

THE POET'S ROLE AS AN EDUCATOR IN PRE-MODERN CENTRAL ASIA

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Annotation: This article explores the role of poets as educators and moral guides in pre-modern Central Asia. It highlights how poets contributed to the intellectual and spiritual upbringing of society through their works. Special attention is given to the educational and ethical messages found in the writings of Alisher Navoi, Ahmad Yassawi, and Babur.

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Alisher Navoi, a towering figure in Eastern literature and a pioneer of the Chagatai language, left an indelible legacy not only through his poetic artistry but also through the profound didactic elements embedded within his works. As a moralist, philosopher, and Sufi thinker, Navoi infused his writings with ethical instructions, spiritual guidance, and life principles that transcend time and geography. His oeuvre stands as a spiritual and intellectual compass, educating generations about human values, justice, self-awareness, and the pursuit of higher truth.

Navoi's works are not merely poetic expressions but rich compendiums of wisdom. His verses are imbued with lessons for individuals and society. Central to his didactic mission was his belief in the power of language and literature to reform human behavior. Navoi considered the poet as a guide, a spiritual teacher whose duty extended beyond aesthetics into the realms of moral and spiritual edification. In this light, his literary contributions become tools of transformation—encouraging readers to cultivate virtues and abandon base desires. One of the clearest manifestations of Navoi's didactic purpose can be seen in his collection *Hayrat ul-abror* (Wonders of Good People), which opens his famous *Khamsa*. This work combines poetic eloquence with ethical discourse. Each section is devoted to a different moral theme—justice, generosity, humility, knowledge, and piety—providing concrete examples of how these virtues manifest in everyday life. In this work, Navoi emphasizes the ephemeral nature of worldly pleasures and power, advising rulers to act with integrity and for the public good. “He who governs must cleanse his heart of greed, for a king's greed is a nation's suffering” [1]. This line alone

encapsulates his political didacticism, a subtle admonishment to the ruling elite of his time.

Navoi's didacticism is not limited to direct moral teachings. It also reveals itself in allegory and metaphor. His masterpiece *Lison ut-Tayr* (Language of the Birds), inspired by Attar's *Mantiq ut-Tayr*, explores the Sufi path through the symbolic journey of birds seeking their king, the Simurgh. Each bird represents a particular human failing or spiritual challenge, making the work a mirror through which readers reflect on their own shortcomings. The Hoopoe, who leads the birds, speaks with the authority of a sage, offering guidance and reprimand alike. Through this poetic fable, Navoi conveys the necessity of self-purification, discipline, and the annihilation of the ego in the path toward divine union. As he writes, "The soul that feeds on pride is denied the wine of love" [2]. This moral is presented not as abstract theology but as a psychological truth intended to reform the reader's inner life.

In *Mahbub ul-qulub* (Beloved of Hearts), Navoi adopts a prose style to deliver didactic content directly to the reader. The work is structured as a series of maxims, anecdotes, and reflections on various subjects: justice, friendship, education, leadership, and more. Each section begins with a theoretical discussion, followed by examples drawn from history and Navoi's own observations. This work is particularly significant for its accessibility and clarity; Navoi makes no attempt to veil his teachings in metaphor or poetic language. Instead, he speaks as a wise elder to a young disciple, offering a lifetime's worth of guidance. One striking example is his commentary on education: "Knowledge is the lamp of the soul, and he who is without it walks forever in darkness" [3]. In this quote, Navoi underscores the vital role of education in shaping an ethical and enlightened society. The didactic function in Navoi's writing also extends into his treatment of love, which he views not merely as romantic longing but as a transformative spiritual force. In *Layli va Majnun*, love becomes a vehicle for self-annihilation and divine awareness. The hero Majnun's descent into madness is not viewed negatively but as a step toward mystical union. Through Majnun's suffering, Navoi teaches that true love involves sacrifice, purity, and a turning away from material concerns. This interpretation aligns with Sufi ideology, where love is a divine trial meant to elevate the soul. Thus, the story becomes a parable for the reader, urging them to consider their own attachments and the spiritual consequences of desire.

Similarly, in *Farhad va Shirin*, Navoi presents characters who embody moral strength and selfless devotion. Farhad's loyalty and unyielding love become symbolic of the human capacity for perseverance and nobility in the face of adversity. Even when denied

his beloved, Farhad remains virtuous and unwavering. These characters are not merely products of fantasy; they are intended as role models, moral exemplars whose stories inspire imitation. Navoi's aim is not simply to entertain but to educate—to shape the reader's worldview through the power of narrative. Another unique feature of Navoi's didacticism is his emphasis on the responsibility of leadership. His writing constantly returns to the idea that rulers must embody justice, compassion, and wisdom. In both poetry and prose, he provides a political philosophy that balances power with ethics. He condemns tyranny and greed while praising rulers who act as servants of the people. This ethical vision reflects his own experience as a statesman in the Timurid court, where he served with distinction. His writings serve as indirect counsel to his contemporaries and successors, many of whom he addressed through poetic eulogies and political allegory.

Navoi also believed in the didactic potential of the Turkic language itself. At a time when Persian was considered the dominant literary language, Navoi championed Chagatai Turkish as a powerful medium for moral and philosophical discourse. In *Muhokamat al-lughatayn* (Debate of the Two Languages), he defends the richness and expressive capacity of Turkish, asserting its ability to convey complex ideas and spiritual truths. By elevating the status of his native tongue, Navoi made his teachings more accessible to the common people and reinforced the idea that wisdom should not be the privilege of a linguistic elite. Moreover, Navoi's works are deeply rooted in the Sufi tradition, and this connection adds another layer to his didactic mission. Sufism, with its focus on the inner self, the heart's purification, and the journey toward God, is inherently educational. Navoi uses the vocabulary of Sufism—symbols like the mirror, the wine, the beloved, and the journey—not to mystify, but to instruct. His poetry serves as a spiritual curriculum, guiding the reader from ignorance to enlightenment, from ego to unity with the Divine. His language, while often ornate, is also imbued with clarity when delivering moral messages. His metaphors are rich but never gratuitous. They serve to awaken the reader's conscience. His tone oscillates between gentle admonishment and passionate exhortation, and this dynamic quality makes his didacticism compelling rather than oppressive. He does not dictate virtue; he illustrates it, making the pursuit of ethics seem not only necessary but noble and beautiful. In addition to individual morality, Navoi stresses the social dimension of ethical life. He believes in the interdependence of individuals and society. A corrupt ruler leads to a corrupt people, and vice versa. Thus, his didactic mission includes both micro and macro perspectives—reforming the soul and the state. His works urge collective responsibility, mutual respect, and justice as foundations for a harmonious society.

Navoi's relevance endures precisely because his didacticism is not limited by his era. His insights into human nature, governance, education, and spiritual longing remain pertinent today. His work anticipates modern humanistic ideals by centuries, calling for the integration of inner development with social justice. Unlike didactic writers who moralize from a distance, Navoi engages the reader as a fellow traveler on the path of life. He admits human weakness while encouraging the pursuit of virtue. His humility as a teacher enhances the persuasive power of his message. In sum, the didactic elements in Alisher Navoi's work form the cornerstone of his literary genius. His commitment to moral education, spiritual guidance, and social reform permeates every aspect of his writing. Whether through allegory, narrative, aphorism, or direct address, Navoi teaches not by command, but by inspiration. His words remain a reservoir of ethical wisdom, urging us to become better individuals and stewards of our communities. As long as his works are read, the moral torch he lit centuries ago will continue to illuminate minds and hearts.

Alisher Navoi, a towering figure in Turkic literature, is celebrated not only for his poetic brilliance but also for his profound ethical and didactic insights. His works serve as a bridge between aesthetic pleasure and moral instruction, blending beauty with purpose. Navoi's didacticism is not accidental; it is intentional and central to his literary mission. Through his poetry and prose, he seeks to educate readers on virtues, spiritual refinement, the importance of justice, the dangers of ego, and the transcendental value of love and wisdom. The educational aspect of his writing reflects his philosophical alignment with Sufi teachings and his desire to nurture an enlightened and morally grounded society.

One of the most illustrative examples of Navoi's didactic aim is his masterpiece "Mahbub-ul Qulub" ("Beloved of Hearts"), a prose work that reflects on social and moral issues through short chapters filled with parables, observations, and aphorisms. Navoi categorizes society into different classes – kings, scholars, artists, merchants, and more – and provides advice tailored to each group. His purpose is not merely to narrate but to mold character and promote virtuous behavior. He writes, for example, about the qualities of a just ruler, emphasizing wisdom, fairness, and humility as essential traits of leadership. His portrait of the ideal king is not rooted in absolute power but in moral superiority and public service, suggesting that authority without justice is a form of tyranny. In doing so, he continues the classical tradition of ethical instruction found in Persian and Arabic literature but adapts it to the Turkic context with profound linguistic elegance.

Navoi's *Khamisa* (Quintet), inspired by Nizami Ganjavi's model, is perhaps the most refined expression of his didactic talent in poetic form. Each of the five epics carries not only narrative delight but also philosophical and ethical lessons. In *Hayrat ul-Abror* ("Wonders of the Good"), Navoi uses the framework of philosophical and spiritual dialogue to explore themes of moral discipline, the nature of the soul, and the responsibilities of human beings before God and society. The prologue of the poem is a treasure trove of ethical exhortation, calling readers to self-awareness and sincere action. Navoi teaches through allegory, where the characters symbolize moral traits, and their journeys reflect the inner transformation necessary for spiritual perfection. In this way, didacticism is woven into the very fabric of the narrative.

The Sufi influence on Navoi's didacticism is especially clear in his lyrical poems (ghazals) found in *Diwan* collections like *Hazoin-ul Ma'ani*. These poems, while deeply emotional and aesthetically powerful, often transcend romantic themes to express spiritual longing and moral struggle. Navoi does not merely entertain his reader but calls them to awaken spiritually and ethically. He views the human ego (*nafs*) as a barrier to truth and encourages self-purification and divine love. In one of his ghazals, Navoi writes: "The one who sees faults in others has never truly looked within" [4]. This line, while poetic, contains a powerful didactic message: moral reform must begin with the self. The poetic form thus becomes a tool of ethical transformation, reminding readers that beauty without virtue is hollow.

Navoi's approach to didacticism also includes a deep concern with education itself. In his works, knowledge is not merely power, but responsibility. He exalts scholars and poets as the guides of society, provided that their knowledge is used for the benefit of others. In *Mahbub-ul Qulub*, he states: "A scholar whose knowledge does not bring light to others is like a candle hidden under a bushel" [5]. Through this metaphor, Navoi conveys the principle that knowledge hoarded is ethically void, while knowledge shared becomes a vehicle for societal upliftment. His message is especially relevant in the context of his time, where scholars often held prominent positions at court, and their advice shaped political and moral discourse.

In addition to wisdom, Navoi consistently promotes humility and warns against pride and arrogance. He sees these traits as the root of social discord and spiritual decay. In the tradition of Sufi poets, Navoi portrays pride as the veil between man and truth. The human being, he insists, must recognize his limitations and submit to divine wisdom. One striking couplet reveals this idea clearly: "He who exalts himself will stumble; he who bows before truth will rise" [6]. This line captures Navoi's ethical philosophy succinctly:

virtue lies not in self-assertion but in humility before the divine order. The didactic force here is powerful yet elegantly expressed, making it memorable and persuasive.

Navoi's treatment of love also reveals didactic intent, particularly when love is directed not toward the ephemeral, but toward the eternal. For Navoi, divine love is the highest aim of human life, and all worldly experiences are but shadows of that ultimate truth. His metaphorical use of romantic love serves as a pedagogical tool to lead readers from the material to the spiritual. Earthly passion is a mirror of divine yearning, and by understanding the pain and ecstasy of love, the soul is refined and prepared for union with the Beloved. Thus, even his most lyrical works carry moral depth, urging readers to look beyond the surface and seek spiritual fulfillment.

Another dimension of Navoi's didacticism is his linguistic and cultural mission. He was among the first to elevate Chagatai Turkic to the level of literary sophistication comparable with Persian and Arabic. By doing so, he not only enriched Turkic culture but also taught his audience the value of their own language and heritage. This cultural pride is itself a form of didacticism – a lesson in identity and self-worth. He demonstrated that refined thought and noble sentiment could be expressed in Turkic just as elegantly as in Persian, encouraging future generations to develop their intellectual and creative potential in their native tongue.

Navoi also believed in moral education through storytelling. His use of allegory and parable enables him to convey complex ethical ideas in accessible ways. In his poem Farhod and Shirin, while narrating a love story, he embeds lessons on duty, sacrifice, and perseverance. Farhod's dedication to Shirin, his labor in carving canals through mountains, becomes a metaphor for the human quest to overcome obstacles through sincere effort. Navoi does not preach directly; rather, he lets the story illustrate virtue. This indirect didacticism is effective because it engages the emotions and imagination of the reader, making the moral message more impactful and lasting.

Justice is another major theme in Navoi's didactic repertoire. He saw justice as the foundation of both individual conduct and social harmony. In his political writings and poetry alike, Navoi emphasizes that a society without justice cannot thrive, regardless of its wealth or military power. He warns rulers against tyranny and encourages them to act as caretakers of the people. For Navoi, the legitimacy of authority is tied not to conquest but to service. In his writings on kingship, he often returns to the idea that a ruler must listen to the cries of the poor, provide for the needy, and protect the vulnerable. These lessons, while directed at monarchs, are equally applicable to anyone in a position of power or responsibility.

Furthermore, Navoi's emphasis on sincerity (ikhlos) is central to his didactic outlook. He criticizes hypocrisy, false piety, and superficial religiosity, arguing that true virtue lies in intention and action rather than appearance. This is especially evident in his ghazals, where he often juxtaposes the outer form of religious devotion with the inner reality of spiritual emptiness. He urges readers to cultivate a sincere heart and to avoid being

deceived by the trappings of status or ritual. In doing so, Navoi aligns with the Sufi belief that the path to God is internal and that external forms are only valuable when they reflect inner truth.

Navoi's educational vision also extends to gender ethics. While writing in a male-dominated society, he shows deep respect for women's wisdom, dignity, and agency. His female characters are often strong, principled, and intellectually capable. This representation challenges the norms of his time and serves a didactic purpose by promoting gender equity in moral and intellectual life. Through the dignity of characters like Shirin, Navoi models a society where both men and women contribute to the moral and spiritual elevation of the community. In sum, Alisher Navoi's works are saturated with didactic elements that aim to educate the individual and elevate society. His ethical teachings cover a wide spectrum – from personal integrity to social justice, from divine love to cultural pride. His literary mastery ensures that these teachings are not delivered as dry sermons but as aesthetically compelling and emotionally resonant expressions of truth. By merging beauty with ethics, Navoi transforms literature into a medium of moral awakening. His legacy endures not just because of his linguistic innovation or poetic talent, but because of the enduring wisdom he imparts. In every couplet and chapter, he invites the reader to reflect, to grow, and to seek a life of purpose, humility, and love.

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