

## Literary Development, Patronage, And Aesthetics in the Timurid Era: The Legacy of Alisher Navoi

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**Abstract:** This study explores the literary and cultural landscape of the Timurid era, focusing on the dynamic interplay between patronage, aesthetics, and literary production. Using the example of Alisher Navoi, a prominent statesman and poet, the article investigates how the Herat court fostered a dual literary heritage in Persian and Chaghatay Turkic, thereby constructing a vibrant bilingual literary field. The analysis highlights how Navoi's contributions—both as a poet and as a cultural patron—exemplify the intellectual sophistication and conscious innovation of the Timurid “renaissance.” Drawing on historical chronicles, literary treatises, and modern scholarly interpretations, the study contextualizes Timurid literature as a product of both refinement of Persianate traditions and pioneering assertion of Turkic poetic legitimacy. It also examines the role of symbolic aesthetics and Sufi-influenced ethical ideals in shaping the narratives and imagery of Navoi's epics, particularly the *Khamsa*. The findings underline that Timurid literary culture was not a static inheritance but a consciously constructed legacy, whose resonance extended far beyond the political lifespan of the dynasty.

**Keywords:** Alisher Navoi; Timurid literature; patronage; bilingualism; Chaghatay Turkic; Persian literary tradition; literary aesthetics; symbolic poetics; *Khamsa*; Sufism.



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### Introduction

The Timurid era (late 14th – early 16th century) is widely recognized as a pinnacle of cultural florescence in the Islamic world. In the span of barely a century, the Timurid courts – from Samarkand to Herat – presided over an extraordinary renaissance of arts and letters, including poetry, history, painting, calligraphy, and architecture. Scholars often term this efflorescence the “Timurid Renaissance,” viewing it as a *glorious fin-de-siècle flowering of culture and the arts*, remarkable for its sophisticated patronage networks. At the same time, historians note that Timurid cultural achievements did not emerge *ex nihilo*; rather, the Timurids refined and elaborated upon existing Persianate traditions in art and literature. The result was an intrinsically extraordinary period of creativity whose legacy far outstripped the dynasty's brief political rule.

Within this cultural renaissance, literature occupied a place of high prestige, nurtured by enlightened patronage and a conscious aesthetic drive. The Timurid courts produced an effusion of Persian and Turkic literary works, with Herat in the late 15th century (under Sultan Ḥusayn Bāyqarā) becoming a particularly vibrant literary hub. Among the luminaries of Timurid literature, the figure of ‘Alī Shīr Navā’ī (Alisher Navoi, 1441–1501) stands out. Navoi was a statesman, poet, and intellectual whose contributions exemplify the era’s intersections of literary development, patronage, and aesthetics. He was instrumental in elevating Chaghatay Turkic to a literary language, alongside the dominant Persian, and served as a patron for many scholars and artists at the Herat court. Renowned historian Bernard Lewis dubbed Navoi “the Chaucer of the Turks” for his role in revolutionizing Turkic literature. Indeed, Navoi’s career encapsulates the Timurid cultural ethos: a deep reverence for the classical Persian canon coupled with a bold initiative to expand the literary tradition in new directions, all under the aegis of courtly support.

This article examines the development of literature in the Timurid era through the case of Alisher Navoi and his contemporaries, focusing on how patronage and aesthetic ideals shaped that development. After providing background on Timurid literary culture, we analyze Navoi’s contributions and the patronage dynamics of the Herat court. We then explore the aesthetic principles of Timurid literature – particularly the blend of innovation and tradition – that defined the era’s poetic works. Through this analysis, we seek to understand how the Timurid “renaissance” in letters was consciously constructed and what legacy it left for subsequent generations.

### Timurid Literary Culture: Bilingual Heritage and Renaissance Context

By the 15th century, Timurid Central Asia had inherited a rich **Persian literary heritage** while also fostering **Turkic literary expression**. Timurid elites were often bilingual – fluent in Persian (the lingua franca of high culture) and Chaghatay Turkic – reflecting what scholars have called a “symbiosis of Turk and Tajik (Persian)” in Timurid culture (Subtelny, 1997, p. 65). Persian literature had long been the prestigious tradition in the region, encompassing classical poetry (e.g. the works of Sa’dī and Ḥāfeẓ) and epic romances like Nizāmī Ganjavī’s *Khamṣa*. The Timurids eagerly embraced this Persian canon. They commissioned copies of Persian classics and even undertook critical editions and compilations of canonical texts. For example, under Prince Baysunghur Mirza in Herat, a monumental edition of *Firdawsī’s Shāhnāma* (Book of Kings) was produced, complete with lavish illumination. Similarly, the court sponsored editions of Ḥāfeẓ’s *Divān* and attempted a comprehensive compilation of Amīr Khusrow’s works. These projects demonstrate the Timurids’ reverence for Persian literature and a *self-conscious effort to codify and preserve* the high cultural tradition (Subtelny, 1997, p. 66). As Maria Subtelny observes, the Timurid literary scene represented “the point of culmination of previous developments” – essentially a grand culmination of the Persianate literary trajectory up to that time.

At the same time, the Timurid period witnessed the **flowering of Turkic literature**, a development that was new in scope and sophistication. Prior to the 15th century, literary works in Turkic languages (e.g. in the Chaghatay dialect) were relatively limited in prestige compared to Persian. This changed dramatically at Sultan Ḥusayn Bāyqarā’s court in Herat, where Navoi championed the use of Chaghatay Turkic for high literature. According to Marc Toutant – a modern scholar of Navoi – the late Timurid era can be seen as “an authentic renaissance of arts and culture,” in which the Turkic literary language *reached its apogee* thanks to Navoi’s efforts (Toutant, 2016, p. 23). Navoi authored numerous works in Chaghatay and by the end of his life was regarded as the greatest representative of Turkic (Chaghatay) literature. His achievement was not only in writing masterpieces himself, but in proving that Turkic could match Persian as a vehicle for sophisticated poetry. In his seminal treatise *Muḥākamat al-Lughatayn* (“Judgment of Two Languages,” completed 1499), Navoi explicitly argued the superiority of Turkic over Persian for poetic expression, noting its richer vocabulary for certain concepts (Navoi, 1499/2011, p. 98).

He famously illustrated that Old Turkic had dozens of specific terms (for types of ducks, for nuanced forms of crying, etc.) where Persian had only general words. While his tone was partly rhetorical, the treatise underscored a serious cultural point: Turkic was a language of *potential eloquence and nuance*, and under the Timurids it was time for that potential to be realized. Thus, the Timurid literary culture was fundamentally **bilingual and bicultural** – Persian represented the established cosmopolitan tradition, and Turkic the rising vernacular voice – and the era’s literary renaissance was characterized by a dynamic interplay between the two.

Crucially, this literary blossoming did not occur spontaneously; it was nurtured by conscious **patronage** decisions. Timurid rulers and high officials saw cultural patronage as a cornerstone of legitimation and legacy. From the reign of Timur (Tamerlane) himself, who ordered court histories and supported poets, through his successors, there was a concerted effort to glorify the dynasty via the pen as well as the sword. The Timurid sultans Shah Rukh and Ulugh Beg, and later Abu Sa’id, laid groundwork by patronizing scholars (especially in history and science). But it was under Sultan Husayn Bāyqarā (r. 1469–1506) in *Herat* that literary patronage reached its zenith. Sultan Husayn gathered an illustrious circle of poets, artists, and sages at his court, earning Herat renown akin to a “Florence of the Timurid Renaissance” (Grousset, as cited in Sirota, 2019, p. 74) – a cosmopolitan milieu of creativity. Among the shining figures were the Persian poet ‘Abd al-Rahmān Jāmī (1414–1492) and the polymath painter Behzād, alongside Navoi himself. Notably, Navoi and Jāmī enjoyed a close friendship; together they embodied the Persian–Turkic duality of Timurid letters (Navoi writing primarily in Turkic, Jami in Persian) within a shared spiritual and aesthetic framework (both were Sufi-influenced). This collaborative atmosphere was made possible by Husayn Bayqarā’s support and by Navoi’s own efforts as a facilitator.

### Navoi as Patron and Poet-Statesman

Alisher Navoi’s unique position as both a creator and a patron makes him an illuminating case study of Timurid literary dynamics. Navoi was a high-ranking minister (vizier) at the Herat court and a confidant of Sultan Husayn. In these roles he wielded significant influence over cultural policy and resource allocation for the arts. He used his position – and personal wealth – to sponsor numerous building projects (like madrasas and libraries) and to financially support poets, scholars, and musicians. Contemporary chronicles and biographical dictionaries (such as Dawlatshāh Samarqandī’s *Tadhkirat al-shu‘arā* and Ẓwāndamīr’s *Ḥabīb al-siyar*) enumerate the many figures Navoi patronized. For example, he is credited with backing the historian Mirkhvānd (d. 1498) and his grandson Ẓwāndamīr (d. 1535/6), both of whom wrote important Timurid-era chronicles. He also provided patronage to poets like Jāmī, Ḥātifī, and others, commissioning their works or giving stipends to ease their scholarly pursuits. Such support was not merely altruistic; it was part of a broader vision to make Herat a thriving center of learning comparable to the great courts of earlier Persianate rulers. Navoi’s actions thus exemplify how *patronage underpinned the literary development* of the period. The steady output of high-quality literature in Timurid Herat was, in large part, enabled by the material and moral encouragement that patrons like Sultan Husayn and Navoi provided to writers (Sela, 2011, p. 37).

Navoi’s own literary output was prodigious and transformative. Writing under the pen-name “Navā’ī,” he produced poetry, prose treatises, and even works on linguistic theory. He composed four *divāns* (collections of lyric poems) totaling nearly 50,000 verses, structured according to the stages of life from youth to old age. These poems, mostly ghazals and rubā’iyāt (quatrains), display a mastery of the Persian lyrical aesthetic adapted into Turkic language – rich in imagery, wordplay, and emotional depth. Navoi also wrote **didactic and scholarly works**: *Mīzān al-Awzān* (“The Measure of Meters”) was a detailed treatise on prosody, reflecting his meticulous attention to the aesthetics of poetic form. His *Majālis al-Nafā’is* (“Assemblies of Distinguished Men”) compiled over 450 biographical sketches of poets and intellectuals, effectively an annotated *who’s who* of Timurid cultural life. This biographical anthology not only preserved valuable information

about his contemporaries but also indicates Navoi's curatorial instinct – he was consciously documenting the literary milieu for posterity, a hallmark of the era's self-awareness.

Navoi's crowning literary achievement is arguably his *Khamisa* (Quintet), a collection of five epic poems written in 1483–1485. This work was an explicit homage to (and competition with) the famed Persian *Khamisa* of Nizāmī Ganjavī. By attempting a *Khamisa* in Turkic, Navoi was staking a claim that Turkic poetry could equal the revered Persian models in sophistication and beauty. The five poems of Navoi's *Khamisa* — *Hayrat al-Abrār* ("Wonders of the Righteous"), *Farhād va Shīrīn*, *Laylī va Majnūn*, *Sab'ai Sayyār* ("Seven Travelers/Planets"), and *Sadd-i Iskandarī* ("Alexander's Wall") — closely mirror Nizāmī's narrative themes (mystical contemplation, romantic tragedy, chivalric adventure, etc.) while introducing original twists. For example, in *Farhād va Shīrīn*, Navoi notably centers the story on Farhād (a humble stonemason) as the hero, rather than the typical prince Khusraw. This narrative change imbues the tale with a moral emphasis on spiritual devotion and selfless love, aligning with Sufi ideals (Kurbanov, 2019, p. 278). By making the self-sacrificing Farhād the protagonist who pursues Shīrīn, Navoi's version foregrounds themes of sincere love and ascetic sacrifice over worldly kingship. Such alterations illustrate Navoi's aesthetic and intellectual priorities: he maintained the *outer form* of the Persian epics but infused them with localized ethical and symbolic nuances. In doing so, Navoi's *Khamisa* exemplified the Timurid literary ethos of *innovative imitation* – a creative dialogue with the canon. As Toutant observes, Navoi's *Khamisa* at once *embodied* the Timurid cultural values (eloquence, erudition, Sufi-influenced wisdom) and marked a *departure* by carving out a distinct Turkic literary identity within a Persianate world (Toutant, 2016, pp. 105–107).

Navoi's success in elevating Turkic literature can be credited partly to the strong patronage environment. Sultan Husayn Bayqarā himself was an accomplished poet (writing in Persian) and deeply invested in cultural patronage. He entrusted Navoi with significant autonomy to lead cultural initiatives. Under Navoi's de facto cultural ministry, Herat saw the flourishing of manuscript workshops, the proliferation of poetic gatherings (*mahfils*), and the integration of Sufi scholars into court literary life. The overlapping of **literary and spiritual circles** was another hallmark of Timurid Herat: Navoi and Jāmī were both disciples of the Naqshbandī Sufi order, and their works are replete with Sufi metaphors and ethics. Navoi's patronage extended to Sufi institutions as well – he endowed *khānaqāh* (Sufi lodges) and supported figures like Khwāja Ahrār (a prominent Naqshbandī shaykh) in their charitable works. This blending of patronage for literature and spirituality created a **holistic cultural atmosphere** in which aesthetic pursuits were seen as pathways to ethical and even metaphysical refinement.

In summary, Navoi exemplified the Timurid ideal of the *poet-statesman-patron*. Through his high office he channeled resources into cultural endeavors; through his writings he expanded the artistic horizons of his society. His dual legacy – administrative and literary – underlines how deeply intertwined governance and cultural patronage were in the Timurid context. As one historian notes, "Mir Alisher Navoi's career demonstrates that art and statecraft went hand in hand in Timurid Herat, each reinforcing the other in the quest to elevate court culture" (Subtelny, 2007, p. 270). Indeed, the flourishing of literature under Navoi's stewardship was not incidental but rather a strategic aspect of Timurid rulership, aimed at immortalizing their reign as a golden age of culture.

### Aesthetics of Timurid Literature: Tradition and Innovation

Timurid literary aesthetics were characterized by a conscious tension between **tradition and innovation**. On one hand, Timurid poets saw themselves as heirs to a long Persian literary tradition and adhered to its established genres, forms, and imagery. On the other hand, they sought to excel and even surpass their models through refinement, complexity, and creative adaptation. This led to what Subtelny (1997) calls a "*self-conscious taste for technical refinement*" in the arts. In literature, this manifested as a penchant for intricate poetic devices, learned allusions, and



formal experimentation. For example, late Timurid poetry often features *mo‘ammā* (riddles or enigma poems) and elaborate figurative language, reflecting an almost virtuoso display of poetic skill (Subtelny, 1997, pp. 67–68). This pursuit of complexity was not mere ornamentation; it was tied to the era’s intellectual vibrancy and love of knowledge. The poets and scholars of Herat codified their aesthetic principles in treatises and manuals, indicating a meta-literary awareness. As Subtelny notes, the period saw something akin to the creation of “critical editions” and theoretical treatises on all arts – from manuals on poetics and prosody to works on musical theory and calligraphy – demonstrating an *unprecedented codification of aesthetic knowledge*. For instance, Navoi’s contemporary ‘Abdullāh Hatifi wrote a treatise on Persian poetics, and Jāmī composed works on music and commentary on earlier poetry, all to systematize the art forms. Such works show the Timurid conviction that beauty and technique could be analyzed, taught, and perfected.

A distinct facet of Timurid literary aesthetics was the heavy use of **symbolism and allegory**, often with Sufi underpinnings. The blending of mystical philosophy with literary expression enriched the imagery and themes of Timurid poetry. Navoi’s works are illustrative: his poems abound with classical Sufi metaphors (the *moth and flame* to symbolize the soul’s annihilating love for the Divine, the *nightingale and rose* to symbolize the lover and beloved, etc.). In *Laylī va Majnūn*, a tale of mad love, the protagonist Majnūn’s wilderness exile and raving love are presented as more than romance – they mirror the Sufi theme of holy madness (Majnūn becomes a metaphor for the soul enraptured by the love of God, beyond reason). In *Hayrat al-Abrār*, Navoi interweaves didactic stories that carry moral and mystical lessons, echoing the structure of Sa’dī’s *Gulistān* but with a stronger mystical coloring. Perhaps most striking is the rich tapestry of symbols in *Farhād va Shīrīn* and *Sab‘ai Sayyār*. As modern analysis shows, Navoi introduced episodes in *Farhād va Shīrīn* that are laden with symbolic objects: Farhād encounters a dragon and a giant, obtains the *treasure of Afridun*, the *ring of Solomon*, and the *cup of Jamshid*, and breaks the magical *tilsim* (spell) of Iskandar’s castle. Each of these legendary items carries allegorical meaning in Islamic lore – Solomon’s ring signifies kingly authority and wisdom, Jamshid’s cup signifies cosmic vision, Iskandar’s mirror (alluded via the *tilsim*) signifies self-knowledge or world knowledge, and so on. Within Navoi’s narrative, these symbols can be read as representing stages of spiritual attainment or the virtues a seeker (Farhād) must acquire. In cognitive terms, Navoi’s audience was expected to recognize these cultural symbols and map them to conceptual themes: e.g. the *dragon* that Farhād slays can represent the lower self or ego (*nafs*) that the spiritual traveler must overcome (Kurbanov, 2019, pp. 279–280). The aesthetic effect is a multilayered narrative – on the surface an adventure romance, at depth an allegory of the soul’s journey. Timurid literature often operated on such dual levels, satisfying both the courtly taste for ornate story and the Sufi appetite for inner meaning. This aligns with the broader Timurid cultural aesthetic of *combining zahir and batin* (outer form and inner truth) in artistic production, an integration of beauty and meaning.

In terms of **language and style**, Timurid poets strove for eloquence (*fasāḥat* in Persian, *ravonlūq* in Chaghatay) and rhetorical brilliance. Persian literary style at that time was influenced by the “Indian style” (Sabk-i Hindī) emerging, which favored elaborate metaphors and far-fetched analogies, though in Herat a relatively classical style still prevailed due to Jāmī’s influence. Navoi’s Turkic style, interestingly, was shaped by Persian models yet had to develop new idioms for the same concepts. He often calqued Persian metaphors into Turkic, enriching Chaghatay with the ability to convey refined abstractions. For example, where Persian poets might describe divine love with the metaphor of wine (intoxication with the divine), Navoi in Turkic uses *mey* (wine) similarly, but also employs native Turkic imagery of sky and steppe to localize the experience (Hayitmetov, 1996, p. 83). The aesthetic project of translating Persianate imagery into Turkic sometimes required neologisms or creative compounding, which Navoi deftly executed – a process he himself described in *Muḥākamat al-Lughatayn*. He argued that Turkic’s abundance of

synonyms and varied terminology gave poets a vast palette for poetic diction (Navoi, 1499, pp. 102–103). The result was a style of Turkic poetry in his works that is richly ornamented, deeply allusive, and sonically melodic – in a sense, *Persian poetry reborn in a Turkic idiom*. This aesthetic triumph validated Navoi’s bold thesis that a Turkic language could attain the literary beauty of Persian. Later observers, such as the Mughal emperor Babur, praised Navoi’s language as exceedingly sweet and pure, indicating that by the early 16th century the aesthetic legitimacy of Turkic literature was well established (Babur, 1520, as cited in Thackston, 1996, p. 237).

It is important to note that Timurid aesthetics always balanced **innovation with continuity**. The Timurid literati never rejected the past; they embraced it so fully that their innovations often took the form of *hyper-heritage* – pushing classical forms to their ultimate refinement. As Subtelny puts it, the Timurids “did not create something completely new... their contribution lay in their refinement and inexhaustible elaboration of existing traditions” (1997, p. 66). This assessment is clearly reflected in the literary field. For instance, Navoi’s *Khamasa* did not invent new genres – it stayed within the established epics and romance genres of Persian masnavī poetry – but it elaborated them to a high polish in a new language. Jāmī’s works, similarly, were firmly in line with Persian Sufi poetic tradition (following Attar and Rumi), yet Jāmī’s *Bahāristān* and other writings show subtle innovations in storytelling technique and didactic style that gave them fresh life. We can thus characterize Timurid literary aesthetics as *renaissance classicism*: a revival and peak of classical forms, marked by conscious artistic self-improvement. Contemporary French Orientalist scholars summarizing this phenomenon note that the Timurid literati were deeply self-aware: they actively “mirrored” themselves against classical predecessors and against each other, creating a dialogue that advanced the entire tradition (Szuppe, 1997, p. 320; Toutant, 2016, p. 45).

Finally, we should consider the aesthetic **legacy** of Timurid literature. The works produced under Timurid patronage did not end their influence with the fall of the Timurids in 1507; they resonated across the Persianate world. The Mughal Empire in India (itself founded by Babur, a Timurid prince) carried forward the Herat literary style – Babur was an avid poet in Chaghatay and a great admirer of Navoi, and under Akbar and Jahangir, Navoi’s works were translated into Persian and circulated (Khalid, 1995, p. 112). In Safavid Iran, the Persian classics that the Timurids had lovingly preserved and edited (like the *Shāhnāma* and works of Jāmī) became mainstays of the Safavid literary curriculum. Even the Ottoman Turks, far to the west, showed esteem for Timurid-era writers: Sultan Bayezid II reportedly collected paintings by Behzād and poems by Jāmī. In Central Asia, the Shaybanid (Uzbek) rulers who succeeded the Timurids in Transoxiana eagerly claimed the Timurid cultural legacy – they patronized descendants of Herat’s scholars and continued to copy Navoi’s works, using them to bolster their own cultural legitimacy (Subtelny, 1997, pp. 68–69). The enduring popularity of Navoi’s poetry in Central Asia (where he is national poet of Uzbekistan today) and Jāmī’s poetry across the Persian-speaking world attests to the Timurid aesthetic achievement. The Timurid period, in short, set benchmarks of literary excellence that later courts emulated as the standard of a golden age.

## Conclusion

The Timurid Empire’s cultural impact – particularly in the realm of literature – far outlasted its short-lived political power. Through the case of Alisher Navoi and the Herat literary circle, we see how *literary development, patronage, and aesthetics* were tightly interwoven in the Timurid renaissance. Timurid rulers and courtiers deliberately used patronage of arts and letters to craft a legacy of refinement; they invested in poets, scholars, and lavish manuscripts as a means of immortalizing their rule. This patronage created the fertile ground on which literary geniuses like Navoi and Jāmī could thrive. Under their pens, the Timurid era achieved a synthesis of Persian and Turkic literary traditions, yielding a bilingual corpus of works that were both deeply rooted in the past and innovatively responsive to the present. Aesthetically, Timurid literature reached

heights of sophistication: it was self-consciously artful, steeped in symbolism, and unafraid to experiment within classical frameworks.

Alisher Navoi's legacy illustrates these points vividly. He demonstrated that a Turkic vernacular literature could stand shoulder-to-shoulder with the venerable Persian canon, given the right patronage and vision. He also showed how a statesman could leverage culture for both enlightenment and statecraft – in Navoi's hands, poetry became a tool of both personal expression and communal identity formation. The "taste for the intricate" that scholars like Subtelny identify as the hallmark of Timurid art was clearly manifest in Navoi's ornate yet profound verses. But Navoi and his peers did more than create beautiful verse; they effectively **curated a cultural renaissance**. They collected, commented on, and codified the knowledge of their time, ensuring that the Timurid age would be remembered as one of high erudition and artistic culmination.

In conclusion, the Timurid literary renaissance exemplified by Navoi was not an isolated miracle but the product of deliberate patronage strategies, cross-cultural synergy, and rigorous aesthetic effort. It stands as a testament to how a convergence of political will and artistic talent can produce a golden age whose glow endures. As modern scholars reaffirm, the Timurids "have universally been acknowledged... as representing the pinnacle of patronage of the arts and letters" (Subtelny, 1997, p. 59), and nowhere is this more evident than in the literary masterpieces forged under their rule. The works of the Timurid era, and Navoi's in particular, continued to inspire poets and patrons in subsequent centuries, from the Mughals to modern Central Asia, underscoring the lasting legacy of this remarkable fusion of literature, patronage, and aesthetics.

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