

The Depiction of Historical Ruler-Poets in The Tazkiras “Majolis Un-Nafois” And “Hasht Bihisht”

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Abstract: This article explores the representation of historical ruler-poets in Alisher Navoi's Majolis un-Nafois and Sahiy Bey's Hasht Bihisht, the latter being one of the foundational biographical anthologies (tazkiras) of Ottoman Turkish literature. The study focuses on how these works praise rulers and reflect their noble character traits and devotion to poetry. It also compares the two tazkiras in terms of their unique features and differences. Furthermore, the article provides excerpts from the poetic legacy of ruler-creators, offering evaluative insights into their literary contributions.

Keywords: Tazkira, biographical tradition, poets, majlis, tabaqa (tier), paradise, analysis, matla (opening verse), comparison.

Introduction: A tazkira serves as a valuable resource not only for literary scholars but also for researchers in other fields. For historians in particular, such texts are critical for understanding the lives, political conduct, and personal attributes of scholars, scribes, officials, and rulers from specific historical periods.

As literary scholar K. Quramboyev notes, the study of literary connections and mutual influences has become an undeniable fact and a key factor in the progress of world literatures. No literature has ever developed in complete isolation, confined only to its own traditions and devoid of external influence. From this perspective, our research compares Navoi's and Sahiy Bey's tazkiras, revealing that Hasht Bihisht, like many other tazkiras, is heavily influenced by Navoi's masterwork.

The seventh majlis (gathering) of Alisher Navoi's Majolis un-Nafois is dedicated to Amir Timur and the literary figures of the Timurid dynasty. This section provides invaluable insights into the literary environment of the Timurid court. It discusses a total of 22 ruler-poets, beginning with Sahibqiran (Amir Timur) and ending with Sultan Ali Mirza. Notably, four of these figures—Khalil Sultan, Shah Gharib Mirza, Saydi Ahmad Mirza, and Sultan Mas'ud Mirza—are identified as prince-poets who left behind complete poetic collections (diwans).

Navoi begins this majlis with a description of Amir Timur, calling him “the garden of royal trees and the ocean of princely gems, the emperor of world conquest, Sahibqiran.” Although Timur did not compose poetry himself, Navoi emphasizes his deep appreciation of poetry and eloquence:

“Though he did not engage in versifying, he recited both verse and prose so eloquently in proper time and place that his recitation of a single verse was worth more than a thousand composed lines.”

Navoi also highlights Timur's traits of forgiveness and tolerance through a well-known story involving Haji Abdulqadir, illustrating Timur's exceptional moral character.

The majlis also praises Timur's son, Shahrukh Mirza. While Shahrukh did not write poetry, Navoi notes that he had a poetic sensibility and sharp intellect. This is illustrated through an anecdote shared by Abulqasim Babur:

When Khwaja Qivamuddin, an architect, criticized one of Shahrukh's building projects, he fell out of favor for about a year. Later, he attempted to regain his position by presenting a calendar to Shahrukh. Upon receiving it, Shahrukh smiled and recited a couplet by Saadi Shirazi:

“You have not yet perfected your work on the earth—

And now you turn to tasks in the heavens?"

Navoi concludes this account by remarking, "It is no wonder that such a son would be born of such a father."

The first Timurid ruler-poet mentioned as a possessor of a diwan in the seventh majlis is Khalil Sultan Mirza. He was the son of Mironshah and the grandson of Amir Timur, raised under the care of Saroy Mulk Khanum. According to historical sources, he was known for his charming personality and handsome appearance from a young age, and there is a wealth of information about him in various chronicles. For instance, in *The History of Timur*, Ibn Arabshah describes him as follows:

"Khalil Sultan was as handsome as Yusuf, as well-mannered as Muhammad, and as loyal as Abraham. He possessed a variety of refined qualities... His virtues and graces were apparent to all who met him... Everyone who followed him was fortunate to receive his generosity."

Khalil Sultan was not only a patron of poets and artists but also a distinguished literary figure himself, noted for compiling a diwan—an endeavor beyond the capacity of many.

In *Majolis un-Nafois*, Alisher Navoi praises this Timurid prince with the following words:

"After the events of the Lord of Kings, he ruled on the Samarkand throne. He would gather refined individuals and poets at his court. It is well known that he also composed poetry."

These comments suggest that, like other Timurid rulers, Khalil Sultan not only supported poets and literary circles but also actively participated in such gatherings and contributed his own poetic works.

A sample couplet from Khalil Sultan included in *Majolis un-Nafois* reads:

O you with the figure of a Turkish angel, abandon cruelty,

And fulfill the desire of my heart with your soul-soothing lips.

This ghazal is particularly praiseworthy for its use of pure Turkic language.

Among the Timurid rulers, Ulugh Beg Mirza holds a special place. Navoi emphasizes his wisdom, sharp intellect, and outstanding knowledge in mathematics and astronomy. He notes that Ulugh Beg compiled a *zij* (astronomical table) and built an observatory, while also showing an interest in poetry.

Navoi, when describing historical ruler-poets, does not limit himself to praise alone; he also mentions less admirable rulers with honesty and neutrality. This objective approach enhances the persuasiveness of his work and nurtures in the reader a sense of justice and

truthfulness. This is evident in his depiction of Abdulatif Mirza, where he writes:

"He was of a melancholic temperament, obsessive in nature, and bore signs of madness. Beyond this, he had other strange negative traits unfit for open mention. For worldly gain, he killed his wise father, the king."

Navoi supports this account by referencing the historical episode of Khosrow and Shiruya:

"Just as the throne showed loyalty to Shiruya, it did so to him."

Nonetheless, Abdulatif Mirza's talent in poetry is also acknowledged—his inclination toward verse and his skill in composing poetry are noted.

As Russian scholar S.A. Vengerov observed in 1919, a true literary historian must not focus only on famous figures but also consider lesser-known contributors to literary history, as they often reflect the unique characteristics of their era. In this regard, Navoi stands out as a true literary historian. Within this majlis, he also writes about Jahanshah Mirza, Yaqub Mirza, Saydi Ahmad Mirza, Sultan Ahmad Mirza, Bayqara Mirza, Kichik Mirza, and Sultan Badiuzzaman Mirza—documenting their lineage, personalities, and their devotion to literature.

Among the diwan holders in the seventh majlis, Shah Gharib Mirza, the son of Sultan Husayn Bayqara, is mentioned with great respect. A poet in both Turkic and Persian, Gharib Mirza was held in high esteem by Navoi, as evidenced by his mention in several works—including the seventh majlis of *Majolis un-Nafois*, as well as in *Farhod* and *Shirin* and *Sab'ayi Sayyor*, two poems from Navoi's *Khamsa*.

In *Majolis un-Nafois*, Navoi describes Shah Gharib Mirza as:

"A young man with a lively temperament, creative intelligence, delicate imagination, and precise reasoning."

He goes on to highlight Gharib Mirza's literary talent in both prose and poetry, noting that such mastery in both genres earned the admiration of Navoi himself. Furthermore, Navoi emphasizes his bilingual creativity (*zullisonayn*) and provides examples of his poetic works in both Turkic and Persian, starting with excerpts from his Turkic verses.

One of the notable poetic excerpts from Shah Gharib Mirza included in the *Majolis un-Nafois* is:

Which rose-faced beauty possesses a blooming lip like hers?

Which cypress-limbed figure walks with the grace of my beloved?

The compiler of the *tazkira* also emphasizes another

verse by Gharibiy as particularly passionate and admired by poetry enthusiasts:

O friends, whenever you pass by the place of my beloved's grave,

Congratulate my soul and offer prayers for my beloved's soul.

It is important to note that Alisher Navoi held a deep affection for Shah Gharib, and was profoundly affected by his untimely death. In his honor, Navoi composed a *marsiya* (elegy) in the *tarkibband* genre, comprising five stanzas of twelve lines each. This poetic form occupies a special place in classical literature. Professor D. Yusupova, in her scholarly studies, has extensively examined and interpreted this *tarkibband*.

Evidence of Gharibiy's poetic talent and the compilation of his *diwan* can also be found in Babur Mirza's famous work, *Baburnama*, where he writes:

"He was hunchbacked. Though his appearance was not pleasant, he possessed a refined poetic sensibility. Despite his physical frailty, his words were charming. He used the pen name 'Gharibiy,' compiled a *diwan*, and wrote poetry in both Turkic and Persian."

Babur mentions a detail Navoi does not—Shah Gharib's physical condition—yet his comments on Gharibiy's literary qualities are nearly identical to Navoi's.

Alisher Navoi did not admire Shah Gharib merely for his princely status, but also for his genuine poetic talent. This is evident from the extensive attention he gives to Gharibiy in the seventh *majlis*. As further proof, Navoi concludes the section with the following sentence:

"His fine *matlas* are too many to fit into this short selection—perhaps a whole book could be written."

This statement reveals Navoi's intention to dedicate an entire book to Shah Gharib Mirza. However, whether such a work was ever written or has survived to the present remains unknown.

When reading Navoi's descriptions of historical ruler-poets, the reader gains not only insight into their literary output but also a broader sense of their character and personality. Navoi provides a multifaceted portrayal that enhances the reader's understanding and appreciation of each figure.

As the *majlis* concludes, Navoi briefly touches on other Timurid princes and poets, such as Baysunghur Mirza, Sultan Mas'ud Mirza, and Sultan Ali Mirza. He ends the seventh *majlis* with a prayerful quatrain, asking God to grant the Timurids not only worldly power but also nearness to the divine in the hereafter:

Since Timur and Shahrukh were their noble forebears,
And their successors bore the traits of blessed ones—

O you who were adorned with fortune and dignity,
May your life always be surrounded by grace and glory.

In contrast to Navoi's *tazkira*, the second *tabaqa* (section) of Sahiy Bey's *Hasht Bihisht* is dedicated to ruler-poets but features significantly fewer entries. Only six historical poet-rulers are mentioned in this part of the work. Similar to *Majolis un-Nafois*, their poetry and literary engagement are briefly discussed alongside notes on their political and public life. However, the level of depth and literary detail in Sahiy Bey's accounts is noticeably less than that found in Navoi's comprehensive portrayals.

The second *tabaqa* (section) of Sahiy Bey's *Hasht Bihisht* begins with a profile of Sultan Murad Khan Ghazi. He is introduced as the son of Sultan Muhammad, who was the son of Sultan Yıldırım Bayezid. In the *Tarikh-i Usmani*, he is referred to as "Abulkhayr," a name bestowed upon no other ruler. Despite his indulgence in alcohol, Sultan Murad is described as a man of refined taste and a devoted admirer of poetry. The following verse is attributed to his pen:

Çalınur çengler ayalar karşılır

Rakş urur rakkaş çardak şarşılır

(Tambourines are struck as veils are lifted;
Horses dance, and the pavilion trembles.)

The next ruler mentioned is Sultan Bayezid, son of the late Sultan Muhammad Abulfath. He used the poetic pen name *Adalat* (Justice). Sahiy Bey beautifully portrays his qualities, noting his mastery in both scholarship and governance, and his sense of justice. As evidence, Sahiy Bey praises his learning and intellectual breadth, stating that he was a true scholar with deep knowledge in many disciplines. His exceptional skill in archery is cited metaphorically—none could draw a bow like him in his time—emphasizing his military prowess. Sultan Bayezid is portrayed not only as a patron of scholars, jurists, and poets, but also as a guide to all of humanity.

Notably, he invited Idris Bitlisi from Persia, offering him generous patronage and commissioning the writing of the *Tarikh-i Ali Usman*. This work is noted for its elegance, comparable to Sharaf al-Din Ali Yazdi's *Zafarnama*.

Following the death of his father, Sultan Muhammad, Bayezid entered a succession conflict with his brother, Prince Cem (Cem Sultan). Ultimately, Bayezid emerged victorious and ascended the throne, while Prince Cem fled to Arabia. After performing the pilgrimage to Mecca, he returned and resided in Karaman province, yet he was again unsuccessful in reclaiming the throne.

Sahiy Bey devotes space in this section to Cem Sultan as well. Despite his failed attempt to seize power, Cem is remembered as a patron of learning and the arts. He supported poets and scholars and was himself an accomplished poet who compiled a diwan. Among his most beautiful ghazals is:

Dil helâk eyler gözüñ hânçer çeker cân üstine

Gör ne hûnîdür gözüñ kim kan ider kân üstine

(Your gaze destroys hearts, drawing daggers upon the soul;

See how your bloodthirsty eyes spill blood upon blood.)

Cem Sultan also composed a masnavi titled Khursheed u Farahshad, noted for its elegance, fluent verses, and refined style.

The section continues with Sultan Selim, the youngest son of Sultan Bayezid. His bravery and determination are such that when his father planned to hand the throne to his elder son, Sultan Ahmed, Selim raised an army, fought his father in battle, and secured the crown for himself. Selim's passion for poetry is also emphasized—he compiled a diwan whose quality is said to rival that of Khusraw Dehlavi. Interestingly, while Dehlavi's diwan features Persian ghazals rather than Turkic matlas, Selim's ghazals are praised for their poetic strength, paralleling his heroic spirit.

The second majlis (chapter) of Sahiy Bey's tazkira concludes with a tribute to Sultan Qorkud. As customary, the section ends with a spiritual reflection. The rulers and princes featured in this part are likened to the just King Nushirvan and the powerful Alexander the Great. The author prays that, just as these rulers had conquered many lands in this world and were crowned kings, they may also be honored and beloved in the presence of God in the hereafter. The conclusion features the following quatrain:

As long as the sultans of the world lie beneath the earth,

May God exalt the Sahibqiran's rank.

May He protect His noble essence from danger until Resurrection,

And bless the princes with long life and prosperity.

CONCLUSION

Although the arrangement of majlis and the number of ruler-poets differ between Majolis un-Nafois and Hasht Bihisht, both works present unique portrayals of poetic rulers, assessing their literary contributions with individual nuance. Through the inclusion of poetic excerpts, the authors invite readers to form their own evaluations of the rulers' artistic merit. As we read these tazkiras, we are drawn into the literary and historical atmosphere of their time. It becomes clear

that Sahiy Bey's tazkira is spiritually and stylistically nourished by the legacy of Alisher Navoi, revealing a profound intertextual connection between the two traditions.

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