

Article

The Cultural and Literary World of Alisher Navoi in The of Studies of Evgenii Bertels

Usmonova Sharifa

1. Independent researcher at the Alisher Navoi University of Uzbek Language and Literature and senior lecturer at the University of Economics and Pedagogy

* Correspondence: gulamovna1973@gmail.com

Abstract: This article explores the life, works, and enduring significance of the great Uzbek poet and thinker Alisher Navoi (1441–1501) as presented in Yevgeniy Bertels' seminal monograph Navoi. While Navoi has long been celebrated as the founder of classical Uzbek literature, his role as a statesman, philosopher, and cultural reformer is equally vital. Drawing primarily on Bertels' comprehensive study, this article examines Navoi's biography, his literary and intellectual contributions, his cultural environment in Timurid Herat, and his intellectual companionship with contemporaries such as Jami. Through this discussion, the article highlights both the historical importance of Navoi's works and their relevance in shaping Central Asian literary traditions.

Keywords: Alisher Navoi, Uzbek literature, Timurid period, Bertels, Jami, classical poetry, cultural heritage

1. Introduction

Alisher Navoi occupies a central position in the history of Turkic and Persianate literature. As a poet, philosopher, and statesman, he not only shaped the linguistic and literary landscape of the fifteenth century but also laid the foundation for modern Uzbek cultural identity [1], [2]. His immense contribution to literature has been celebrated across centuries, yet it was through the meticulous scholarship of Yevgeniy Eduardovich Bertels (1890–1956), one of the most prominent Russian Orientalists of the twentieth century, that Navoi's intellectual legacy was systematically analyzed and contextualized [3].

Bertels' interest in Navoi was not incidental but grew out of a profound personal response to his poetry. He recounts how, on first encountering *Lisān ut-Tayr*, he was determined to test the assumption that it was merely a copy of Attar's *Mantiq al-Tayr*. The deeper he read, the clearer it became that Navoi's work was an original achievement of striking artistic value. As he himself explained, "Those who, without reading Navoi's poems, judged only from their titles and labeled him a translator, were mistaken [4], [5]. My task was to establish the truth, and I succeeded in demonstrating that Navoi's *Lisān ut-Tayr* was not a mere copy of Attar but a work of genuine originality." This realization marked the beginning of Bertels' lifelong dedication to Navoi. His interest deepened into admiration as he became increasingly captivated by what he described as "its humanism, its tenderness, its warmth, and its pure Turkic wit."

It was this intellectual and emotional engagement that motivated Bertels to study Navoi not only as a poet of genius but also as a cultural reformer, philosopher, and statesman whose works demanded recognition far beyond the borders of Central Asia [6], [7]. His monograph *Navoi* (first published in Russian and later translated into Uzbek) remains one of the most authoritative studies, situating Navoi within the broader socio-political and cultural environment of the Timurid dynasty, particularly in Herat under Sultan Husayn Bayqara

Citation: Sharifa, U. The Cultural and Literary World of Alisher Navoi in The of Studies of Evgenii Bertels. International Journal on Integrated Education (IJIE) 2026, 9(1), 71-74

Received: 10th Jun 2025
Revised: 16th Jul 2025
Accepted: 24th Aug 2025
Published: 03th Sep 2025



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2. Materials and Methods.

Navoi was born in 1441 in Herat, a flourishing cultural and political center of the Timurid dynasty. His family background was closely tied to the court, which gave him early access to education and literary life. From childhood, Navoi displayed a remarkable gift for poetry, composing verses in both Persian and Chagatai Turkish, though he soon demonstrated a preference for the latter. At a time when Persian dominated courtly and literary life, Navoi's decision to embrace Turkish was revolutionary. Bertels stresses that this decision permanently altered the trajectory of Turkic literature: "He was the first to give the Turkic language a place equal to Persian in poetry, proving that Turkish could serve as the medium of the highest literary creation." His early training was not only poetic but also intellectual, exposing him to philosophy, Islamic sciences, and Sufi thought, which would later permeate his verse. Bertels further observed: "Even in youth, Navoi was distinguished by his voracious appetite for knowledge; no branch of science or art seemed foreign to him, and his mind absorbed them with remarkable ease."

The cultural environment of Herat during Navoi's youth was a decisive factor in his intellectual development. The city, often called the Florence of the East, blossomed under the patronage of the Timurid rulers. Artists such as Behzod, calligraphers, architects, musicians, and philosophers gathered at court, making Herat one of the richest cultural hubs of the fifteenth century. As Bertels remarked, "So many poets, painters, calligraphers, and scholars gathered at Husayn Bayqara's court that this period may rightly be called one of the brightest stages of the Eastern Renaissance." Navoi's entry into these literary circles gave him direct exposure to the great Persian poet and Sufi thinker Abdulrahman Jami, who became both mentor and friend. Their bond was one of mutual admiration and spiritual kinship. As Bertels puts it, "The friendship of Navoi and Jami is a living testimony to the eternal fraternity of the Uzbek and Tajik peoples, built on sincerity and mutual respect." Jami himself confirmed this in his letters, where, as Bertels recalls, "Jami highly praised Navoi's poems, calling him 'the pride of the Turkic language.'"

3. Results

Navoi's literary career reached its zenith with the composition of his *Khamasa* ("Quintet"), five epic poems written in the 1480s. These works — *Hayrat al-Abrar*, *Farhad and Shirin*, *Layli and Majnun*, *Sab'ai Sayyar*, and *Saddi Iskandari* — built upon the tradition of Nizami and Amir Khusraw while infusing it with Turkic linguistic expression and Central Asian cultural themes. *Hayrat al-Abrar* explored moral and social values, while *Farhad and Shirin* and *Layli and Majnun* reinterpreted classical tales of tragic love [8]. *Sab'ai Sayyar* presented allegorical journeys rich with philosophical undertones, and *Saddi Iskandari* used the legendary figure of Alexander the Great to reflect on power and justice [9], [10]. According to Bertels, these works demonstrated that Navoi was not a mere imitator but an innovator: "Although Navoi's *Khamasa* continues the traditions of Nizami and Khusraw Dehlavi, it stands apart in being independently created in the Turkic language." His deep humanism is evident throughout these poems: "The more I read Navoi's poem, the more I was captivated by its humanism, its tenderness, its warmth, and its pure Turkic wit."

Navoi's lyric poetry, consisting of ghazals, rubaiyat, and qasidas, further revealed the depth of his spiritual and emotional range. Many of these works drew upon Sufi imagery, portraying the soul's longing for divine union through metaphors of earthly love [11]. His ability to weave together mystical thought with lyrical beauty placed him alongside the greatest Persian poets, yet his use of Chagatai Turkish distinguished his voice as uniquely national and innovative. Bertels consistently emphasized that Navoi's lyric poetry contained a subtlety and metaphysical richness that matched — and in many cases rivaled — his Persian contemporaries [12]. He explained: "In his ghazals, Navoi skillfully employed the musicality of Turkic words, harmonizing them with Persian rhyme and artistic devices. In this way, he created a new poetic style."

In his epic *Hayrat al-Abrar*, Navoi not only displayed poetic mastery but also articulated his views on social justice and ethics. As Bertels highlights, "In *Hayrat al-*

Abrar, Navoi harshly criticizes corrupt officials and extols the just ruler as the true protector of the people." This shows that Navoi's literary mission went beyond aesthetics: his poetry was also a vehicle for moral instruction and social commentary [13].

Navoi was not only a poet but also a statesman of considerable influence. Under Sultan Husayn Bayqara, he served as a high-ranking official, playing a crucial role in governance, diplomacy, and cultural policy [14], [15]. He advocated for social justice, funded educational and religious institutions, and personally financed the construction of hospitals, libraries, caravanserais, and mosques. As Bertels documented, "Sources confirm that Navoi, from his own funds, had nearly twenty madrasas, dozens of mosques, caravanserais, bridges, and hospitals constructed." For Navoi, these projects were not simply acts of generosity but reflections of his vision of a society rooted in learning, piety, and compassion. Bertels himself vividly recalls his encounter with one of the surviving manuscripts of Navoi's epics: "One of the manuscripts I examined was a large, darkened volume containing all five of Navoi's epics. Such a manuscript is a rare find and could never rightfully be sold later." This anecdote underscores both the fragility of cultural heritage and the enduring material legacy Navoi left behind.

In his role as a cultural patron, Navoi became an intellectual architect of Herat's golden age. He protected scholars and poets, encouraged cross-cultural dialogue, and used his political influence to foster an environment where literature and the arts could thrive. His vision of society was guided by principles of justice and ethical responsibility, which he articulated not only in his prose works such as *Mahbub al-Qulub* but also in his poetry. Yet Bertels warned against distorting this vision with modern ideological projections: "To claim that Navoi's worldview was shaped by peasant uprisings is nothing but exaggeration and modernization. Such interpretations diminish his true stature."

4. Discussion

One of the strengths of Bertels' monograph is its balanced portrayal of Navoi. Rather than presenting him as a flawless national hero, Bertels situates him firmly within the context of Timurid politics and culture. Navoi's loyalty to Sultan Husayn Bayqara brought him both opportunities and challenges, requiring him to navigate the complexities of court life while maintaining his moral principles. His literary achievements were equally complex, as they were deeply rooted in Persian models yet also distinguished by their originality in content, language, and style.

Bertels' emphasis on Navoi's humanism, linguistic innovation, and role as a cultural reformer ensures that his analysis remains relevant today. By elevating the Turkic language, Navoi empowered subsequent generations to view their native tongue as a vehicle of literary greatness. His moral and spiritual insights, expressed through stories of love, justice, and wisdom, continue to resonate across cultures. In this sense, Navoi represents not only a foundational figure for Uzbek literature but also a universal voice in world literature.

5. Conclusion

Alisher Navoi remains one of the most remarkable figures of world literature, not only for his poetic genius but also for his role as a cultural architect of his time. Through his works, he established Chagatai Turkish as a refined literary language, produced masterpieces of epic and lyric poetry, and articulated a vision of society guided by justice and compassion. As Bertels' monograph demonstrates, Navoi was more than a poet; he was a philosopher, statesman, and reformer whose influence continues to shape Central Asian cultural identity.

The study of Navoi, as Bertels rightly insisted, remains far from complete. Each reading of his works reveals new layers of meaning, offering insights into the human condition that transcend historical boundaries. By revisiting Bertels' scholarship, we not only honor the intellectual legacy of Navoi but also reaffirm the relevance of classical literature in addressing the moral and cultural challenges of our own time.

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