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Article

The Interpretation of Poetry and Poethood in Uzbek Literary Studies: From Historical Sources to Abdurauf Fitrat

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Abstract: This article traces the evolution of discourse on she'r (poetry) and shoirlik (poethood) in Uzbek literature from the sixteenth century to the formation, in 1919, of the first dedicated theoretical treatment of the subject. It shows that, before the twentieth century, reflection on poetry and the poet was embedded within other genres — the historical chronicle and memoir (Hofiz Tanish Buxoriy's Abdullanoma, Zayniddin Vosifiy's Badoye' ul-vaqoye) and the lyric devan (Munis, Maxmur, Furqat) rather than treated as an independent subject of inquiry. Particular attention is given to the nineteenth-century poets' growing insistence on truthfulness (haqqoniylik) and social usefulness in poetry, their condemnation of the flattering "maddoh" poet, and the press-era controversies this provoked. The article then examines Abdurauf Fitrat's 1919 essay "She'r va shoirliq," published in the newspaper Ishtirokiyun, which the dissertation on which this study draws identifies as the first Uzbek-language work to treat poetry and poethood as a unified theoretical problem rather than a series of scattered remarks. Fitrat's argument that verse requires "ma'naviy kuch" (spiritual-emotional force) rather than meter and rhyme alone, and his rejection of imitation (taqlidchilik), are read against both classical Eastern poetics and later twentieth-century Uzbek poets' own reflections on originality. Given the continuing post-Soviet rehabilitation and international reassessment of Fitrat's legacy, revisiting this genealogy remains a task of clear current relevance.

Keywords: Abdurauf Fitrat, "She'r Va Shoirliq," Uzbek Literary Criticism, Jadidism, Poetry and Poethood, Tazkira and Chronicle Literature, Munis, Furqat, Literary Theory, National Literary Heritage

1. Introduction

Reflection on the nature of poetry and the qualities of the true poet is one of the most persistent themes of Uzbek literary culture, yet its historical development between the classical and modern periods has received comparatively little dedicated study. As the historian of Uzbek literary scholarship Botirxon Valixo'jayev observed, the literary views of the sixteenth through nineteenth centuries are best understood through the interplay of "tradition and innovation" [1], a framework that applies directly to how successive generations of authors addressed the question of she'r and shoirlik. Unlike the fifteenth century, when Alisher Navoiy treated poetry and the poet as an explicit subject across dedicated prose works, the following three centuries channelled the same concerns mainly through other genres: the dynastic chronicle, the memoir, and the lyric devan, where judgments on poetry appear alongside historical narrative or personal reflection rather than as an independent object of study.

This situation changed in 1919, when the Jadid scholar and reformer Abdurauf Fitrat published "She'r va shoirliq" ("Poetry and Poethood") in the newspaper "Ishtirokiyun" a

work that, setting aside the fragmentary observations scattered across earlier tazkiras, stands as the first Uzbek-language study to treat the subject as a unified theoretical problem. Fitrat's own biography gives the subject added weight: persecuted and executed in 1938, his literary and scholarly legacy was suppressed for half a century and has been the subject of sustained rehabilitation, both scholarly and institutional, since Uzbekistan's independence a process that has itself drawn international academic attention [2]. Reconstructing the path from the scattered literary judgments of the sixteenth-century chronicles to Fitrat's systematic 1919 essay therefore serves two purposes: it fills a gap in the history of Uzbek literary-theoretical thought, and it contributes to the wider, currently active project of reassessing Jadid intellectual heritage.[3]

2. Materials and Method

The study draws on primary historical, memoir, and poetic sources of the sixteenth through early twentieth centuries including Hofiz Tanish Buxoriy's Abdullanoma, Zayniddin Vosifiy's Badoyeʾ ul-vaqoye, and the collected works of Munis, Maxmur, and Furqat together with Abdurauf Fitrat's 1919 essay "Sheʾr va shoirliq" and his later treatise Adabiyot qoidalari, examined through document and textual analysis. A comparative-historical method was used to trace how judgments on poetry and the poet migrated across genres over time, from chronicle and memoir to devan and, finally, to dedicated theoretical prose. Fitrat's essay was further read against classical Eastern poetics,[4] represented here by Nizomiy Aruzi Samarqandiy's Chahor maqola, and against the reflections of later twentieth-century Uzbek poets Erkin Vohidov and Abdulla Oripov, in order to assess both its debts to earlier tradition and its afterlife in subsequent Uzbek literary thought. Findings were checked against the existing secondary literature on this material, including Valixo'jayev's history of Uzbek literary scholarship and Hamidulla Boltaboyev's studies of Fitrat, as well as the international scholarship on Jadidism and the post-Soviet rehabilitation of Jadid writers.[5]

3. Results and Discussion

First, in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, judgments on poetry and poets appear chiefly within historical chronicles and memoirs rather than as an independent subject. Hofiz Tanish Buxoriy's Abdullanoma classifies writers of his time by stylistic tendency, criticizing those who sacrifice clarity of meaning for ornamental wordplay (tarseʾ and tajnis) and praising the union of form and content: "the glory of a word must not be trampled underfoot by artifice" [6]. Roqim Samarqandiy's Taʾrixi kasira similarly weaves assessments of poets among them Hofiz Sheroziy, Kamol Xoʾjandiy, Alisher Navoiy, Abdurahmon Jomiy, and Zahiriddin Muhammad Bobur into historical narrative, while Zayniddin Vosifiy's Badoyeʾ ul-vaqoye preserves valuable observations on the literary milieu and poetic taste of fifteenth- and sixteenth-century Herat and Movarounnahr [7]. In all three works, reflection on poetry serves the chronicle's larger historical purpose rather than constituting a subject in its own right.

Second, the nineteenth century brought a marked shift toward explicit, socially engaged reflection on poetry within the lyric devan itself. Munis Xorazmiy repeatedly addresses the poet's social duty, insisting that verse should be "pleasing to the discerning and acceptable to the common people" alike [8], and elsewhere compares poetry to a "sharp blade" that only the deserving should wield. Munis reserves particular scorn for the maddoh, the flattering poet who trades sincerity for patronage "cursed be the poet who, driven by greed, showers praise on the unworthy" [9] while praising poets who share the people's hardship through verse. His younger contemporary Maxmur pursued the same theme through satire, directing a cycle of poems against the court poet Fazliy Namangoniy that channels moral judgment on shoirlik into concrete historical target rather than general statement. By the second half of the century, Furqat pushed the argument further still, in his masnaviy "Shoir va sheʾr mubolag"si xususida" insisting that

literature must depict life exactly as it is — "to call what does not exist existent has no worth among the people" — an early articulation of realist principle in Uzbek literary thought, carried into the new periodical press once Turkiston viloyati gazetasi began publication in the 1870s [10]. These press-era debates were not without controversy: conservative critics attacked the openly humanist poetry of Muqimiy, Furqat, and later Zavqiy in journals such as Al-isloh, prompting the woman writer and critic Nozimaxonim to defend a national literature that "does not neglect the cultivation of writers and poets" on pain of eventual moral and intellectual decline [11].

Third, it was Abdurauf Fitrat who, in 1919, first treated she'r and shoirlik as a unified theoretical problem rather than a series of occasional judgments. Published across three issues of the newspaper Ishtirokiyun, "She'r va shoirliq" opens by insisting that the Turkic peoples possessed poetry and poets "long before the coming of Islam," rejecting outright any suggestion that Turkic culture lacked its own ancient literary tradition [12]. Fitrat then turns to definition proper, rejecting the formal Arabic criterion of verse as merely "measured, rhymed speech" as inadequate: "if we consider poetry to consist only of meter and rhyme, we will never approach true poetry" [13]. In its place he offers a criterion grounded in emotional force: "in poetry there is a power a spiritual power that sets the blood racing, stirs the nerves, and shakes the mind; speech lacking this power is not poetry, whatever its meter and rhyme". This definition, resting on the poet's capacity to transmit inner feeling (sezgi) through skillfully chosen words, echoes while substantially recasting in psychological terms the classical Eastern view represented by Nizomiy Aruzi Samarqandiy, who likewise defined the poetic art by its capacity to "produce stirring impressions" in the listener. Fitrat couples this definition with a sustained argument against imitation (taqlidchilik), which he calls "a robber on the road to truth," holding that a poet who merely reproduces inherited images and formulas, however metrically correct, moves further from "the truth of poetry" rather than closer to it.

Fourth, the influence of Fitrat's 1919 essay proved durable. Scholars of Uzbek literature credit it with laying the groundwork for a subsequent wave of theoretical writing on literature and art, including Abdulhamid Cho'lpon's "Sho'rolar hukumati va sanoyi' nafisa," Abdurahmon Sa'diy's "Go'zal san'at dunyosida," and Vadud Mahmud's "Bugungi she'rlarimiz va san'atkorlarimiz." Fitrat's own poetic practice, particularly his early adoption of folk verse forms and his 1920 poem "Shoir" (dedicated to Abdulhamid Cho'lpon), was seen by his contemporary Sadriddin Ayniy as genuinely innovative within a tradition that had, in Ayniy's words, "known no form but aruz for a thousand years" [14]. Fitrat's insistence on originality over imitation likewise anticipates positions later articulated by Uzbekistan's major twentieth-century poets: Abdulla Oripov argued that a poet's verse must first of all achieve individuality to be noticed "among thousands upon thousands of works," given that "serious thought, genuine feeling, sincerity, and high craftsmanship" determine a poet's lasting worth while Erkin Vohidov reflected at length on the relationship between imitation and originality in creative work. That the same problem what distinguishes genuine poetry from its formal imitation recurs across a century of subsequent Uzbek poetic self-reflection is itself evidence of how thoroughly Fitrat's 1919 formulation reshaped the terms of the debate he inherited from the chronicle and devan literature of earlier centuries.

Taken together, these findings trace a clear line of development: from poetry criticism embedded within historical narrative in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, through the socially engaged, increasingly realist reflections of nineteenth-century poets writing within the devan and, later, the periodical press, to Fitrat's 1919 essay, which for the first time isolated she'r and shoirlik as an independent theoretical problem answerable on its own terms. This reading is consistent with the broader historiography of Uzbek literary scholarship and it resonates with the international scholarly literature that has, since the 1990s, treated the Jadid intellectual project of which Fitrat's literary theory was

one strand among several as a formative episode in the making of modern Central Asian national culture [15].

4. Conclusion

The Uzbek literary discourse on poetry and poethood did not emerge fully formed in the twentieth century; it developed gradually, migrating across genres over some three hundred years. Sixteenth- and seventeenth-century chroniclers and memoirists such as Hofiz Tanish Buxoriy and Zayniddin Vosifiy embedded judgments on poetic style within historical narrative; nineteenth-century poets such as Munis, Maxmur, and Furqat turned the same concerns into explicit ethical and, increasingly, realist argument within their own verse and, later, the periodical press; and in 1919 Abdurauf Fitrat's "She'r va shoirliq" finally lifted the question out of these other genres altogether, treating it as a subject worthy of dedicated theoretical prose grounded in a definition of poetry as "spiritual power" rather than mere meter and rhyme. This genealogy matters for two reasons. Philologically, it fills a gap that the existing historiography of Uzbek literary scholarship has itself identified the absence of a dedicated study tracing how she'r-shoirlik discourse evolved between the classical and modern periods. And historically, it forms part of the wider, still-active project of reassessing the Jadid intellectual legacy that Soviet-era censorship suppressed for half a century, a project of considerable and continuing interest to scholars of Uzbek literature both within Uzbekistan and internationally. Future research might extend this genealogy into the poetry and criticism of the Soviet and independence periods, testing how far Fitrat's 1919 definition of poetry as "spiritual power" continued to shape Uzbek literary self-understanding across the century that followed.

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