

INSPIRATION FROM THE ARAB HERITAGE IN THE LITERATURE OF ALISHER NAVOI

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Abstract

There is no doubt that the literary and creative imagination of Alisher Navoi stemmed from his Uzbek identity, with its customs, traditions, values, and other components of Uzbek culture that give his works their distinctive character. However, it is equally undeniable that the Arab heritage – with its values, stories, heroism, and spirituality – enriched Uzbek culture and became an integral part of its fabric and identity. Therefore, Alisher Navoi's interaction with the Arab legacy cannot be ignored or overlooked. Yet, this aspect remains underrepresented in studies and research concerning Alisher Navoi in particular, and Uzbek literature in general.

Hence, the idea for this study, *"Inspiration from the Arab Heritage in the Literature of Alisher Navoi,"* emerged to draw the attention of scholars of Navoi's and Uzbek literature to the need for further academic effort to produce serious research revealing the influence of Arab heritage on the works of Alisher Navoi.

Keywords

Alisher Navoi – Layla and Majnun – Farhad and Shirin – Seven Seas – Uzbek Literature

Introduction

Alisher Navoi is regarded as the father of Uzbek literature and holds an esteemed position in the history and culture of the Uzbek people. This makes him a

figure worthy of study from every possible angle, and it would be improper to neglect or overlook any aspect of his multifaceted personality. This is precisely the issue I noticed while surveying what has been written about Alisher Navoi: there is a clear lack of research examining his relationship with the Arabic language and culture. Therefore, through this study, I seek to draw attention to this neglected dimension of Navoi's legacy.

Alisher Navoi: Between Pride in Turkish and Appreciation for Arabic

Alisher Navoi became famous for his pride in the Turkish language, his deep affection for it, and his vigorous defense of it. This is evident in his celebrated work *Muhokamat al-Lughatayn* (*The Judgment between the Two Languages*), in which he championed Turkish over Persian—the dominant literary language of his time. It can thus be said that Navoi profoundly valued his native tongue, establishing for it solid foundations and deep roots as a language of literary creativity capable of expressing the thoughts, emotions, and feelings of writers and poets.

Navoi's passion for his language set an example for later generations of poets and writers who followed in his footsteps, devoting themselves to their mother tongue. His privileged social standing—being of noble lineage, wealth, and influence—enabled him to support and patronize numerous scholars, writers, and artists who contributed significantly to the cultural flourishing of his era. Sultan Babur later wrote:

"How many people received literary and artistic education thanks to Alisher Navoi! How many talents flourished with his support! No one after Navoi matched his dedication to nurturing scholars and men of letters." (Viktor Zhirmunsky, 2000, p. 206)

For this reason, Alisher Navoi deserves to be described as the greatest servant of the old Turkic language after Mahmud al-Kashgari, the true founder of classical Uzbek literature, and the cornerstone upon which the Uzbek language established itself as a medium of art and literature.

However, alongside his devotion to Turkish, Navoi was also known for his profound admiration and deep respect for the Arabic language. He viewed it as the language of divine revelation, surpassing all others in richness and beauty, and possessing a spiritual sanctity that gives it a unique, transcendent power. This appreciation is evident even at first glance at the titles of his works. As the Arabic proverb says, "*The letter shows from its title*"—and indeed, Navoi's reverence for Arabic can be seen from his frequent use of Arabic words in the titles of his books, such as *Mahbub al-Qulub* (Beloved of Hearts), *Khamisa* (The Quintet), *Hayrat al-Abrar* (The Wonder of the Righteous), *Tarikh-i Muluk-i Ajam* (History of the Kings of

Persia), *Khazayin al-Ma'ani* (Treasures of Meanings), *Lisan al-Tayr* (Language of the Birds), and *Muhokamat al-Lughatayn* (The Judgment between the Two Languages).

These Arabic titles clearly testify to Navoi's love for the Arabic language and his admiration for the expressive power, precision, and spiritual resonance of its words—qualities he did not find in other languages. Our conviction of this deep respect grows stronger when we consider that every writer carefully selects the title of his book as the most meaningful and cherished expression of his intent.

Another important example of Navoi's engagement with Arabic is his book *Sab'at Abhur* (*Seven Seas*), which serves as a kind of linguistic lexicon containing a vast collection of Arabic vocabulary drawn from seven encyclopedic Arabic sources—each representing a “sea” of knowledge, hence the title.

Yet this very work stands as evidence of the neglect that scholars have shown toward Navoi's connection with Arabic, for *Sab'at Abhur* still remains confined to manuscript collections and has not yet been published. The need to edit and publish it is urgent—not only to make it accessible to researchers but also to correct the widespread misconception that Navoi wrote only in Turkish and Persian.

The Arab Heritage in the Works of Alisher Navoi

The Arab heritage, with its depth and richness, has the power to add new dimensions to the imagination of any poet who engages with it, igniting and illuminating his creative vision. It opens before him vast horizons leading to new and fertile worlds, guiding him toward greater artistic creativity and brilliance in the realms of art and literature. This is clearly reflected in the manifestations of Arab heritage in the works of Alisher Navoi and other poets from the lands opened by the Arabs, where they spread their culture and sciences. Among the peoples of these regions—despite their linguistic diversity—a shared cultural foundation emerged, drawing from a single source. Consequently, strong bonds and clear, reciprocal relationships of influence and inspiration developed among the literatures of these nations (Muhammad Abd al-Latif Haridi, 1987, p. 3).

The story of *Layla and Majnun* stands as one of the finest examples of this influence. It is one of the most famous love stories in Arabic literature—so much so that it has been said its fame in the East surpasses that of *Romeo and Juliet* in the West. For this reason, *Layla and Majnun* has become one of the timeless stories that has inspired, and continues to inspire, countless poets, writers, playwrights, and musicians across the East (Dalal Abbas, p. 1). It has provided fertile material for creative minds to weave into their artistic works (Muhammad Bekadi, 2019, p. 22).

This story has, therefore, enjoyed a prominent presence in various world literatures, particularly in Persian and Turkish literature, where the figure of

Majnun was interpreted as a symbol of mystical and philosophical love. From his experiences, writers derived numerous philosophical and spiritual themes (Abdullah Abd al-Rahman al-Ghuwail, 2016, p. 34).

Based on this, it can be said that the character of Majnun Layla represents one of the historical human archetypes of Arab origin that has been employed in many other literary traditions. It has played an important role in the mutual influence and interconnection between Arabic literature and Eastern literatures such as Persian and Turkish. This confirms that literature is a universal human phenomenon that transcends the narrow limits of nationality and extends toward universality. At the same time, it highlights the unique and vital role played by such human archetypes in fostering dialogue between Arabic and other literatures to address shared human concerns. Furthermore, the use of these archetypes in Arabic literary works opens channels for cross-cultural exchange and the fertilization of ideas among creators, offering an opportunity to know and accept “the other” not as a stranger but as a partner in the shared cultural and literary enterprise (Muhammad Bekadi, 2019, pp. 16, 21, 22).

Alisher Navoi narrated this story (*Layla and Majnun*) in poetic form, using a refined and powerful language in a poem that portrayed the pure, chaste love between Layla and Majnun in his own distinctive style. Through this work, Navoi sought to depict the human emotions akin to those expressed in the mystical love of the Sufis. This becomes evident, for example, in that magnificent poetic scene where Navoi presents a moment of passionate union between Majnun and Layla, surrounded by the elements of nature that share in their happiness and celebrate their love. He writes:

Two suns rise upon one land, / Two roses bloom upon one branch, / Two souls unite within one body, / Two pupils merge within one eye. / The soul became the body, and the body became the soul; / God made the two into one. / They have two names – but what does that mean? / We see only one being. / Every creature on this earth, / Every creation, no matter how small, / Tries to help the lovers on this night. / The spider lets down its long threads / To cover the lovers. / The bat spreads its gray wings over the world / To conceal the lovers. / The insects of the wilderness sleep; / The creatures of the steppes rest in peace; / All flying beings have fallen asleep; / All biting creatures have gone still; / The beasts have ceased to care for their prey; / The small animals have stopped their howling and wailing. / The four forces of nature relaxed, / And suddenly, all became calm. (Alisher Navoi, 1943, pp. 188–190; Viktor Zhirmunsky, 2000, p. 215)

In these verses, Navoi fuses the spiritual and the natural, the human and the divine, creating a vivid tableau of harmony between love and creation. His poetic vision transforms the scene into a universal symbol of unity, where the love of Layla and Majnun transcends individuality and merges into oneness—a theme deeply rooted in both Sufi thought and the universal human experience of love.

“There is no doubt that the figure of *Majnun* directly inspired Alisher Navoi in his portrayal of the character *Farhad* as an ideal lover. It is no coincidence that the name *Majnun* is repeatedly mentioned in the epic *Farhad and Shirin*, nor is it accidental that this work contains many ideas and motifs associated with the Majnun archetype.

For example, we find in *Farhad* the same unquenchable longing that persists even in the presence of the beloved, the loss of consciousness upon seeing her, the madness of love, the union with the desert, and the friendship between *Farhad* and the wild animals that share in his sorrow and surround him as if he were an ascetic hermit. When death approaches, nature itself joins in his farewell: *Farhad* bids goodbye to the companions of his suffering—the sky, the mountains, the steppes, the birds of prey, and the wild beasts. He addresses the flying birds and passing creatures with the following words:

My companions... my friends, / I am parting from you forever. / I have loved you as my brothers and people of my faith; / I loved you with all my heart. / You accompanied me in my wanderings, / And shared my sufferings. / You took the place of my kin and friends, / And became my faithful companions. / I am grateful to you all, / And I ask your forgiveness and pardon. (*Viktor Zhirmunsky, pp. 212, 214*)

It is beyond the scope of this paper to discuss in full the diverse manifestations of Arab heritage in the works of Alisher Navoi. Therefore, I will confine myself to brief references to some of these aspects, in the hope that they may open the door to further, more detailed studies on the subject. Among them are the following:

- The echoes of Arab proverbs and wisdom can be discerned in Navoi's own moral and philosophical sayings.
- His poetic collection *Khazayin al-Ma'ani* (*Treasures of Meanings*) is rich with inspiration drawn from the verses of the Holy Qur'an and includes numerous references to figures from Qur'anic stories.
- The book *Nathr al-La'ali* (*Scattered Pearls*), attributed to Imam 'Ali ibn Abi Talib, served as a foundation for Navoi's quatrains in his work *Nazm al-Jawahir* (*The Arrangement of Jewels*) (Shah Musarov, pp. 227, 233).

• Navoi's works *Arba'in (The Forty Hadiths)*, *Nazm al-Jawahir*, and *Mahbub al-Qulub (Beloved of Hearts)* were all inspired by the noble Prophetic Hadiths. As Dr. Shah Musarov notes:

"The influence of the noble Hadiths on Alisher Navoi was truly profound, and this subject, in our opinion, deserves numerous dedicated studies." (Shah Musarov, p. 239)

Conclusion

I conclude this brief research by highlighting the main findings as follows:

1. The titles of Alisher Navoi's works and books stand as clear evidence of his love for and admiration of the Arabic language.
2. *Sab'at Abhur* ("The Seven Seas") is a hidden gem that confirms Alisher Navoi's knowledge of and appreciation for Arabic. It also corrects the common misconception that Navoi wrote exclusively in Turkish and Persian. Hence, the book holds great documentary, linguistic, and scholarly value, deserving careful study, critical editing, and publication.
3. The story of *Layla and Majnun* serves as the best example of Alisher Navoi's inspiration from the Arabic literary heritage. The direct influence of this story is evident in his work *Layla and Majnun*, while its indirect influence appears in his *Farhad and Shirin*.
4. Alisher Navoi drew inspiration from the verses of the Holy Qur'an and the noble Hadith in many of his writings.

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