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THE IMAGE OF AMIR TEMUR IN RUSSIAN AND UZBEK LITERATURE

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Abstract

To understand the image of Amir Temur, it is necessary to take into account the historical context and ideological attitudes of the eras in which literary works were created. The Soviet period (1920s–1980s) was generally characterized by a biased attitude toward medieval monarchs. Marxist-Leninist doctrine viewed the feudal era through the prism of class struggle, and conquerors were seen as embodiments of expansion and reaction.

Keywords: Muhammad Ali, Sarbadars, Amir Temur, Buribay Akhmedov.

Introduction

In the Uzbek SSR, the theme of Temur was effectively taboo for many years: referring to the figure of a commander who created an empire could be interpreted as “feudal nationalism” and an idealization of a “reactionary past.” For this reason, until the late 1980s the image of Amir Temur was either absent from Soviet Uzbek fiction or presented in a distortedly negative light. In Russian Soviet literature he was also not at the center of attention. Only occasionally did he appear in historical essays or folklore motifs, while critics of that time branded Tamerlane as a bloody despot, contrasting him with “people’s heroes.”

A turning point came in the late 1980s and early 1990s. The period of perestroika and the subsequent collapse of the USSR brought freedom to reinterpret history.

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In the republics of Central Asia, a revival of national self-consciousness began: in Uzbekistan, calls were voiced to return to the people their great ancestors. After independence was declared, the new state ideology established the image of Timur as a symbol of national statehood and strength. As President I. Karimov noted in one of his speeches devoted to Timur, he was proclaimed “a great son of the Uzbek people who brought glory to our land.” Literature responded to these ideological changes: beginning in the 1990s, Uzbekistan witnessed a surge of historical novels, poems, and dramas in which Amir Timur became a central figure of a positive pantheon. This surge was largely a reaction to earlier silence, an attempt to restore historical justice through art.

Until the late 1980s, Uzbek literature had effectively avoided the figure of Amir Timur because of the official ban on “glorifying the feudal past.” However, in the late Soviet period the first signs of revision appeared. One of the first major works about Timur in the Uzbek language was Muhammad Ali’s historical dilogy *Sarbadorlar* (“The Sarbadar Rebels,” 1989–1990). Published even before independence (in the journal *Sharq Yulduzi*), this novel about popular uprisings against the Mongols is notable for rehabilitating the image of the young Timur against the background of peoples’ struggle for freedom. Although Amir Timur is not the main character of *Sarbadorlar* (he appears in the background as a young commander), he is not portrayed as a villain. On the contrary, through the context of struggle against invaders, the author suggests that Timur’s role was historically justified in restoring order. The writer himself admitted that he wrote the book in order to reassess the colonial version of history: “That is why in my work I turned to such historical figures as Spitamen, Muqanna, the Sarbadars, as well as Amir Timur, who at that time was considered a controversial figure, and to other similar characters of our history,” the author openly noted about the conception of *Sarbadorlar*¹. This programmatic statement shows that already at the end of the

¹ Мухаммад Али. Умид қўнглимизни ёритиб турсин // Ёшлик журнали. – 2011. – № 7.

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Soviet era Uzbek literature was taking on the task of restoring historical pride and dismantling imposed negative myths.

In the early 1990s, immediately after independence, the theme of Temur rapidly emerged from the shadows. Writers gained the opportunity to create without regard for party dogma, and within a short time landmark works appeared that laid the foundation for a new “Temurid canon.”

One of the pioneers of the new perspective was historian and writer Buribay Akhmedov, author of the first complete historical novel *Amir Temur* (work began in the 1980s; full publication 1991–1995). As a professional historian, Academician B. Akhmedov sought to rely on reliable sources and present Temur’s biography in artistic form. The novel covers the hero’s entire life, from his youth in Kesh to the creation of an empire and his death, combining chronicle-like accuracy with patriotic pathos. The author clearly sympathizes with his character, emphasizing his progressive role for the 14th century as a unifier of the fragmented lands of Maverannahr, a reformer, and a creator. Thus, the text repeatedly includes episodes in which, by Temur’s order, destroyed irrigation canals are restored, madrasas are built, and scholars and poets receive patronage. For example, in one key moment of the novel, the young Temur utters words that became his life motto: “In justice lies strength”², thereby declaring the principle on which he will build his state. In general, Akhmedov portrays the image of a wise, decisive, and just ruler who united the country and strengthened statehood. Despite a certain idealization, the novel does not go beyond historical plausibility: in the notes the author refers to medieval chronicles and the *Temur Tuzuklari* (a collection of instructions attributed to Temur himself), which lends the narrative a scholarly documentary foundation.

If the 1990s marked Temur’s return to Uzbek literature, the 2000s were characterized by the creation of large monumental epics that consolidated the

² Ахмедов Б. Амир Темур: Тарихий роман. – Тошкент: Абдулла Қодирий нашриёти, 1995. – 640 б.

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canonical image of the hero. Two authors played a central role here — Muhammad Ali (who continued the theme he had begun) and Nurali Kabul. After the success of *Sarbadorlar*, Muhammad Ali wrote the large-scale tetralogy *Ulug' Saltanat* (“The Great Empire,” 1999–2019), devoted directly to the Timurid era. This cycle of four large novels covers a wide period: from the rise of Amir Temur’s power to the reigns of his descendants (each book focuses on one heir: Jahangir, Umarshaykh, Miranshah, Shahrukh)³. By combining these parts, the author created a panoramic picture of Temur’s empire, showing both his own deeds and the destinies of his sons. Stylistically, M. Ali’s epic is distinguished by epic scope and patriotic pathos: Temur appears as a powerful leader of global scale whose actions predetermine the course of history. Researchers note that the author deliberately mythologizes the image of Temur, emphasizing the external aspects of his power — military victories, state building — while pushing personal doubts or weaknesses into the background. The hero’s inner world is less detailed; in Ali’s work, Amir Temur is rather a symbol of an era, a personification of the idea of a strong empire. Even the commander’s cruelty is interpreted as historically justified: “his Temur is not just a ruler but a symbol of an era whose harshness is justified by the need to maintain power and create an empire,” the authors assert, explaining severe measures by higher goals⁴. The text often contains scenes of brutal executions and fierce battles, yet they are accompanied by explanations that Temur must be ruthless to save the country from anarchy. An illustrative episode shows the hero replying to a comrade’s reproach of despotism: “Even if I am, in your opinion, a tyrant, without me you would not live till morning.” This remark clearly reflects the central message: only Temur’s firm power can protect the people from chaos and external

³ М.Али. Улуғ салтанат (Жаҳонгир Мирзо). 1-китоб. Наврӯз. – Тошкент, 2019. – Б. 414.; М.Али. Улуғ салтанат (Умаршайх Мирзо). 2-китоб. Наврӯз. – Тошкент, 2019. – Б. 462.; М.Али. Улуғ салтанат (Мироншоҳ Мирзо). 3-китоб. Наврӯз. – Тошкент, 2019. – Б. 396.; М.Али. Улуғ салтанат (Шоҳруҳ Мирзо). 4-китоб. Наврӯз. – Тошкент, 2019. – Б. 509.

⁴ Бобохонов М., Гофурова Ж. Художественное воплощение образа правителя в произведениях Евгения Березикова и Мухаммеда Али // *Uza ilmiy tadqiqotlar jurnali*, №9, 345, 2025. <https://uza.uz/posts/643504>

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threats. Thus, Muhammad Ali shapes the canonical post-Soviet image of Temur as a great imperial figure whose harshness is explained by duty to history. If in B. Akhmedov's work the image had a more educational character (Temur as benefactor, patron, reformer on the throne), in M. Ali's it acquires superhuman dimensions of a legendary hero. This is обусловлено жанром: Akhmedov wrote in a realist manner, whereas Ali created an epic with elements of heroic myth, magnifying the figure of the ruler.

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