot be considered intellectuals, nor even thinkers. They are merely semi-literate people in Russian,” highlighting the detrimental impact of such schools on the nation’s future. As a result, Jadid schools began to open rapidly, with the goal of ensuring that “soon, laws and most affairs will take on a different color, and we must defend our religion, nation, and state in the National Assembly.”

The Jadids began to use theatrical art to promote their ideas, elevate national culture, and spread knowledge. The creative tours of Russian, Tatar, and Azerbaijani theater troupes in Central Asia and the public’s interest in the performances served as an important means of reinforcing and amplifying the propaganda of literature created for the dissemination of their ideology. As a result, Mahmudkhoja Behbudi’s drama *Padarkush* (Patricide), published in 1913, “marked the true birth of Uzbek national theater.”

In the play *Padarkush*, or the Fate of an Uneducated Child, the author not only promotes the ideas of enlightening the people and spreading knowledge but also warns about the negative effects of the infiltration of European lifestyles and culture, which were leading to harmful trends in youth upbringing. Indeed, in the drama, the tragedy unfolds due to taverns, alcohol, and immoral behavior. Behbudi explicitly expresses his goal

at the end of the work through the words of an intellectual: "It is lack of upbringing and ignorance that have made us homeless, rootless, stateless, enslaved, poor, and humiliated — statelessness, wandering, captivity, poverty, and degradation are all the fruits and consequences of ignorance and lack of upbringing." The Jadids saw it as appropriate to develop both education and upbringing simultaneously to foster societal development and progress. In the drama, the author focuses attention on the causes of lack of education and upbringing, proposing the necessity of awakening certain segments of the public who thought that mere wealth and possessions were sufficient for happiness, ignoring the fate of the nation.

In Nusratulla ibn Qudratullohoja's play *Toy (Wedding)*, the author reflects on the introduction of wedding customs that had been accepted as tradition among the people at the beginning of the last century. The play depicts the events surrounding a circumcision ceremony organized for a rich man's sons. In the first act, called *The Council Feast*, the imam, elders, and respected men of the neighborhood gather to discuss the wedding plans. The elder addresses the wealthy man, advising him to hold a modest celebration, something "small, humble, or befitting a well-known wealthy man," and mentions that he himself, whenever there was a wedding or mourning in any part of the city, would go and bring "ten pounds of sugar or a piece of cloth." After hearing from the elder (the headman) that holding a grand wedding would make his wealth known and his name spread, the rich man accepts this advice.

As the plot develops, the rich man agrees to bestow golden robes upon judges, muftis, scholars, and teachers to secure their favor and enhance his reputation among the public. The judge, commenting on the wedding, claims that "a wedding is God's treasure, and no matter how much is taken from God's treasure, it will never run out," thus trying to satisfy his own desires.

The play also discusses the organization of a *kopkari* (goat-pulling) competition at the wedding. According to custom, *kopkari* is one of the national games usually held during winter or early spring, and the value of the prizes determined the social standing of the wedding host. Nowadays, the custom of organizing *kopkari* at weddings has diminished. Although the play mentions the possible damages and dangers of *kopkari*, and how the wedding could turn into mourning, this is viewed as a typical, acceptable occurrence.

The work explains that the adaptation of customs and rituals to serve the interests of certain social groups and the use of various traditions to gain false prestige leads to extravagance, which is interpreted as one of

the main causes of social problems.

In Abdulla Qodiriy's tragedy *The Unfortunate Groom*, the wasteful and excessive traditions of the early 20th century are also criticized. In the play, as the discussion revolves around the amount of *olugh-solugh* (traditional wedding expenses) to be provided by the groom's side, the strict demand that it is shameful not to follow the "customs of the land" is assessed as one of the causes of material hardship and the emergence of social issues. The play describes how the wedding ceremonies and their rules, which diverge from Sharia principles, actually arose due to unnecessary expenses serving the false prestige of the wealthier class.

The story centers on Salih, an orphan raised by his uncle Abdurahim after losing his parents at a young age, and his tragic life. The events begin with efforts by his uncle to persuade Salih to marry Faiziboy's daughter. Salih, who earns his living honestly, initially refuses, saying it is too difficult to marry in a time when excessive customs dominate. However, under the pressure of his uncle — who has acted as a father to him — he agrees to the wedding. When they ask at the wedding council to reduce the *olugh-solugh* due to the groom's limited means, Faiziboy refuses, citing local customs, aspirations, and the fear of becoming the subject of public ridicule. As a result, Salih, urged by his uncle, mortgages his house to cover the heavy costs, but when he cannot repay his debt on time, he is consumed by shame and takes his own life.

In the works mentioned above, the invention of various customs by people aiming to profit from traditions like weddings is described as a societal vice. In the play, the elder (*ellikboshi*) introduces different ceremonies classified as "ancient customs," explaining their origins and saying, "I tell the fathers, let them not think that abandoning our ancient customs will make us a laughingstock to the people," sharply criticizing the wasteful traditions associated with wedding ceremonies.

Abdurahim, who has been calculating the wedding expenses, persuades Salih to go through with the wedding by saying, "The debt will be repaid, but the wife will remain by your side." This phrase was likely coined by people struggling with the burdensome customs of weddings, and even today, it is still humorously used among the people.

In *Jadid dramaturgy*, customs and various rituals are portrayed as part of the people's social life, but their significance lies not in elevating the spiritual life of the people; rather, the various traditions arising under the pretext of these customs are evaluated as obstacles to social progress. Drawing on the didactic function of theater, the presentation of social problems on stage

marked a distinct stage in the development of the national professional theater.

In the first quarter of the last century, the Jadids increasingly promoted the idea of “making Turkestan literate, enlightened, prosperous, and, above all, independent” through theatrical art. Fully aware of how difficult it was to instill this idea in people who were unaware of their identity and did not understand their national values, the Jadids paid special attention to interpreting national values on stage by turning to historical themes. A vivid example of this is Abdurauf Fitrat’s play *The Tomb of Timur* (1919).

In the play, the characters appeal to the spirit of Sahibqiron (Timur), asking to restore the pride, honor, and freedom characteristic of Turkic peoples. The appearance of the spirit of Amir Timur — a figure revered among the people alongside Alexander the Great (Iskandar Zulqarnayn) and the Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) — on stage increased the emotional power of the work. In the stage decorations for the play, Amir Timur’s spirit was depicted “appearing in and behind dark clouds, surrounded by light.” Although the performance had some flaws, it was able to deeply move the audience. According to Zaki Validi’s testimony, “When *The Tomb of Timur* was staged, tears flowed like rain from the eyes of the spectators. The play had such a powerful emotional effect that its stage life did not last long.”

Abdurauf Fitrat’s 1924 drama *The Devil’s Rebellion Against God* is based on the well-known religious legend of the devil’s expulsion from paradise. The playwright uses a story familiar and impactful for the people as a foundation to convey his own ideas to the public, drawing on elements of traditional folk theater. “In the play, the ideas of the struggle for truth, freedom, and enlightenment are advanced within the framework of religious concepts and attitudes, using parody and mockery of religious dogma.”

Such propaganda against the system, expressed on stage, led to the harsh repression of works that addressed national traditions and history in dramatic form. As a result, by the 1920s, national traditions began to be interpreted through the genre of contemporary comedy. The closeness of laughter and humor to the people allowed social problems to be reflected even more deeply in stage works. Examples of success in this regard include H.H. Niyoziy’s comedies *The Punishment of the Slanderers* and *The Old Judges*, or *The Case of Maisara*.

In *The Old Judges*, or *The Case of Maisara*, biting satire with roots in folklore is effectively used to expose the moral failings, corruption, and debauchery of officials. The popular humor infused into the characters ensures

the work’s connection to the people. The characters of Maisara and Mulladust closely resemble the folk hero Nasriddin Afandi. We encounter a similar type of character in M. Uyghur’s play *The Doctor of Turkestan* (1920), embodied in the figure of Eshimqul the Trickster. This clever, agile, resourceful hero, who quietly pursues his own plans, is marked by simplicity in speech, playful humor in actions, and the incorporation of folkloric elements into the plot.

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