

The Dissemination Of Alisher Navoi's Literary Legacy During The Ottoman Period

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Abstract: This article examines the influence of the creative legacy of the great poet and thinker Alisher Navoi on the literary milieu of the Turkic peoples, with particular attention to the attitudes of representatives of Ottoman Turkish literature toward Navoi's heritage. It also discusses the copying of Navoi's works during the Ottoman period, poets who composed nazira (poetic responses) to his writings, and the scholarly activities of researchers who studied Navoi's oeuvre.

Keywords: Navoi, Turkic, Ottoman, divan, literary milieu, nazira, tazkira, literary influence, poet, work.

Introduction: The emergence of a major poet such as Alisher Navoi onto the literary stage, his creation of unique works, and his bequeathing of a rich and invaluable legacy were grounded in the language and literary traditions that formed the foundation of his творчество. Before addressing Navoi's influence on the Turkic world—particularly during the era of Turkic dynasties—it is methodologically appropriate to consider the firm foundations of his творчество: the Turkic language and literary models that predated him and served as its cornerstone. Such a retrospective view is essential for the present study.

Today, more than 250 million Turkic peoples live across the globe, speaking over thirty languages belonging to the Turkic language family. Naturally, during Navoi's lifetime and earlier, numerous Turkic languages and dialects existed, differing from one another to varying degrees. However, not all of them conformed to the norms of written expression; as Babur aptly remarked, they did not always "correspond correctly to the pen" [Babur, 1989: 13].

For this reason, Turkic dynasties that ruled from Navoi's time to the present generally displayed a particular reverence for his creative legacy. Among them, the Ottoman dynasty—whose rule extended for more than

six centuries—occupies a prominent place, as Navoi's influence was especially significant within its literary milieu.

METHOD

The relationship between Ottoman rulers and Alisher Navoi began during the poet's own lifetime. According to some sources, Navoi received gifts from Ottoman sultans [Tietze, 1986: 273–292]. A. Erkinov enumerates eight manuscripts of Navoi's works copied between 1489 and 1501 and currently preserved in Istanbul libraries [Erkinov, 2021: 256]. Sources also indicate that Navoi sent thirty-three of his ghazals to Sultan Bayezid II. The sultan reportedly admired these poems and summoned the poet Ahmad Pasha, instructing him to compose ghazals in Ottoman Turkish in a similar style [Gelibolulu, 2000: 132].

According to Ottoman tazkira writers, Ahmad Pasha studied Navoi's ghazals and composed poems in imitation of them. As a result, his poetic mastery increased, and his poetry became a model for later generations of Turkish poets.

Among the poets who composed nazira to Navoi's poems during this period were Nadim and Shaykh Ghalib (1757–1799) [Köprülü, 1945: 305]. Shaykh Ghalib, the court poet of Sultan Selim III (1761–1808),

reportedly learned Old Uzbek specifically in order to read Navoi's works [Okcu, 1993: 55].

Sultan Suleiman the Magnificent (r. 1520–1566) was also deeply influenced by Alisher Navoi and kept three manuscripts of Navoi's works in the palace library. One of these—a copy of Navoi's *Khamsa*—was transcribed in Istanbul at the Sultan's court in 1531 [Karatay, 1961: 57].

Jami and Navoi also acted as patrons of Ottoman poets. During the reign of Bayezid II, a poet using the pen name Behishti committed an error and was forced to flee Istanbul. He sought refuge with Jami and Navoi and entered their service. Through Behishti, they sent a letter to the Ottomans requesting his pardon. As a result, Behishti was forgiven and reinstated in court service.

The *tazkira* writer Latifi (1491–1582), in his biographical anthology dedicated to Ottoman poets and presented to Sultan Suleiman the Magnificent, provides information about a poet known by the pen name Basiri. According to Latifi, Basiri originated from a region close to Iran and, during the reign of Bayezid II, arrived in Ottoman lands on the recommendation of Jami and Navoi, bringing with him a *divan* of Navoi. The same *tazkira* also notes that a poet from Turkestan using the pen name Jamili composed poetry in Navoi's style. Jamili is said to have written poetic responses to every poem in Navoi's three *divans*, matching each poem precisely in rhyme.

A number of Ottoman authors explicitly acknowledged their inspiration from Navoi's works. For example, Lorandali Hamdi (16th century) composed his *Layli and Majnun* in 1542 and, when discussing his reasons for writing the work, referred to both Jami and Navoi. The earliest *tazkira* produced in the Ottoman milieu—*Hasht Bihisht* (completed in 1538)—likewise emphasizes that it was inspired by Navoi's *Majalis un-nafa'is*.

Navoi's poetic language so appealed to Ottoman poets that several of them composed works directly in Navoi's language—Old Uzbek. In the centuries following Navoi, Old Uzbek came to occupy a prominent position among Turkic peoples not only as a poetic medium but also as a language of culture. Notably, Sultan Ahmad III (r. 1703–1730) wrote a letter to Subhanqulikhan (r. 1680–1702) in Old Uzbek, demonstrating the use of this language in diplomatic

correspondence. This phenomenon reflects Navoi's efforts to elevate Old Uzbek and the impact of his literary language within the Ottoman milieu.

Lexicographical works dedicated to Navoi's writings were compiled under various dynasties, including the Safavids, Ottomans, and Mughals. Numerous dictionaries were produced to facilitate the understanding of Navoi's works. One such dictionary, compiled in Istanbul in 1560 during the Ottoman period, is conventionally known as *Abushqa*, as it begins with an explanation of the Chagatai word *abushqa*. The preface is written in Old Uzbek and provides Ottoman Turkish equivalents for thousands of Old Uzbek words.

This manuscript is currently preserved in the Russian National Library in St. Petersburg, within the Dorn Collection, under catalogue number 594. Notably, the preface is composed in Old Uzbek in a style closely resembling that of Navoi himself. The work opens in a traditional manner with a quatrain of praise (*hamd*).

It is likely that this dictionary was compiled at the Ottoman court during the reign of Sultan Selim I for users of Navoi's works. The author's name is not mentioned in the introduction. The dictionary became widely known as *Abushqa* because it begins with an explanation of that word, which in Old Uzbek denotes "elderly," "aged," or "venerable" [Abushqa, 1a].

In compiling *Abushqa*, extensive use was made of *Badoe' ul-lug'at*, an Uzbek–Persian dictionary of Navoi's works compiled in the fifteenth century by the Herati scholar *Tole' Imaniy*. *Abushqa* was first published in Hungarian in Budapest in 1862 by the orientalist A. Vámbéry, and later, in 1868, by the Russian orientalist V. Velyaminov-Zernov under the title *Al-lug'at un-Navoiya wa al-istishhadat al-jaghata'iya* ("A Navoi Dictionary with Evidence from the Chagatai Language").

The success of Navoi's efforts to elevate the Turkic language as a medium of artistic expression is evident in his own oeuvre and in subsequent Uzbek poetry. His treatise *Muhokamat al-lug'atayn* represents a culmination of these efforts, a fact well recognized in scholarship. This work also received attention in the Ottoman milieu, where it was regarded as an important source for safeguarding the Turkic language from excessive Arabic and Persian influence and for fully

realizing its expressive potential [Baslik, 2004: 211–222].

In 1889, *Muhokamat al-lugʻatayn* was translated into Ottoman Turkish and published in issues 37–40 of the journal *Nilüfer* in the city of Bursa, Turkey. The work was republished in Istanbul in 1897 in a collection entitled *İkdam*, where it appeared together with its original Old Uzbek text and the Ottoman Turkish translation prepared by Valadi Çelebi. In addition, Rifat İştimon adapted *Muhokamat al-lugʻatayn* into Ottoman Turkish [Küt, 1989: 453].

During the Tanzimat period (1839–1876), a new approach to Navoi’s literary legacy began to emerge. According to the prominent Turkish scholar Mesut Şen, Old Uzbek literature of the fifteenth to eighteenth centuries—particularly the works of Alisher Navoi—had long been followed by Ottoman poets. However, in earlier periods, the term “Turks” was understood to refer exclusively to Turkic peoples living within the territory of the Ottoman Empire. By contrast, Tanzimat-era intellectuals began to study in greater depth the cultures of Turkic peoples in the Caucasus, the Volga region, and Turkestan, and called for their unification under the common name “Turk” [Şen, 2014: 82].

At the same time, Turkology began to develop rapidly in Russia and the West. European scholars started to differentiate Turkic languages and referred to the language used in Central Asia as Eastern Turkic or Chagatai Turkish, publishing works written in this language. In 1872, Ahmet Vefik Pasha adapted and published Alisher Navoi’s *Mahbub al-qulub* in Western Turkic.

In his article “The Reform of the Ottoman Language,” published in 1872 in the newspaper *Dağarcık*, Ahmet Midhat Efendi wrote:

“Because we have lost our original mother tongue that we brought with us from Turkestan, if we were now to remove Arabic and Persian words from our vocabulary, we would see how impoverished our language has become” [Efendi, 1807: 20–25].

In the preface to his work *Usul-i Lisan-i Türki*, published in 1807, Ahmet Midhat Efendi expressed the following views:

“From the time of Ali Shir Navoi to our own day, numerous works have been written in the Chagatai language. Moreover, across Central Asia, Tatarstan,

Siberia, and Chinese Turkestan—regions that have since ancient times been the homelands of Turkic peoples—there exist many ancient written monuments engraved on trees, stones, and cultural artifacts. By reading and studying them, it becomes possible to uncover many truths about not only our language but also the very foundations of our Turkic identity, which have remained obscured in the darkness of ignorance” [Efendi, 1313: 3–9].

This passage alone demonstrates that Alisher Navoi served, to a certain extent, as a benchmark in the study and preservation of Ottoman Turkish history and language.

It is well known that in the anthology *Harabat*, published in Istanbul between 1874 and 1875 by the prominent literary scholar and statesman Ziya Pasha, numerous poems in Arabic, Persian, and Turkic were included, among them several ghazals, quatrains, fragments, and a *saqinama* by Alisher Navoi.

In the preface to the first volume of *Harabat*, the author mentions Navoi first among the poets who composed poetry in Turkic using the prosodic system (‘aruz) by following Persian models. Ziya Pasha emphasizes that although ‘aruz was initially foreign to Turkic literature, poets gradually adapted Turkic poetry to this meter, and that Ottoman poets followed Navoi’s example in this process.

In the second volume of the anthology, Navoi’s *tarjiʻband* beginning with the verses:

Bring, O cupbearer, that wine of the dawn of pre-eternity,

From whose intoxication the heart was once enraptured...

is included [Navoi, 1987: 426]. The refrain repeated in each stanza—

I entered the tavern in a state of bewilderment,

With a broken bowl in my hand seeking wine—

is considered one of Navoi’s most famous couplets. It is likely that the compiler of the anthology derived its very title, *Harabat*, from this verse. Although the word *harabat* literally denotes ruins or a dilapidated dwelling, in Sufi terminology it signifies a gathering place for mystics intoxicated with divine love, as well as the renunciation of base instincts and immoral habits upon entering the path of spiritual poverty (*faqr*)

[Usmonov, 2012: 65].

The final stage of the Ottoman Empire, known as the Constitutional (Mashrutiyat) period (1876–1923), provided an even stronger impetus for the awakening of the Turkic world and for the study of the literary heritage of Turkic poets. In the Turkish press, writings related to national revival and Turkism became more widespread. Interest in Old Uzbek and the works composed in this language increased further, and dictionaries of Chagatai and Ottoman Turkish began to be compiled.

In the preface to the dictionary *Lughat-i Chaghatayi wa Turki-yi 'Osmani*, published in 1882, Shaykh Suleyman Efendi notes that Chagatai Turkish was the language of Alisher Navoi and a number of other poets and writers, that many masterpieces of Turkic literature were created in this language, and that it functioned as a common literary language for the Uzbeks, Turkmens, Kazakhs, Mongols, Kipchaks, Kyrgyz, and Kalmyks living in Turkestan [Efendi, 1298: 1–2].

Another prominent intellectual of the Constitutional period, Shamseddin Sami, once again emphasized Alisher Navoi's unforgettable contribution to the development of Turkic languages in his article "Our Language and Literature," published in 1897 in a joint issue of the newspapers *Tarjuman-i Haqiqat* and *Servet-i Fünun*. He wrote:

"In Transoxiana, Ali Shir Navoi emerged and elevated Chagatai literature to the highest level of perfection. Even today, there is no path for the development of Chagatai other than adherence to the style and method of Ali Shir Navoi. Unfortunately, among us no such great writer or poet emerged to serve as a universal model. The poetry and especially the prose written during the early formation of the Ottoman state were quite simple, yet exceedingly coarse. In none of them does one encounter refined expression or lofty thought."

As one of the most devoted advocates of the mother tongue, Shamseddin Sami argued passionately for purifying Ottoman Turkish from foreign influences. He considered it necessary to teach works written in Chagatai Turkish as textbooks in schools for two main reasons:

1. to enhance the expressive power of Ottoman Turkish as a literary language by reintroducing archaic

Turkic words and expressions from Chagatai;

2. to promote political unity among the Turkic peoples.

CONCLUSION

Unfortunately, neither of the aspirations advanced so fervently by Shamseddin Sami was realized during that period. The Ottoman state was gradually weakening and becoming increasingly entangled in political conflicts, wars, and crises in Europe, while rulers and officials were preoccupied with issues they deemed more urgent than language policy. Political unity among the Turkic peoples was likewise unattainable, as at that time Central Asia was divided among several states—the Emirate of Bukhara, the Khanates of Khiva and Kokand—while Turkic peoples in the Caucasus and the Volga region had fallen under the domination of Tsarist Russia.

Following the proclamation of the Republic of Turkey on 29 October 1923 under the leadership of Mustafa Kemal Atatürk, the aspirations of Turkish intellectuals regarding linguistic purity and unity were partially realized. As a result of Atatürk's language reforms, the Latin alphabet was officially adopted, and the literary Turkish language was largely cleansed of Arabic and Persian elements. The idea of political unity among Turkic peoples, however, was realized nearly a century later, on 12 November 2021, with the establishment of the Organization of Turkic States.

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