

TRADITIONS OF THE HISTORICAL-BIOGRAPHICAL NOVEL IN UZBEK LITERATURE

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Abstract. This article examines the formation and evolution of the historical-biographical novel as a distinct genre within Uzbek literature. Tracing its trajectory from the foundational historical prose of the 1920s through the mature biographical narratives of the Soviet decades and into the reinterpretations of the independence period, the study identifies the artistic principles that have come to define the national tradition of the genre. Particular attention is devoted to the interplay between documentary evidence and creative imagination, the psychological reconstruction of historical personalities, and the role of such narratives in articulating national identity. The analysis draws on the novels of Oybek, Odil Yoqubov, Pirmqul Qodirov and Mirmuhsin, arguing that the Uzbek historical-biographical novel developed a recognisable poetics of its own rather than merely reproducing imported models.

Keywords: historical-biographical novel, Uzbek literature, Oybek, Odil Yoqubov, Pirmqul Qodirov, historicism, documentary basis, psychologism, national identity, genre poetics.

Introduction

Among the prose genres that took shape in twentieth-century Uzbek letters, the historical-biographical novel occupies a place of special significance. Unlike the purely historical novel, which reconstructs an epoch through invented protagonists set against an authentic background, the historical-biographical novel places a real, documented personality at the very centre of the narrative and builds its entire artistic architecture around that figure's inner and outer life. The genre therefore imposes a double obligation on the writer: fidelity to the surviving record and, at the same time, the imaginative freedom required to transform archival fact into living character.

The relevance of studying this genre in the Uzbek context is difficult to overstate. For a culture whose collective memory rests on such towering figures as Alisher Navoiy, Mirzo Ulugbek and Zahiriddin Muhammad Babur, biographical fiction has served not merely as entertainment but as a principal vehicle for national self-knowledge. During periods when direct historiographical discussion was constrained by ideological pressure, the novel about a great ancestor quietly performed the work of historical education, ethical reflection and cultural continuity. Understanding how Uzbek writers negotiated these tasks illuminates both the history of the national literature and the broader theory of biographical narrative.

The purpose of the present article is to trace the formation of the historical-biographical novel in Uzbek literature, to characterise the artistic traditions established by its leading practitioners, and to assess how those traditions were renewed after independence. The study employs comparative-historical and structural methods of analysis, treating the genre's evolution as a sequence of creative dialogues between successive generations of novelists.

The Genesis of the Genre: from Historical Prose to the Biographical Novel

The soil in which the Uzbek historical-biographical novel germinated was prepared by Abdulla Qodiriy. His novels *Bygone Days* (*O'tkan kunlar*, 1925) and *The Scorpion from the Altar* (*Mehrobdan chayon*, 1928) established the very possibility of large-scale national prose devoted to the past. Although Qodiriy's protagonists were fictional, his method — meticulous reconstruction of the material and moral atmosphere of nineteenth-century Turkestan, combined with an unmistakably national narrative intonation — became the point of departure for every later historical novelist. From him the tradition inherited its ethnographic density, its attention to everyday detail as a bearer of historical meaning, and its conviction that the past must be judged from within its own value system.

The genre proper, however, was born with Oybek's *Navoiy* (1944). Written during the war years, when the image of a great humanist ancestor acquired urgent symbolic weight, the novel undertook something unprecedented in Uzbek prose: the artistic resurrection of a documented genius. Oybek faced the classic dilemma of biographical fiction in its sharpest form, for Navoiy's poetry survived in abundance while reliable details of his private life remained scarce. His solution proved formative for the entire national school. He reconstructed the poet's personality primarily through his social and creative conduct — the statesman defending the people against arbitrary power, the patron of scholars, the thinker at work — while allowing the inner world to shine through carefully motivated psychological scenes. The novel thus fused the chronicle of an epoch with the portrait of a mind, and this synthesis became the genre's founding convention.

Critics of the time already sensed that Navoiy had created a template. The historical-biographical novel in Uzbek literature would henceforth be expected to satisfy three requirements simultaneously: scholarly conscientiousness in handling sources, a panoramic image of the age, and a psychologically persuasive central figure whose personal drama expresses the essential conflicts of his era.

The Flowering of the Tradition in the 1960s–1980s

The two decades between the mid-1960s and the mid-1980s constitute the classical period of the Uzbek historical-biographical novel. A generation of writers who had absorbed Oybek's lesson now deepened it in different directions, and the genre acquired the internal variety that marks artistic maturity.

Odil Yoqubov's *Ulugbek's Treasure* (*Ulug'bek xazinasi*, 1973) shifted the genre's centre of gravity from external chronicle to moral philosophy. The novel about the astronomer-king of Samarkand is organised not around the sequence of biographical events but around a tragic collision: the incompatibility of enlightened reason with the mechanics of medieval power. Yoqubov intensified the psychological and dramatic elements of the tradition, constructing long scenes of inner debate and confession in which the historical figure is tested as a moral being. His *Ulugbek* is simultaneously a documented ruler and a timeless embodiment of the scholar's conscience, and this deliberate doubling — the hero as person and as ethical problem — became one of the most productive devices of the national school.

Pirimqul Qodirov, in *Starry Nights* (*Yulduzli tunlar*, 1978) and its continuation *The Pass of the Generations* (*Avlodlar dovoni*, 1988), returned the genre to epic breadth while preserving the psychological refinement won by his predecessors. Taking as his hero Babur — poet, memoirist and founder of an empire — Qodirov enjoyed a resource no earlier Uzbek novelist had possessed: the hero's own autobiographical prose. The *Boburnoma* allowed him to verify psychological conjecture against self-testimony, and the novel's celebrated authenticity of tone owes much to this constant dialogue between the novelist's imagination and the memoirist's voice. Qodirov also expanded the genre's geography, following his protagonist from Andijan to Kabul and Agra and thereby framing the national hero within a broad civilisational panorama.

A third line was developed by Mirmuhsin, whose novel *The Architect* (*Me'mor*, 1974) chose as its hero not a ruler or a poet but a master builder. By dedicating biographical narrative to a man of craft, Mirmuhsin democratised the genre's conception of historical greatness: the creative labour of the artisan was presented as no less worthy of epic commemoration than statesmanship or scholarship. Taken together, the novels of this period demonstrate that the tradition founded by Oybek had become a self-renewing system, capable of generating distinct artistic answers to the shared question of how the past lives in a person.

The Poetics of the National Tradition

Viewed as a whole, the Uzbek historical-biographical novel rests on several stable artistic principles that together may be called its national poetics. The first is the balance of document and imagination. From Oybek onward, Uzbek novelists treated the source — chronicle, divan, memoir, architectural monument — as a binding contract with the reader. Invention is admitted only where the record is silent, and even there it must remain historically probable. This

scrupulousness distinguishes the tradition from the freer romantic biography cultivated elsewhere and explains why the genre in Uzbekistan has always stood close to scholarship.

The second principle is psychologism as the engine of historicism. The epoch is revealed through the consciousness of the hero rather than through authorial digression. Ulugbek's meditations on the fate of his observatory or Babur's nocturnal self-reckonings carry more historical information, in the artistic sense, than any panoramic description could; the reader experiences the fifteenth or sixteenth century as an inner condition. The third principle is the ethical interpretation of greatness. The Uzbek tradition consistently portrays its heroes at the point where genius collides with power, loyalty with truth, or creation with destruction, so that the biography becomes a moral parable without ceasing to be history.

Finally, the tradition is marked by a distinctive linguistic strategy: the moderate archaisation of speech. Rather than reproducing the old literary language, which would estrange the modern reader, the classics of the genre developed a stylised idiom in which carefully dosed archaisms, classical quotations and folk turns of phrase create the acoustic illusion of the past. This stylistic middle path, first found by Qodiriy and perfected by Oybek and Pirimqul Qodirov, remains one of the most recognisable features of Uzbek historical prose.

Renewal of the Tradition after Independence

The attainment of independence in 1991 altered the conditions of the genre profoundly. Figures whose commemoration had been discouraged or ideologically filtered — above all Amir Temur — returned to the centre of literary attention, and the archive itself expanded as previously inaccessible sources entered circulation. The historical-biographical novel was called upon to participate directly in the reconstruction of national memory, and writers of the older generation responded alongside newcomers: Pirimqul Qodirov continued his Baburid cycle, while a wave of novels devoted to Temur, to the great jurists and saints of Transoxiana, and to the Jadid reformers of the early twentieth century broadened the genre's gallery of heroes beyond the classical triad of poet, scholar and king.

The post-independence period also brought poetic experimentation. Younger prose writers began to combine the inherited documentary discipline with conditional, mythopoetic and modernist techniques — shifting narrative perspectives, non-linear composition, the interpenetration of historical and legendary planes. Such experiments do not abolish the classical tradition; rather, they confirm its vitality, for each innovation defines itself in dialogue with the conventions established between the 1940s and the 1980s. The genre today functions simultaneously as a guardian of the national canon and as a laboratory of contemporary Uzbek prose.

Conclusion

The historical-biographical novel in Uzbek literature developed from the historical prose of Abdulla Qodiriy, was constituted as a genre by Oybek's Navoiy, and reached classical maturity in the work of Odil Yoqubov, Pirimqul Qodirov and Mirmuhsin. Across this evolution a coherent national tradition took shape, defined by the contractual treatment of documentary sources, by psychologism as the principal instrument of historicism, by the ethical framing of historical greatness, and by a stylised language that renders the past audible without making it opaque. The independence period did not interrupt this tradition but re-energised it, widening its thematic range and admitting new narrative techniques. The genre thus remains what it has been since 1944: the form in which Uzbek literature conducts its most serious conversation with the national past.

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