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Ali Shir Navayi and the Rich World of Turkic-Persian Poetry. An Interview with Nicholas Walmsley - Voices On Cental Asia

13-16 minutes

Ali Shir Navayi born in 1441 in Herat, was a Turkic poet, writer, politician, linguist, and mystic, who was the greatest representative of [Chagatai](#) literature. He lived in the Timurid era and left a lasting impact on Central Asian literature. Navayi self-identified as a Turk in *Muhakamat al-lughatain*, where he argued that Turki was a “superior” language to Persian, especially due to its flexibility. He also wanted to make Turki an equal language to Persian and Arabic for expressing Islamic ideas, and in his poetry he evokes Allah and the world of Islam. Because of his distinguished poetry in Chagatai language, many in the Turkic-speaking world

consider Navayi to be the founder of the early Turkic literature.

Many places and institutions in Central Asia are named after him.

Interview with



Nicholas Walmsley

Nicholas Walmsley is a historian with an interest in Central Asian literature and poetry. He received his doctorate from the Department of Central Eurasian Studies at the Indiana University. The theme of his doctoral dissertation was the work of Alisher Navayi and his poetry's influence on the literary culture of the Turkic-Persian world between 1500-1865. He

currently [teaches](#) core humanities and literature courses at the American University of Central Asia, in Bishkek.

Ali Shir Navayi is a great poet of Central Asia and of the greater Turco-Persian world. He advanced the use of Chagatai as the language of arts, challenging the undisputed role of Persian at that time. What else is so special about his poetry? How different is Navayi from his other great predecessors (Hafiz, Nizami, ec), what new things did he introduce into the classic



Persian/Muslim poetry?





Alisher Navoi. A miniature of the 15th century Herat school.

The first thing about Navayi that distinguishes him from his predecessors, who wrote in Chagatai (about whom I'll say more below) is that he wrote a vastly

greater quantity of poetry than anyone before him and, indeed, after him! He also wrote in a greater variety of forms and genres, for example, *ghazal*, *qasida*, *masnavī*, *rubaʿī*, *tuyugʻ*, *mukhammas*, *tarikh*. And he wasn't just a poet: he also wrote stories of the prophets, short works of history, memoirs, and also translated 'Aṭṭār and Jāmī into Chagatai. He composed a divan of Persian poetry, which is very similar in style to the great poets like Ḥāfiẓ, Niẓāmī, Amīr Khusraw, and, of course, his great friend Jāmī. To that effect, his Chagatai poetry is based on the same kind of formal structures, particularly meter (*vazn*) and rhyme (*qāfiya*), and themes as these Persian poets. But he figured out how to adapt the Chagatai language, so that it could meet the technical requirements of these forms and genres. He was not the first Chagatai poet, but he spent more time than anyone else working on developing Chagatai as a medium for poetic expression. While he borrowed a lot of words and expressions from Persian, which is one of the defining features of Chagatai (as he himself explained), he also worked on direct translation of ideas and concepts from Persian into Chagatai.

How would you describe the general poetic traditions of Turkic poets and its roots? Do they borrow more from Arabic or Persian linguistics and literary images? What is so peculiar about their genres (like ghazals of Navayi, for



example)?

As I said, Navayi was not the first to compose Chagatai poetry: in the *Muḥakamat al-lughatayn* (“Dispute of the Two Languages”) he talks about his predecessors like Ḥaydar Khwārazmī, Atā’i, Gadā’ī, Sakkākī, and Luṭfī, but he only has kind words to say about Luṭfī.

This was a deliberate effort by Navayi to celebrate himself as the first truly great Chagatai poet! However, these poets are not so well known because there are so few surviving examples of their *divans*, and consequently non-specialist readers and

historians of classical poetry in medieval Central Asia tend only to recognize the name of Navayi and, therefore, assume that the Chagatai literary tradition begins with him. But when you take the time to read the work of these poets – and you should – you will encounter fine examples of ghazals by Atā’i and Gadā’ī, which are often simpler and easier to understand than Navayi. Similarly, Luṭfī’s masnavī *Gul u Navrūz* is a wonderful example of the kinds of allegorical story-telling in verse form that was common in Persian. Poetry was also used to praise rulers, such as in the *muddah* of Sakkākī.

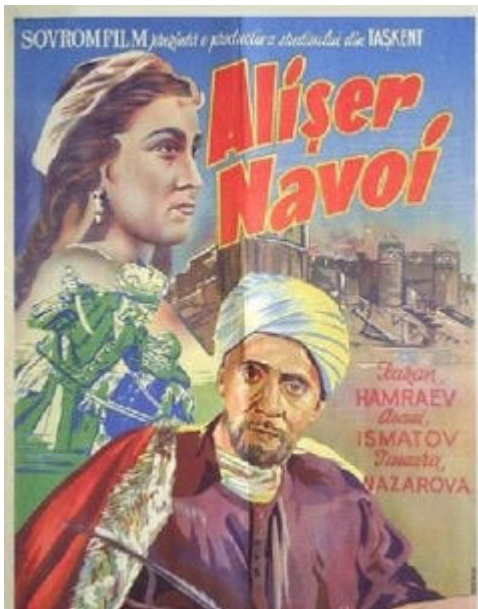
Ironically the study of Navayi in Uzbekistan was influenced by the Russian occupation of Central Asia. During the Soviet era, his work was edited and reprinted, making it more “Soviet” (M Edward Reese put it as reading “red Navayi” in one of our Facebook discussions). Was Navayi selectively translated into Russian (and Uzbek) and how was he studied in the Soviet times and



now?

The main impact of the Soviet period is that Navayi was established as the national poet of the Uzbek people and, as their national poet, he had to represent certain values and beliefs that they ought to follow and emulate. The thing is, Navayi was a Muslim and so much of his writing can only be properly understood, if the reader is also aware of the Islamic background to his writing, e.g., he translated the *Mantiq al-tayr* (The Conference of the Birds) by ‘Aṭṭār into Chagatai, but ‘Aṭṭār had written this a didactic work for the education of Muslims, who were interested in following the Sufi path. However, since the Soviet Union was officially an atheist state and religion was proscribed, the cultural commissars responsible for developing and establishing Soviet Uzbek culture, had to find ways

to make Navayi acceptable as a national poet while downplaying or even eradicating the Islamic themes present in nearly all of his writing. So, Navayi was celebrated instead as a “great humanist,” whose work could be understood as a guide to the human condition more generally, without reference to Islam.



Alisher Navoi (1947)

Additionally, he was also a minister and bureaucrat within the Timurid empire, a state founded upon tribal feudalism, which is not something the Soviets wanted to celebrate. According to the Marxist interpretation of historical materialism, this was a backwards and fundamentally oppressive form of government. Therefore, they presented Navayi as a champion of the common people, based upon his

philanthropic projects (mosques, madrasas, hospices, bathhouses, guesthouses, bazaars) that served the broader population of Herat. They also celebrated him as a great patron of the arts and artisans, e.g., the painter Behzād, the calligrapher Sulṭān ‘Alī Mashhadī, the historian Khwāndamīr, and many others. One example of this Soviet image of Navayi can be found in the film *Alisher Navayi* (1947), starring the famous Uzbek actor Razak Xamroyev as Navayi. In the film, we see him protecting the people from his rival Majduddin, who is depicted as a corrupt and devious minister. This is, in fact, a great over-simplification and distortion of the historical record, as the real Majduddin appears to have been a reformer and rooter-out of corruption! Naturally, Navayi’s works were extensively printed and reprinted in Uzbek and translated into Russian. However, one of the main problems of reading him in those editions of his work is that the Cyrillic script that was used was (and still is) a terrible script for Chagatai and often conceals the fact that many of his words and expressions were borrowed from Arabic and Persian, and consequently his writing

becomes even more confusing for readers (then and now), who are not familiar with either of these languages, and, who may have not encountered these expressions in modern Uzbek. After all, it is very difficult even for a modern native speaker of English to understand the work of Chaucer, who wrote over six hundred years ago, so imagine how difficult it must be for a speaker of modern Uzbek to understand Navayi! Now, as the national poet of independent Uzbekistan, his poetry is quoted by people in the street and performed at *sunnat* and *to'y* celebrations.

What about the historical context? When and why did Turkic/Persian poetry flourish under various rulers? How crucial was the support of

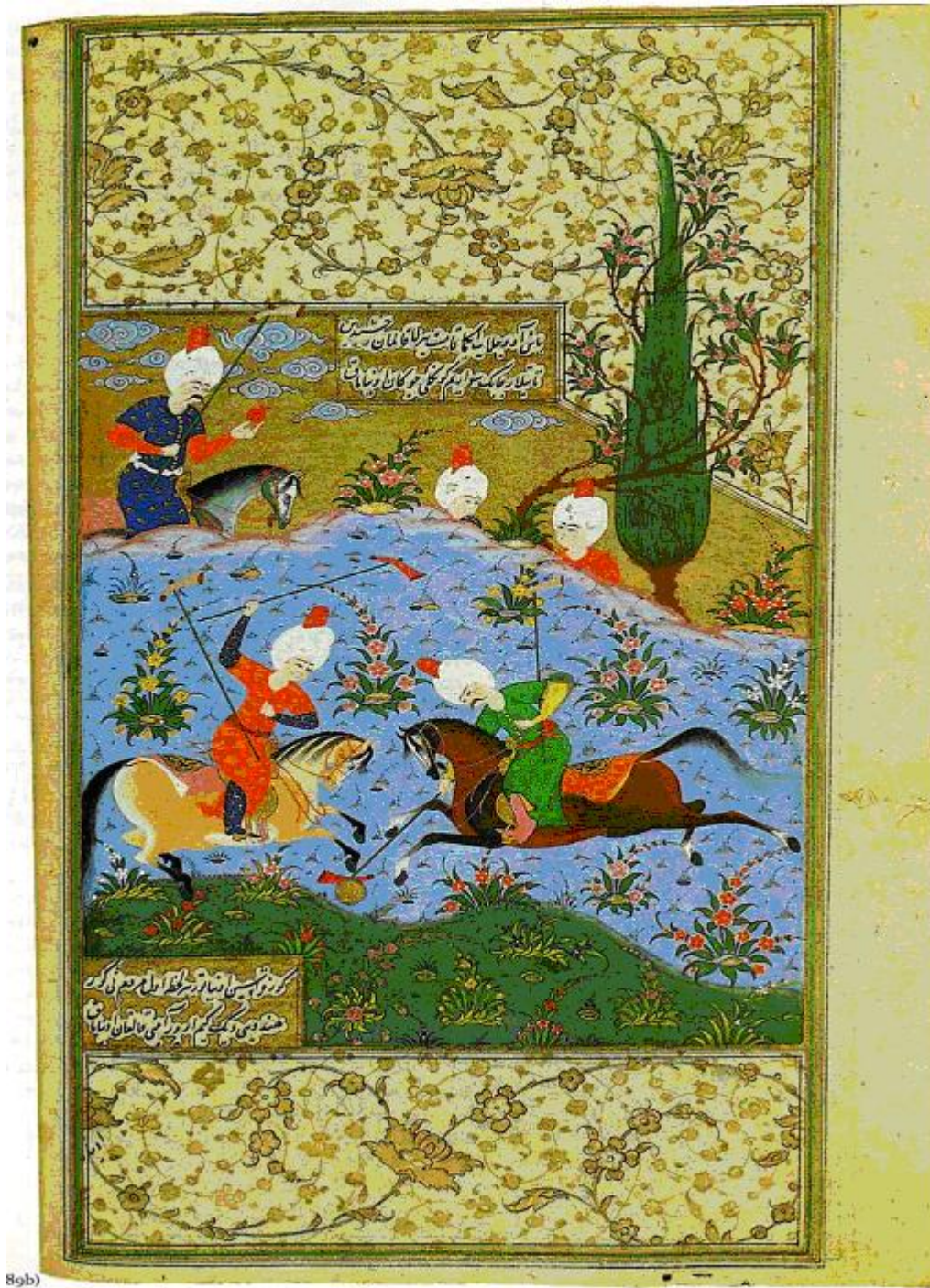


the court?

As a Turkic dynasty, it was inevitable that Turkic

poetry would become more prevalent under the Timurids, even though the rulers and their followers were often bilingual and encouraged both Persian and Turkic poets. The same is true of the Aqqoyunlu dynasty in Iran, who were also ethnically Turkic. However, it was unavoidable that Persian literature would continue to have a strong presence in these times and places – both dynasties ruled over large Persian-speaking populations. The Safavid dynasty also had Turkic roots and Shah Ismail composed a Turkic divan. But in the sixteenth century, the center of Turkic poetry was in the Ottoman empire, where Navayi was hugely popular and highly-esteemed. Ottoman scholars referred to Chagatai as “the language of Navayi” and knowledge of Chagatai was considered one of the signs of an educated man. The famous Ottoman dictionary of Chagatai known as *Abushqa* was essentially based on the work of Navayi. Fuḫūlī, the greatest Ottoman poet of the sixteenth century, was a passionate admirer of Navayi and frequently imitated him in his ghazals. Similarly, Babur and his early descendants in India continued to compose poetry in Chagatai, but over time, Chagatai was relegated to secondary status

and Persian and Urdu became the principal languages of the Mughal empire.



Navoi in Suleyman the Magnificent's library
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The early Uzbek rulers such Muḥammad Shībani Khan and ‘Ubaydullah Khan composed Chagatai poetry and were probably influenced or inspired Navayi, but I believe we can detect a dip in the popularity of Navayi among readers in Central Asia due to the small number of surviving copies of his divan, *Khamsa* (Quintet), and other works from there and then. By the end of seventeenth-century, I think we can see a revival in the fortunes of Navayi due to the increase in the number of manuscript copies and also the increasing number of Chagatai poets. This is noticeable in the region known as Moghulistan (present-day Xinjiang): Jahān Khwāja ‘Arshī, the ruler of Yarkend, composed a divan that contains imitations of Navayi, as did the better-known Sufi poets Zalīlī and Mashhūrī.

From the mid-eighteenth century onwards, the courts of the Uzbek rulers in Khiva, Bukhara, and Khoqand encouraged and supported writers of all kinds, not least because the rulers themselves were often also writers. ‘Umar Khan of Khoqand at the beginning of

the nineteenth-century was very supportive of poets, as was his wife Nādira. They both composed poetry, frequently inspired by Navayi, and this example infused the whole literary culture of Khoqand. At the end of the century, Muḥammad Rāḥim Khan II of Khiva was similarly supportive of writers and literary culture, with an emphasis on imitating the Timurid Renaissance as a model for high culture. Therefore, I do not think it is so unusual that Navayi became the national poet of Uzbekistan, since he was already the most highly-regarded Turkic writer of Central Asia in the areas ruled by the Uzbek dynasties before the establishment of the Uzbek SSR.

The written poetry of Central Asian settled people contrasted with oral traditions of the steppe nomads. How did these different cultures approach the concepts/images of love, politics and life? And towards each other?



To be honest, it's a false dichotomy: the oral culture of the steppe nomads is no less rich and complex than the written culture of the sedentary peoples. Furthermore, there were traditions of oral culture in the form of proverbs and fables among the settled peoples of Khiva, Bukhara, and Khoqand, and there is evidence of an extensive written culture among the nomads of the Kazakh steppe. Additionally, I would challenge anyone not to be astonished by the sophistication of the Kyrgyz *Manas* epic – and what an amazing act of memorization it is – or by the subtlety and power of Abai. It's also interesting to note that the *Dīvān-e Hikmat*, which is supposed to have been composed by Aḥmad Yasavī (although there's no evidence of that), was incorrectly dismissed as simple and rudimentary because it was

allegedly written in order to be easily understood by nomads, but in fact, it is very close in style and content to Chagatai poetry and is based upon the same kinds of complex meters.

That said, I'm not an expert on the oral cultures of Central Asia, so I can't give a fair assessment of them, nor of the interplay between the written and the oral. But if we return to Navayi, we can detect a distinct voice that addresses universal themes of love, politics, religion, and life through his work, and to that effect we can use the words of the English poet Percy Shelley to describe him as one of "the unacknowledged legislators of the world."



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