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The Levels Of The Nafs In Sufi Doctrine And Their Artistic Interpretation In Classical Uzbek Poetry: A Comparative Study Of Alisher Navoi And Muhyiddin Khoqandi

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Abstract: This article analyzes in detail the artistic expression of the soul, one of the main concepts of the doctrine of Sufism, and its levels (nafs-ul ammorah, nafs-ul lavvoma, nafs-ul mutmainna) in the works of Alisher Navoi and his spiritual successor Muhyiddin Khoqandi. The study highlights the role of the soul in spiritual perfection, the process of moving from sinfulness to perfection through examples taken from the poets' ghazals, epics, and prayers.

Keywords: Sufism, levels of the soul, nafs-ul ammorah, nafs-ul lavvoma, nafs-ul mutmainna, Alisher Navoi, Muhyiddin Khoqandi.

1. Introduction

Sufism (taṣawwuf) represents one of the most influential intellectual, philosophical, and spiritual traditions within Islamic civilization. Throughout history, it has significantly contributed to the formation of moral values, religious consciousness, and literary creativity across the Muslim world.[1] Beyond its theological foundations, Sufism has functioned as a comprehensive ethical and educational system that seeks to cultivate spiritual perfection through self-discipline, purification of the heart, and devotion to God.[2] Consequently, classical Eastern literature, particularly the literary heritage of Central Asia, cannot be fully understood without considering the profound impact of Sufi philosophy on its themes, imagery, symbolism, and aesthetic principles.[3]

Among the central concepts of Sufi doctrine, the notion of the nafs occupies a particularly significant position. In Islamic thought, the nafs generally refers to the human self, ego, or lower soul, which constantly struggles between worldly desires and spiritual aspirations. According to Sufi teachings, human perfection is impossible without overcoming the domination of the nafs.[4] Therefore, the purification of the self (tazkiyat al-nafs) has been regarded as one of the primary objectives of spiritual education. The Qur'an and the traditions of the Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) repeatedly emphasize self-purification as an essential prerequisite for attaining closeness to Allah and achieving eternal salvation.[5]

2. Methodology

Classical Sufi scholars developed a comprehensive theory describing the gradual transformation of the “nafs”. Although different Sufi schools classify the stages of the “nafs” in slightly different ways, the most widely accepted classification includes “nafs al-ammārah” (the commanding self), “nafs al-lawwāmah” (the self-reproaching self), “nafs al-mulhimah” (the inspired self), [6] “nafs al-muṭma’innah” (the tranquil self), “nafs al-rāḍiyah” (the contented self), “nafs al-marḍiyyah” (the self pleasing to God), and “nafs al-kāmilah” (the perfected self). Each stage represents a higher degree of spiritual maturity and moral refinement. The struggle against the lower self (“mujaḥadat al-nafs”) is therefore regarded as the greatest form of inner jihad, requiring continuous repentance, self-reflection, and ethical discipline.[7]

Result and discussion.

These philosophical concepts profoundly influenced the literary traditions of the Islamic East. Rather than merely discussing theological doctrines, classical poets transformed abstract mystical ideas into sophisticated artistic images, metaphors, and symbolic narratives. Love, wine, the beloved, the journey, the mirror, the desert, and light became powerful literary symbols expressing the soul's struggle against the “nafs” and its aspiration toward Divine Truth. Consequently, classical poetry should be interpreted not only as an aesthetic phenomenon but also as a reflection of complex spiritual and philosophical experiences.[8]

Within the history of Turkic literature, Alisher Navoi (1441–1501) occupies an unparalleled position as both a literary genius and an outstanding representative of Sufi intellectual tradition. His poetry reflects a harmonious synthesis of Islamic theology, Persian literary aesthetics, and Naqshbandi Sufi philosophy. Navoi regarded literature as a means of moral education, emphasizing that the ultimate purpose of human existence lies in spiritual perfection rather than material achievement. Throughout his ghazals, narrative poems, and didactic works, the struggle against the “nafs” emerges as one of the central themes. His poetic language consistently presents the ego as the greatest obstacle separating human beings from Divine love and eternal truth.[9]

The influence of Navoi's philosophical worldview extended well beyond the Timurid period. Among the later representatives of classical Uzbek literature, Muhyiddin Khoqandi occupies a distinguished place as one of Navoi's spiritual successors. Living during the nineteenth century, Muhyi continued the literary traditions established by earlier Sufi poets while adapting them to the intellectual and social realities of his own era.[10] His lyrical poetry, particularly his “munājāts” (supplicatory poems), reflects profound spiritual anxiety, sincere repentance, and continuous self-examination. Unlike purely philosophical discussions of Sufism, Muhyi presents the struggle against the “nafs” as an intensely personal psychological experience, thereby enriching classical Uzbek literature with remarkable emotional depth.[11]

Although considerable scholarly attention has been devoted to the study of Alisher Navoi's literary heritage, many previous studies have focused primarily on linguistic, historical, or aesthetic aspects of his works. Likewise, existing research concerning Muhyiddin Khoqandi has generally concentrated on his contribution to nineteenth-century Uzbek literature rather than on the philosophical foundations of his poetry. Comparative investigations examining the artistic representation of the “nafs” in the works of both poets remain relatively limited.[12] Furthermore, the symbolic interpretation of different stages of the “nafs” within their poetic discourse has not yet received comprehensive scholarly analysis from the perspective of comparative literary studies.

This research seeks to address this gap by investigating the artistic interpretation of the stages in the literary works of Alisher Navoi and Muhyiddin Khoqandi. Particular attention is devoted to the symbolic representation of “nafs al-ammārah, nafs al-lawwāmah, and nafs al-muṭma’innah”, as these stages constitute the fundamental framework of spiritual development in Sufi doctrine. Through close textual analysis, the study explores how both poets transform religious concepts into artistic images capable of conveying complex psychological and ethical meanings.[13]

The significance of this research extends beyond literary criticism. Contemporary societies continue to face moral challenges associated with materialism, individualism, and ethical decline. In this context, classical Sufi literature offers valuable perspectives on self-discipline, moral responsibility, compassion, and spiritual education.[14] The artistic interpretation of the “nafs” presented by Navoi and Muhyi demonstrates that genuine human development depends upon overcoming selfish desires through knowledge, faith, repentance, and ethical conduct. These ideas remain highly relevant for modern educational philosophy and moral development.[15]

3. Conclusion.

Accordingly, the present study aims to analyze the artistic representation of the in the poetry of Alisher Navoi and Muhyiddin Khoqandi within the framework of Sufi doctrine. Specifically, the research pursues four principal objectives: to examine the literary portrayal of the principal stages to compare the artistic techniques employed by the two poets in expressing spiritual purification to identify the influence of Sufi philosophy on their poetic worldview; and to evaluate the ethical, philosophical, and educational significance of their literary heritage in the context of classical Uzbek literature and contemporary humanities research.

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