

The Sufi Interpretation of a Historical Figure in Navoi's Works

Alisher Razzoqov

PhD in Philology, Doctoral Researcher, Tashkent State University of Uzbek Language and Literature, Uzbekistan

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Abstract: In his literary activity, Alisher Navoi portrayed numerous historical figures, including characters from the pre-Islamic era. This article deals with the image of one such figure Nushiravan and examines its sufi interpretation within Navoi's creative framework. The methodological approach is based on auto-interpretation, meaning the poet's own hermeneutic lens. A selected couplet from Navoi's ghazals serves as the basis for analysis, wherein the artistic imagery and symbolic essence are interpreted through a comparative lens alongside a character from the narrative poem "Hayrat ul-abror" (The Wonder of the Righteous). The study concludes that although Navoi's literary tradition is historically situated within the Islamic period and geographical sphere, he often references figures from pre-Islamic history solely for their names or symbolic resonance, without aligning them ideologically with Islamic doctrine. Specifically, in the portrayal of Nushiravan, Navoi employs the figure as a symbolic vessel for conveying Sufi ethical ideals, rather than a historical or religious endorsement.

Keywords: Alisher Navoi, ghazal, auto-interpretation, sufism, futuwwat (a chivalric code of conduct), perfect human.

Introduction: By its very nature, the poetry of Alisher Navoi is didactic; in other words, for the poet, literary creation is not merely a pastime of the heart concerned solely with love and passion. Rather, it is a profound and weighty responsibility to acquaint his reader with knowledge and wisdom, and to guide them toward an understanding of the true meaning of life. It is for this reason that Navoi, in the preface to his first divan *Badoye' ul-bidoya* ("The Beginning of Art"), criticizes poetic collections limited to a single theme. In this respect, Navoi maintained a highly self-critical attitude toward his own creative output.

Consequently, every image and symbol in Navoi's poetry possesses not only its primary, literal meaning, but also layers of secondary, metaphorical significance. On the other hand, when analyzing and interpreting literary works created throughout the history of literature, it is essential to consider the historical period in which a work was written, the prevailing social environment, and the philosophical worldview of its time. As rightly stated, "At the foundation of literary history lies the principle of historicism. This principle demands that the literary process be studied as a

phenomenon intimately connected to specific socio-historical circumstances" [Ulughov, 2018:14].

Literature review

Although Alisher Navoi's *Hayrat ul-abror* has been the subject of extensive scholarly inquiry by numerous Navoi specialists, the story and character of Nushiravan within the poem have yet to be examined in depth from a sufi perspective. In her dedicated study of the poem, N. Sharipova concludes: "In this narrative, the poet acknowledges modesty and a sense of decorum as essential virtues for a human being" [Sharipova, 2018:492]. Meanwhile, I. Pardayeva, who has explored the literary artistry of Navoi's historical works, emphasizes that the poet highlights two particular qualities of the just ruler Anushirvan, his commitment to justice and his sense of shame, not as imaginative exaggerations, but as qualities grounded in historical reality [Pardayeva, 2018:111]. Literary scholar A. Malik, who has written an in-depth commentary on *Hayrat ul-abror*, builds upon these interpretations, asserting that Alisher Navoi presents Nushiravan's purity of intention and modesty as the very qualities that elevate him to kingship and make his justice a source of protection for

all humanity. In doing so, Navoi implicitly calls upon rulers to embody modesty, decorum, and justice [Malik, 2021: 267–268].

METHODOLOGY

One of the most fundamental and enduring principles of Navoi studies is the interpretive approach that seeks to elucidate the poet's works through the lens of his own writings. This principle demands a meticulous and comprehensive reading of each of Navoi's texts. A recurring phenomenon in his oeuvre is that a problem or thematic question raised in one work often finds its resolution, clarification, or commentary in another. In modern literary theory, this phenomenon is referred to as auto-interpretation. According to this concept, "auto-interpretation is defined as a literary work being interpreted by its own author". Such self-commentary may either encompass the work in its entirety or pertain to specific aspects or issues within it [Erkinov, 2018: 293]. At times, auto-interpretation may occur within the confines of a single work; in other cases, the author may address a problem posed in one text by offering its resolution in another. For this reason, in the present article, we have attempted to analyze a couplet by Navoi through the narrative framework of his poem Hayrat ul-abror.

RESULTS

In many cases, Navoi's epic and prose works serve as a broad and nuanced commentary on his lyrical poetry. For this reason, one often encounters artistic interpretations of complex lyrical themes within his "Khamsa" poems or in works such as *Lison ut-tayr* (The Language of the Birds). This principle holds true even in the interpretation of a single couplet from his lyrical corpus. For instance, in the 46th ghazal of the *divan G'aroyib us-sig'ar* (Wonders of youth), we find the following couplet:

Yor chun barcha zamon nozir erur holinga, bo'lg'il

Bori holatda mushohid, bori el birla muaddab [Навоий (a), 2011: 67].

English transcreation:

For each time, the watchful eye beholds its state,

At times, it observes in solitude, at times with the crowd, dignified. [Navoi (a), 2011:67].

Before delving into an analysis of this couplet, it is essential to first consider the meaning of the term "yor" (beloved) as defined in the lexicon of sufi terminology. In Sayyid Ja'far Sajjadi's "Farhangi Istilohot va Tabiroti irfoni" (A dictionary of sufi terms and expressions), the word yor is explained as follows: "Yor refers to the realm of witnessing (shuhud), that is, to the contemplation of the divine essence" [Sajjadi, 1370:803]. In other words, yor signifies the spiritual act

of contemplating Allah recognizing him as the one who sees, hears, and is fully aware of every state of being. Notably, the word "mushohid" (witness/observer), derived from the same root as mushohada (contemplation), appears in the couplet under discussion. This linguistic parallel highlights a thematic and conceptual link between the mystical definition of yor and the deeper meaning embedded in the verse. In sufi terminology, mushohada carries meanings such as "vision", "unveiling", "spiritual beholding" or "mystical journey". More specifically, it can denote: a) the presence of the divine within the heart, b) essential self-disclosure (zotiy tajalli),

c) perceiving material reality through the lens of divine unity (tawhid),

d) the spiritual station of "absolute union" (ayn al-jam),

e) the state of absolute certainty of truth (haqq al-yaqin),

f) the inward spiritual states experienced by Naqshbandi Sufi masters and Gnostics, as they perceive the realm of meaning in connection with the visible world.

[Uludagh, 1995:391]

In the couplet above, Navoi is essentially stating: "The beloved is ever watchful of your condition in every moment; therefore, in every state, be contemplative, and in the company of others, remain within the bounds of decorum". According to the logic of the verse, the word "yor" cannot be understood in its conventional, worldly sense, since no earthly beloved could possibly be "vigilant at all times". This aligns with the Sufi understanding, where it is frequently emphasized that noble conduct manifests in two distinct modes: one in relation to the Divine (Haq), and the other in relation to creation (khalq) [Hujviri, 1435:39].

A deeper interpretation of this couplet can be found in Navoi's own writings specifically, in his Hayrat ul-abror. In the sixth discourse of the poem, which is devoted to the theme of adab (etiquette), Navoi presents the story of Prince Nushiravan. While on the surface this tale appears to promote ethical conduct, on a deeper level it constructs the figure of a gnostic (arif) a spiritual seeker who perceives divine knowledge (ma'rifa) and is acutely aware of being under the constant gaze of the Divine. What is most significant here is that adab, the central theme of the story, is also one of the ultimate aims of Sufism. Navoi explicitly underscores this point in the 306th ghazal of his Favoyid ul-kibar (Teachings of the great) *divan*, which is dedicated to the definitions and descriptions of sufism.

Tasavvuf rizo ahlidin yaxshi axloq,

Erur istilohoti zebu takalluf [Навоий (b), 2011: 311].

English transcreation:

Sufism is but the noble conduct of those content with the Divine,

Its terms are but adornments, its speech mere ornament [Navoi (b), 2011:311].

Spiritual guides (murshids) who undertook the training of saliks those walking the sufi path fought vigorously against negative traits such as pride and arrogance. They devoted their utmost effort to cultivating in their disciples' noble manners, gentleness, and humility. Depending on the temperament, character, and even the social background of each disciple, they prescribed different forms of riyazat (spiritual discipline). In the corresponding discourse of "Hayrat ul-abror", Navoi addresses the concept of adab (etiquette and ethical conduct) from the perspective of the sufi path (ṭariqa). While the chapter does acknowledge the social significance of adab, its primary focus is spiritual. The Naqshbandi order, to which Navoi belonged, encompassed all layers of social life, reflecting the Islamic legal tradition, wherein every aspect of worldly conduct is regulated by a specific form of adab grounded in the Sunnah. Sufism, as the spiritual dimension of Islam, draws each of its core ideas and principles from Islamic sources. The Sufi master Abu Hafs Haddod famously stated that "all of sufism is comprised of adab" Abul Ḥasan Nuri further refined this view, asserting that sufism is neither a system of customs nor a body of knowledge, but rather the embodiment of virtuous character. Had it been a set of rituals, it would be acquired through effort (mujahada); had it been a collection of sciences, it could be attained through instruction [Hujviri, 1435:41].

The Naqshbandi sufi order likewise established its principles on the foundation of strict adherence to the Prophetic Sunnah. Bahauddin Naqshband himself is quoted as saying: "Our path is among the rare forms of the firmest handhold (urwat al-wuthqa); that is, it is to grasp the hem of obedience to the Sunnah of the noble Muhammad Mustafa (peace and blessings be upon him) and his followers, and to walk in the footsteps of the great Companions may God be pleased with them all". [Abul Muḥsin Muḥammad Baqir ibn Muḥammad Ali, 1993:78]. Given this foundation, every effort and aim of the Naqshbandi path, like those of Islam more broadly, is directed toward the cultivation of noble character and the moral and spiritual formation of the perfect human being.

In the narrative structure of "Hayrat ul-abror", one finds a telling episode from the life of Nushiravan. While still a prince, he becomes captivated by love. Eventually, he encounters his beloved in a secluded

garden. Just as he reaches out his hand to her, he suddenly restrains himself and withdraws. He then offers the following explanation for his change of heart:

Kim bu visol ichraki voqe' durur –

Nargisi shahlo ko'zi mone' durur [Навоий (c), 2011:143].

English transcreation:

Just as I stood at the threshold of union's delight,

Her violet narcissus-eyes forbade the rite [Navoi (c), 2011:143].

It becomes clear that at the very moment Nushiravan reaches out to his beloved, his gaze falls upon a narcissus flower blooming in the garden. The flower commonly likened to the human eye in classical poetry appears to him as if someone is watching. Struck by this sense of being observed, Nushiravan is overtaken by modesty and moral restraint, and he recoils from the act he was about to commit.

Ayni hayo birla futuwwat anga,

Bermadi ul amrda quvvat anga [Навоий (c), 2011: 143].

English transcreation:

With modesty came chivalry to his aid,

And in that moment, strength to act was stayed [Navoi (c), 2011:143].

Thus, what prevented the prince from committing the wrongful act was his modesty and chivalry. In his "Tarih-i muluki ajam (History of the Kings of Persia), Navoi quotes a wise saying of Nushiravan that resonates with the prince's situation in "Hayrat ul-abror": "The wise man is he who, having secretly conceived a certain deed, does not carry it out openly when it becomes known" [Navoi (d), 2011:639]. The sufi mystic Husain Mansur Halloj describes futuwwat in the following way: "Futuwwat is the quality possessed by a person who ties all their desires to God, seeking God's direction for the sake of God alone" [Gulpinarli, 2011:19]. In general, many definitions of futuwwat are found in sufi sources, and one such definition aligns precisely with the character portrayed by Navoi: "Futuwwat is the final stage in the journey towards God. It is the name of the station attained by those who have purified themselves from carnal qualities. This purity is the increase in guidance that follows faith" [Porso, 1913:63]. Although the central concept of futuwwat revolves around selfless and sincere good deeds done for the sake of God, in the story, Navoi also emphasizes its literal meaning (in Arabic, "fatiy" means youthfulness or bravery). In this context, Nushiravan demonstrates bravery in his fear of Allah and his piety. He refrains from wrongdoing solely for the sake of Allah, thus exhibiting the courage to maintain virtue

despite temptations. This quality in a person arises from recognizing Allah's attributes, such as His all-seeing (Al-Basir) and all-hearing (As-Sami) nature. Naturally, a person possessing such qualities will conduct their actions within the framework of adab and hold a noble position in society. The emphasis on adab in the previously cited couplet from "G'aroyib us-sig'ar" is not without reason.

CONCLUSION

From this brief analysis, it can be concluded that, although the works of Alisher Navoi are historically and essentially considered a part of Islamic literature (within the context of the region), he nevertheless frequently chose historical figures, even those unrelated to Islam, as his protagonists. Nushiravan is one such figure. Navoi "revitalizes" him as a sufi disciple based on his own Islamic and mystical worldview.

The literary output of Alisher Navoi is a cohesive and harmonious phenomenon. In it, no contradictory or opposing views can be found. Navoi's Sufi beliefs are unified in a single image. Each character created by Navoi embodies his aesthetic ideals the qualities of the perfect person he envisioned. The essence of an image or symbol in one of his ghazals can be interpreted through the narrative and characters in another of his works. In other words, Navoi provides the "key" to unlocking the mystique of his works to his readers. The first and most important way to correctly understand and interpret his works is, above all, to study Navoi through his own lens. Additionally, it is crucial to become familiar with the Islamic and Sufi sources that inspired Alisher Navoi, the classical literature that developed within this region, and the major literary traditions, perspectives, and systems of imagery in poetry.

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