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The Spiritual Interpretation of The Image of The Four Caliphs in Alisher Navoi's Works

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Abstract: The spiritual and artistic dimensions of Alisher Navoi's literary heritage have long intrigued scholars for their depth and symbolic richness. One of the poet's most significant mystical works, *Lison ut-Tayr* ("The Language of the Birds"), presents a unique interpretation of early Islamic figures, particularly the four rightly guided caliphs, as central spiritual archetypes. Despite recognition of Navoi's mystical inclinations, the integration of historical caliphal figures into his Sufi poetics remains underexplored in literary analysis. This study aims to analyze how Navoi's spiritual worldview is reflected in his poetic representation of Abu Bakr, Umar, Usman, and Ali, shedding light on their roles in shaping Sufi ideals. The analysis reveals that each caliph is associated with a distinct spiritual virtue—truthfulness, justice, modesty, and sainthood—and that Navoi skillfully integrates these qualities into the structural and thematic composition of *Lison ut-Tayr*. By examining the literary, historical, and spiritual dimensions of these portrayals, the article demonstrates Navoi's deliberate use of the caliphs as prototypes for the Sufi path and as literary instruments to assert the continuity between Islamic tradition and mystical experience. This interpretation underscores the foundational role of early Islamic figures in Central Asian Sufi literature and deepens our understanding of Navoi's poetics as both literary and spiritual discourse rooted in orthodoxy and innovation.

Keywords: Alisher Navoi, *Lison Ut-Tayr*, Four Rightly Guided Caliphs, Sufism, Literary Creation, Artistic Image, Prototype

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1. Introduction

In analyzing and interpreting a literary text, the examination of its series of artistic images and the investigation of their origins is of paramount importance. This is because the artistic image embodies the author's subjective "I" and aesthetic ideal. As noted by the literary scholar Izzat Sulton, "Character (image) is a generalized yet individualized depiction of a person... In the character, the writer's (more broadly, the poet A.R.) attitude toward people and life, and their aesthetic evaluation of life's phenomena, become vividly apparent. The character carries the author's aesthetic ideal". These insights must be considered when reflecting on the images created by Alisher Navoi[1].

To fully comprehend and interpret the essence of Alisher Navoi's creativity, it is crucial to study the historical background and genesis of the artistic images presented in "*Lison ut-tayr*". The significance of this work lies not only in its literary value but also in its potential to illuminate many important theoretical questions within Navoi studies. To

grasp the core meaning of the text, one must first heed the author's own explanations. Navoi himself provides such insights within the text[2].

Kim bu daftar nazmidin kulli murod,
 Chunki marja' mayli erdiyu maod.
 Munda foniy bo'lmay ish o'lmas tamom,
 Foni y ondin topti nazimim ehtimom.

Transcreation:

Whoever seeks the essence in this book of verse,
 For every refuge and abode therein converses.
 Here, mortal deeds shall never meet their end,
 For verse eternal finds beyond the mortal's bend

That is to say, this "book" refers to "Lison ut-tayr", and its overarching purpose is to depict the return to the original source. This, in turn, necessitates the mortal's own mortality. The fact that the work was composed under the pseudonym "Foni" (meaning "mortal") is cited as one reason for this. This very example leaves no doubt that the poem is composed on a mystical, Sufi theme[3].

2. Materials and Methods

The methodology of this article is rooted in a comprehensive qualitative approach combining historical, biographical, and hermeneutic analysis to interpret the spiritual and literary imagery crafted by Alisher Navoi in his mystical work "Lison ut-tayr." The research involves a close textual reading of Navoi's verses, particularly the sections dedicated to the four rightly guided caliphs—Abu Bakr, Umar, Usman, and Ali—through which the poet articulates key elements of Sufi doctrine[4]. Historical narratives and classical Islamic sources, including works by Jalaluddin Suyuti and al-Tabari, are consulted to contextualize Navoi's poetic representations within the broader tapestry of early Islamic history. The study further analyzes how Navoi's literary choices reflect his alignment with the Naqshbandi tradition and his engagement with the doctrine of wahdat al-wujud (unity of existence). This multi-dimensional methodology also incorporates intertextual comparisons with earlier Sufi literature, particularly the works of Attar and Ibn Arabi, to trace the influence and transformation of mystical motifs[5]. The hermeneutic lens is employed to decipher the symbolic and philosophical depth of the imagery, allowing for a nuanced interpretation of Navoi's synthesis of orthodox Sunni thought and Sufi metaphysics. Citations from Navoi's complete works, alongside translations and contextual explanations, enrich the interpretive process. Through this methodological framework, the research aims to demonstrate how Navoi's poetic structure and artistic intent collectively contribute to the embodiment of Sufi ideals and the spiritual elevation of historical Islamic figures within literary tradition[6].

3. Results and Discussion

The Islamic roots of mystical imagery

Alisher Navoi, within the scope of his creative work, fashioned numerous mystical images. The majority of these are based on prototype figures grounded in concrete historical personalities. To understand the genesis of these images, it is essential to have a profound knowledge of the sources from which Sufism emerged. One of the earliest theorists of Sufism, Abu Nasr Sarroji, in his work "Al-Luma" ("The Gleams"), grounds his exposition in the Qur'anic verse: "Allah bears witness, and so do the angels and those endowed with knowledge, maintaining justice; there is no deity but Him"[7]. He writes: "It has been reported that the Prophet (peace be upon him) said, 'The scholars are the inheritors of the prophets'. In my understanding, those who bear witness with justice, as mentioned in the verse, are the rightful heirs of the Prophet. For they are those who hold

firmly to Allah's Book, follow the Messenger's path, and adopt the guidance of the pious and God-fearing people among the companions and the successors. These comprise three groups: the muhaddithin (traditionists), the fuqaha (jurists), and the men of Sufism (Sufi mystics). It is these three groups who testify to the unity of Allah and are truly worthy of inheriting the Prophet"[8].

It is evident that Sarroj places the men of Sufism alongside the muhaddithin (traditionists) and fuqaha (jurists), emphasizing that their fundamental sources are the Qur'an, the Sunnah, and the ways of the pious predecessors (salaf al-salih). This view is echoed in the words of Junaid al-Baghdodi, who stated: "Our path is fundamentally rooted in the Book and the Sunnah. Whoever neither preserves the Book, nor records hadith, nor becomes a jurist should not be followed"[9].

The work "Lison ut-tayr" possesses a distinctive compositional structure, which many scholars who have studied the text have largely overlooked. Following the panegyric of the Prophet (peace be upon him), the narrative proceeds with chapters devoted to the four caliphs. The arrangement of these introductory chapters serves two purposes. Firstly, Alisher Navoi's adherence to the compositional model of his great predecessor Farididdin Attor is evident, reflecting a deliberate effort to preserve the structural integrity of the earlier work. Secondly, the inclusion of chapters and narratives about the four caliphs at the outset reveals a deliberate poetic intent Navoi seeks to articulate a particular perspective from the very beginning of the text. As Izzat Sulton observes, "The author's point of view is a decisive element of composition". In "Lison ut-tayr", the poet's standpoint and aesthetic ideal is the archetype of the perfect human, whose means of realization is the doctrine of Sufism. To this end, Alisher Navoi engages with the philosophy of wahdat al-wujud (unity of existence) as expounded in Attor's work, but in his own distinctive manner. As noted by the Turkish literary scholar Ogah Sirri Levend, "Navoi softened the philosophy of wahdat al-wujud found in Attor's writings to a considerable extent and sought to align this Sufi doctrine more closely with the orthodox Sunni worldview"[10].

Indeed, within the Naqshbandi order to which Alisher Navoi belonged, the interest in Abn Arabi's philosophy of wahdat al-wujud (the unity of existence) began with the scholarly activities of Khoja Muhammad Porso, the chief khalifa of Bahauddin Naqshband. This intellectual engagement reached its zenith in the scholarly and creative work of Abdurahman Jami. The fact that Jami composed commentaries on several of Ibn Arabi's works serves as clear evidence of this influence. Alisher Navoi himself, when enumerating Jami's Sufi commentaries in his "Khamasatul-mutahayyirin", emphasized that these were written at Jami's personal request, acknowledging his own role in encouraging their composition: "...this humble servant was the cause of their classification and composition". The Sufi scholar J. Kholmuminov writes regarding the Naqshbandi approach to Abn Arabi's doctrine of wahdat al-wujud: "The Naqshbandi teachings absorbed Ibn Arabi's philosophy of the unity of existence to a certain extent, yet implemented it without deviating from the principles of Hanafi jurisprudence and creed. As a result, the Naqshbandi doctrine solidified itself theoretically and intellectually within the philosophy of gnosis while simultaneously adapting it to fit the framework of Naqshbandi practice"[11].

As noted above, the composition of "Lison ut-tayr" is intrinsically linked with the poet's artistic intention and his doctrinal, mystical convictions. This is because the structure of a literary work represents an "internal cohesion, an organization based on content. Such cohesion must be grounded in thematic unity and serve to express its central idea or purpose"[12].

The figure of the four caliphs as a mystical image

Following the traditional sections of praise, supplication, and the na't miraj of spiritual ascent, the text dedicates chapters to the eulogizing of the four caliphs, enriching

the main thematic discourse by recounting the most significant events of their lives. The initial chapter, devoted to the first caliph Abu Bakr Siddiq (may Allah be pleased with him), emphasizes his profound devotion and self-sacrifice for Islam and the Prophet (peace be upon him). The accompanying narrative further highlights his steadfast care in preserving the integrity of the pillars of Islam:

Мустафодин сўнгра аҳли иртидо,
 Chun xilofatqa ul o'ldi istinod,
 Din tariqida adovat tuzdilar,
 Kim hujum aylab jadal ko'rguzdilar.
 Bergali islom ruknig'a halal,
 Kim zakot aylab ayon erdi jadal.
 Ul g'azab aylab bu nav' etti xitob,
 Kim nabi qonunidin bir rishtatob –
 O'ksamak tag'yir ila imkoni yo'q,
 O'ksutur elga qilichdur, dog'i o'q.

Transcreation:

After the chosen one's departure, the people of apostasy rose,
 For the caliphate, they sought a foundation to impose.
 They wove enmity into the path of faith's embrace,
 And swift in assault, they showed their fierce face.
 Some defiled the pillars of Islam's sacred frame,
 Others seized the alms, proclaiming their claim.
 With wrath they cast this grievous reproach,
 Striking at the Prophet's law without reproach
 A wound that cannot be healed by change or art,
 A sword in the hand, a stain upon the heart[13].

In "Lison ut-tayr", Alisher Navoi constructs the image of Abu Bakr Siddiq by grounding it in specific, historically documented events from early Islamic history. The very same episode is also recounted by the renowned scholar Jaloliddin Suyuti in his "Tarikh al-khulafa" ("The History of the Caliphs"), drawing upon the authoritative narrations of Imam Bukhari and Imam Muslim[14].

The following chapter turns to the portrayal of Hazrat Umar Foruq (may Allah be pleased with him). Here, the narrative focuses on the caliph's defining qualities justice, contentment, and generosity. Notably, though his table of charity could feed the world, Umar himself would tie a stone to his stomach to distract from his own hunger:

Xoni bazlidin jahon ahli to'yub,
 Ul o'zin to'yg'org'ali kirpich qo'yub.

Transcreation:

The people of the world, sated with abundant blessings,
 He laid a brick to feed his soul alone.

His utter lack of mercy toward himself in the discipline of his ego to the extent that he showed no compassion even toward his own child has been recorded in writing.

Nafsini o'lturgon ichibon zahri nob,
 O'g'lun o'lturgon qilurda ehtisob.

Transcreation:

He slew his self with poison most refined,

And judged his son as if to justice blind.

In the aforementioned work by Jaloliddin Suyuti, an incident is narrated on the authority of Abdullah ibn Umar that illustrates caliph Umar's constant vigilance over his own soul. It is reported: "Once, people saw Umar carrying a waterskin on his back. They said to him, "Do not do this, what are you doing?" Umar replied, "My soul inclines toward pride, so I am humbling it". This moment encapsulates the Sufi principle of *riyozat al-nafs* the rigorous discipline of the lower self. An additional narrative appended to this chapter further reveals another facet of caliph Umar's character: his complete indifference to worldly wealth. During his caliphate, when the city of Madayin (Ctesiphon) was conquered and vast treasures amassed over centuries by Persian monarchs were brought before him, Umar did not so much as glance at the staggering wealth gathered before him[15].

The works of Islamic historians are replete with such accounts extolling Umar's virtues. According to "Tarikh Tabari", he held the caliphate for ten years. During this time, glad tidings reached him daily. There were constant campaigns, and victories followed. Spoils of war and tributes poured in. Arabs and non-Arabs alike submitted to his authority. Wealth was amassed, buildings were erected, and his armies extended their reach northward to the banks of the Jayhun river (modern the Sirdarya). The entire population acknowledged his rule and obeyed his commands. And yet, despite presiding over such a vast dominion, Umar did not alter his way of life in the slightest. Neither his manner of eating and drinking nor his speech reflected any trace of pride or ostentation[16].

In the subsequent chapter of the work, the life and character of Hazrat Usman (may Allah be pleased with him) are rendered through refined literary expression. The accompanying narrative highlights his esteemed position in the eyes of the Prophet (peace be upon him) and underscores the virtue of modesty that so deeply marked his nature.

Chapters XI and XII of the work are devoted to the figure of Hazrat Ali (may Allah be pleased with him). Alisher Navoi begins by emphasizing two defining attributes in Hazrat Ali's character his profound knowledge and his spiritual authority (administrative region).

Ilm darosi, valoyat gavhari,
Olam ahlida ajoyib mazhari.

Transcreation:

An ocean of knowledge, a pearl of sanctity,
A wondrous manifestation among all humanity.

Indeed, Hazrat Ali (may Allah be pleased with him) distinguished himself among the Companions by his exceptional knowledge. As noted by scholars, "Among the Companions, there were seven great jurists those who issued legal rulings and verdicts. One of them was Hazrat Ali, another was our Mother Aisha... Of these, only Hazrat Ali's mastery of jurisprudence was considered superior even to that of Umar. On certain complex legal matters, it was to Ali (may Allah be pleased with him) that people would turn for answers". In the narrative of Chapter XII, another remarkable quality of Hazrat Ali is portrayed his complete self-effacement in worship, to the extent that he once remained unaware of an arrow being extracted from his body during prayer. Alisher Navoi regards this spiritual absorption as one of the defining attributes of the Sufi ideal. In the introduction to his work "Nasoyim al-muhabbat", he describes this quality as essential to the Sufi path. Referring to Bayazid Bastami, Navoi writes: "When the Sultan of the Gnostics, Shaykh Abu Yazid Bastami (may his secret be sanctified), entered into prayer, the very sound of his ribs cracking would echo from his chest. Such was his awe before the Divine Presence and his reverence for the Sacred Law that those around him would hear the trembling of his bones".

In addition to this, Alisher Navoi refers to the khulafa al-roshidin in the opening section of his work “Nazm al-javahir”, in a quatrain where he extols them with the very same qualities attributed to them in “Lison ut-tayr”.

Avvalg’ini fazl durrig’a ummon bil,
 Soniysini adl gavharig’a kon bil,
 Solisni hayo gulbunig’a bo’ston bil,
 Robi’ni valoyat badanig’a jon bil.

Transcreation:

Know the first as an ocean to the pearl of virtue,
 The second as a mine to the gem of justice,
 The third as a garden to the rose of modesty,
 And the fourth as a soul to the body of sainthood

That is to say: Abu Bakr Siddiq is described as the ocean to the pearl of virtue; Umar as the mine of the gem of justice; Usman as the garden of the rose of modesty; and Hazrat Ali as the very soul within the body of sainthood.

If we return to the question of why Alisher Navoi chose to present the figures of the khulafa al-roshidin precisely at this point in his mystical narrative poem, one can observe, first and foremost, that the poet thereby offers an exemplary model of faith and conduct as prescribed by his religion. According to Islamic etiquette, after the Prophet (peace be upon him), the most virtuous of all people are the four rightly guided caliphs. In this regard, Sufi Allahyar, in his didactic poem “Sabot al-ajizin”, declares:

Nabiylar so’nggidin bilgil batahqiq,
 Ki inson afzali Bu Bakr Siddiq.
 Ki andin so’ng Umardur, so’ngra Usmon,
 Ki andin so’ng Ali, beshubha, ey jon.

Transcreation:

Know with certainty, after the prophets in rank,
 The most exalted of men is Abu Bakr Siddiq.
 Then comes Umar, followed by Usman
 And after him, without doubt, comes Ali, O soul.

Secondly, it is implied that the figures of the four rightly guided caliphs should serve as exemplars and models for the Sufis. The author of the earliest Persian treatise on Sufi theory, Mustamliy Bukhari, in numerous passages of his work “Sharh at-taaruf”, emphasizes that the lives and conduct of the companions (sahaba), as well as the succeeding generation (tabiin), who embraced Sufism, provided enduring paradigms for later representatives of the Sufi tradition. Indeed, as the Turkish scholar Hasan Kamil Yilmaz rightly notes, “The spiritual lives of the Prophet and his companions, as conveyed through the Qur’anic verses and hadith, constitute the very foundation of the Sufi way of life”.

4. Conclusion

Alisher Navoi’s spiritual portrayal of the four rightly guided caliphs in *Lison ut-tayr* offers deep insight into the mystical foundation of his literary philosophy. By integrating the exemplary lives of Abu Bakr, Umar, Usman, and Ali into the poem’s structure, Navoi emphasizes that the roots of Sufism are grounded in the early Islamic era. These caliphs embody the poet’s spiritual and moral ideals, illustrating that Sufi values are not innovations but continuations of the Prophet’s legacy. Thus, Navoi’s work becomes a bridge between classical Islamic piety and refined literary mysticism.

In conclusion, the genesis of the Sufi imagery in Alisher Navoi's oeuvre must primarily be sought within his own works. In particular, the unique composition of "Lison ut-tayr" and the depiction of the rightly guided caliphs in its introductory chapters are crucial for a proper understanding of the essence of the Sufi imagery found throughout the poet's other writings. By portraying the figures of the four caliphs in the prologue of "Lison ut-tayr", Navoi underscores that the earliest roots of Sufism trace back to the era of felicity, the Golden Age.

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