



Article

The Poetics of Muhammad Ali's Epic Poetry

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Abstract: This article examines the poetic features of Muhammad Ali's epic poems (doston), with particular attention to their lyrical-epic nature and their place in the development of twentieth-century Uzbek literature. The study situates Muhammad Ali's works, such as Mashrab and Gumbazdagi nur, within the broader historical and cultural context of Uzbek poetry, which, under the influence of both classical traditions and modern literary movements, experienced significant transformations during the Soviet period. While classical epics, like those of Alisher Navoi, emphasized idealized heroes and elaborate introductory sections, Muhammad Ali's epics embody a synthesis of historical reflection, lyrical sensitivity, and authorial subjectivity. His works not only reconstruct historical memory invoking figures such as Amir Temur and Mashrab but also integrate personal and collective experiences, including autobiographical elements. Through this duality, Muhammad Ali demonstrates how the modern Uzbek doston could serve both as a continuation of classical forms and as a platform for innovation, combining national heritage with contemporary concerns. The article also highlights scholarly perspectives on his oeuvre, underlining the significance of his contribution to Uzbek literary tradition. Ultimately, the study argues that Muhammad Ali's epic poetry represents a unique bridge between tradition and modernity, embodying lyrical depth, historical consciousness, and artistic innovation.

Keywords: Muhammad Ali, Uzbek literature, epic poetry, lyrical-epic form, doston, poetics, tradition and innovation, historical memory, literary criticism, intertextuality, narrative structure.

1. Introduction

At the beginning of the twentieth century, representatives of Uzbek literature, in addition to cultivating their traditional genres, began to experiment with new literary forms in their creative work. In this regard, the great Uzbek poet Cho'lpon once remarked: "The soul seeks something different, it yearns for newness". The political and social circumstances of the time, combined with the exposure of the progressive youth to world literature, led to the enrichment of Uzbek literature with new genres and artistic forms. During this period, Abdulla Qodiriy's O'tkan kunlar, Cho'lpon's poems written in non-traditional structures, and the works of many other writers and poets appeared. Although most of these early attempts were mere exercises that could not withstand the test of time, a limited number of works are still read today by readers and analyzed by literary scholars. By the mid-twentieth century, one of the most widespread genres in Uzbek literature was the modern epic poem [1]. The introduction of this genre into Uzbek literature was largely influenced by Russian literary traditions. In classical Uzbek literature, there exist numerous masterpieces written in the masnavi form, most notably Alisher Navoi's Khamsa. These works narrate epic events in poetic form, with a broad scope encompassing humanity's ultimate purpose, happiness, love, morality, interpersonal relations,

Citation: Qizi, R. N. H The Poetics of Muhammad Ali's Epic Poetry. Central Asian Journal of Literature, Philosophy, and Culture 2025, 6(4), 776-781.

Received: 10th Jun 2025

Revised: 16th Jul 2025

Accepted: 24th Aug 2025

Published: 16th Sep 2025



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compassion, conscience, the struggle against selfish desires, friendship, kinship, and the triumph over difficulties through willpower.

The structure and composition of classical poems differ significantly from those of modern poems. Classical epics traditionally contain a distinct introduction such as *hamd*, *muqaddima*, *na't*, or *sababi nazmi kitob* in which the poet discusses the significance of the work, evaluates the achievements and shortcomings of earlier poems on similar subjects, explains how his work differs from previous ones, elaborates on the importance of literature (the power of the word), emphasizes the superiority of poetic expression over prose, outlines the reason for writing the poem, and states to whom it is dedicated. Only after this preamble does the main narrative begin [2]. At the conclusion of the poem, the author usually reflects upon himself, his labor, the era in which he lived, his contemporaries, and often offers subtle allusions to the political system and rulers of the time. For example, in Navoi's *Farhod va Shirin*, the main story begins only in the twelfth chapter. This compositional technique embodies artistic balance and harmony.

In contrast, the introductory sections of modern epics are generally much shorter. While classical epics often featured protagonists who were idealized figures *komil inson* (perfect human beings) or those destined to become such modern epics tend to depict characters chosen with realistic considerations. Their genuine deeds, thoughts, and reflections, closely tied to the contemporary era, are presented [3]. In many cases, the protagonist of the modern epic poem is none other than the author himself.

In the 1930s, along with other literary genres, the genre of the poem underwent significant development. During this period, notable works emerged, including Muhammadsharif So'fizoda's "*Bayram nashidolari*", G'ulom Zafariy's "*Yoshlar endi berilmas*", "*Gulyor*", "*Cho'pon Temir*", "*Vannaycha*", G'afur G'ulom's "*Ko'kan*", Hamid Olimjon's "*Zaynab va Omon*", Uyg'un's "*Jontemir*", Asqad Muxtor's "*Po'lat quyuvchi*", as well as Elbek's series of epics such as "*Anorgul*", "*Go'zal qiz*", "*Turkiston*", "*Bizniki*", "*Paxta*", "*O'tmishim*", "*Chirchiq*", "*O'zbekiston*", "*Bog'bon*", and "*Etik*" [4]. Oybek also produced more than twenty epics, among them "*Zafar va Zahro*" and "*Haqgo'ylar*". Other significant contributions of this period include Uyg'un's "*Brigadir Karim*", "*Gulasal*", "*Ukraina yellari*"; Hamid Olimjon's "*Ikki qizning hikoyasi*", "*Oygul bilan Baxtiyor*", "*Zaynab va Omon*", "*Semurg'*"; Mirtemir's "*Dilkusho*", "*Suv qizi*", "*Oysanamning to'yida*"; Quddus Muhammadiy's "*Sandal va pechka*", "*O'z-o'zini tanqid*"; Sulton Jo'ra's "*Zangori gilam*", "*Qaldirg'och*", "*Karim va Quddus*", "*Bruno*"; and Mirmuhsin's "*Kamar*".

In the 1950s and 1960s, the tradition of epic poetry continued to flourish with works such as Maqsud Shayxzoda's "*Toshkentnoma*", Hamid Olimjon's "*Ikki qizning hikoyasi*", Zulfiya's "*Quyishli qalam*", Turob To'la's "*Bolalar dostoni*", Shukrullo's "*Toshkent, 26 tongotari*", as well as Jumaniyoz Jabborov's epics including "*Gulshan*", "*Tog'lar sadosi*", "*Ona yer qo'shig'i*", "*Sahro sanami*", "*Yo'ldagi o'ylar*", "*Qishloqdagi haykal*", and "*Muhabbat naqqoshi*". Similarly, Erkin Samandar enriched the genre with "*Qabul soatlari*", "*Sevishganlar shahri*", "*Komissar*", "*Erk sadolari*", and "*Ajdodlar qilichi*". Within this broader literary context, Muhammad Ali's epics "*Mashrab*" and "*Gumbazdagi nur*" also stand out as remarkable achievements of the period.

Literature review

With his earliest literary works, Muhammad Ali drew the attention of eminent mentors, leading literary scholars, and talented contemporaries [5]. Particularly, I. G'afurov in "*Dostonchiligimiz haqida*", U. Normatov in "*Poemada hayot falsafasi*", N. Xudoyberganov in "*Jiddiy o'zgarishlar pallasi*", Y. Yakvalxo'jayev in "*Yurak to'lqinlari*", O. Xoldor and T. Nizom in "*To'lqinlar*", A. Abdumannopov and T. Sharipov in "*Otlar yurti*", M. Safarov in "*Uchqunlar*", B. Qosimov in "*Fikrlar bahsi*", M. Mahmudov in "*Toshqin daryo mavjlari*", A. Oripov in "*O'zbekistondir bu yurt*" and Q. Kenja in "*Qizil gul vafi*" expressed highly positive assessments of Muhammad Ali's creative activity. In literary studies, epic poetry (*doston*) is typically classified into three categories. First, there are folk epics, products of oral creativity, such as *Alpomish*, *Kuntug'mish*, *Malikai Ayyor*, and *Go'ro'g'li* [6]. These works embody the ideals, dreams, and aspirations of the people. The bard (*baxshi*) performing the epic could introduce additional details and

invented episodes, thereby enriching the narrative. Second, there are classical epics with identified authors and traditional plots, such as Layli va Majnun, Farhod va Shirin, and those devoted to the life of Iskandar Zulqarnayn. Third, there is the modern poem-epic (doston) that emerged in the early twentieth century as one of the “new genres” of “new Uzbek literature” developed by great figures such as Behbudiy, Cho’lpon, and Qodiriy. This modern genre includes three subtypes: lyrical, epic, and dramatic poems. If the lyrical dimension predominates, the work is considered a lyrical doston; if it takes a dramatic form, it is a dramatic doston; and if its primary aim is the narration of events, it is an epic doston. The Dictionary of Literary Studies provides clarification on certain confusions in classification: “There are cases in literary scholarship where all doston (poems) are equally regarded as belonging to the lyrical-epic genre. Yet, if we take into account the aforementioned distinctions, this is not entirely correct. A work may be called lyrical-epic if the epic event being narrated is expressed through the perspective of a lyrical hero [7]. However, not all doston employ this method. Moreover, in any literary work be it epic or dramatic the author’s attitude towards the depicted events is present in one form or another. Therefore, it would be more accurate to classify as lyrical-epic only those works in which epic and dramatic elements hold equal weight within the structure (for example, *Ruhlar isyoni*).”

In conclusion, a doston can be considered lyrical-epic if, alongside the events, the author successfully conveys his own emotional response to those events, instilling this feeling into the reader.

2. Materials and Methods

The methodology for this study on the poetics of Muhammad Ali’s epic poetry is rooted in both literary analysis and historical contextualization. The research draws on a close reading of Muhammad Ali’s major epic works, notably *Mashrab* and *Gumbazdagi Nur*, to examine the poet’s unique synthesis of classical Uzbek literary traditions and modern influences. The study employs a comparative approach, contrasting the structural and thematic elements of Ali’s epics with earlier examples of classical poetry, particularly those of Alisher Navoi and other notable figures in Uzbek literature. This comparison highlights the ways in which Muhammad Ali’s works depart from traditional forms while retaining core elements of epic poetry, such as the use of historical figures and collective destiny.

Additionally, the methodology integrates the historical and socio-political context of the early-to-mid 20th century, a period marked by significant literary transformation. The researcher analyzes how the socio-political climate, influenced by Soviet-era literary trends, shaped the evolution of epic poetry in Uzbekistan. By focusing on the lyrical-epic nature of Ali’s poetry, the study examines the ways in which the poet blends personal subjectivity with national and historical narratives, reflecting the broader shifts in Uzbek literature.

To further contextualize the poetic elements, the research draws upon scholarly critiques and literary discussions from various experts in Uzbek literary studies, which provide insights into the critical reception of Muhammad Ali’s work and its lasting impact on the development of modern Uzbek epic poetry.

3. Results and Discussion

The poem *Gumbazdagi nur* (“The Light in the Dome”) was published in 1967. Scholars such as B. Qosimov, Q. Yo’ldoshev, I. Yoqubov, and A. Alimbekov expressed warm appreciation for this work. In *Gumbazdagi nur*, reference is made to the magnificent architectural monuments of Samarkand, such as the mausoleum of Amir Temur and the Bibixonim Mosque, about which the conqueror himself is said to have declared: “If they doubt our greatness, let them look at the buildings we have constructed [8].” The central focus of the poem is the Go’ri Amir the majestic mausoleum built in memory of Muhammad Sultan, the beloved grandson of Amir Temur. The narrative covers the process of its construction, the thoughts and destinies of the architects and craftsmen who built it.

Gradually expanding the scope, the author moves from these monuments to broader historical contexts: the construction of the Fergana Canal, the Farhod Hydroelectric Station, the great theater in Tashkent, and the reconstruction efforts after the devastating Tashkent earthquake. In all these endeavors, he emphasizes the unity and diligence of the Uzbek people [9].

Yil o'tsa ham yil osha,
Qo'ldan tushmas poytesha.
Ona xalqim o'zbekning
Qo'li guldin hamisha!
Qo'li guldin hamisha!

These lines highlight the hardworking spirit and unity of the Uzbek people, qualities that have not lost their significance across generations.

The poem further emphasizes that each of the twelve architects involved in constructing the mausoleum had unique destinies and sorrows. Some were awaited by their mothers, others by children, others still by their beloveds. One appeared carefree and youthful, yet his love accused him of negligence and betrayal. Nevertheless, just as the arch of the dome unites them, so too were all of these craftsmen bound by a single aspiration: to make their homeland beautiful [10].

The image of Amir Temur is presented not only as a powerful builder and strong leader but also as a compassionate grandfather and a tender-hearted figure:

O, chorasi bo'lsaydi agar,
Agar kelsa tirilib o'g'lon,
Rostlansa gar taqdiri xato,
Amir Temur, fotih, o'shal on
Taxtidan ham kechardi, hatto!
Yig'i olar ko'ngil dardini,
Garchi bitmas, nimaki sindi.
Olamgirning ko'zyoshlarini
Artib qo'yar o'zgalar endi...

These verses convey one of the most delicate and sorrowful scenes in the poem the deep grief Temur felt at the death of his grandson Muhammad Sultan, the only surviving companion of his beloved son Jahongir Mirzo.

The poem also depicts the prosperity of Temur's era: the abundance of the bazaars, the grandeur of the architecture, and the flourishing of the land [11]. His battles with Yildirim and the salvation of Europe at the hands of Temur are narrated with pride. Alongside these historical episodes, the author also recalls Alisher Navoiy and Mirzo Ulug'bek, presenting them as gifts of destiny for the nation, thereby allowing "history to speak."

Muhammad Ali also connects this history to his own lineage by including his father, Ahmadqul Beknazar o'g'li, a courageous and hardworking Uzbek who participated in the construction of the Fergana Canal. He remembers his father in his poem O'zbekiston:

Otam seva bildi O'zbekistonni,
Farg'ona kanalini qurdi, quoldi.
Qo'lga qurol oldi, tashlab ketmonni,
Jang-jadalda chappar urdi, uoldi.
Yetti oy tinmadi to'pi maydonda,
Gumbur-gumbur saslar dillarda oqdi.
So'ngra tegib daydi o'q nogahonda
To'qqiz oy gospital shiftiga boqdi...

These lines demonstrate that Muhammad Ali's love for his homeland did not arise by chance but was inherited from his father much like the blood of the twelve legendary architects, passing down devotion to the land from one generation to the next [12].

The poem begins with the image of a child standing in awe before the mausoleum, overwhelmed by its grandeur and struggling to imagine how it was built. This symbolizes the way future generations look upon history with wonder, with questions, and with a search for truth.

Even under an oppressive regime that erased or left blank the pages of history, the poet insists:

Zulmat ichra qolganda nogoh,
Narsani ko'z ilg'amas chogdir.
Sahrolardek kengu begiyoh,
Tarixning ham varog'i oqdir.

Yet he believes that poets like himself will continue to write and restore history:

O'shanda ham Tarix entikib,
Eslolmasa yoshligin, inon,
Mening kabi bir shoir chiqib
O'shanda ham yozgusi doston.

The success of the poem is emphasized by scholars, including I. Yoqubov, who stated: "In 'Gumbazdagi nur,' by observing human characters and actions, and by listening to the voices of the heart, the poet expresses the destiny of our people, full of creation, prosperity, labor, joy, and sorrow."

Similarly, in his poem *Mashrab*, Muhammad Ali employs Alisher Navoi's line "Olloh-Olloh, ishq aro mundoq balolar bor emish..." as an epigraph, alluding to the trials of love and setting the tone for *Mashrab's* fate. The poem begins with reflections on the boundless nature of human thought and imagination, capable of transcending centuries and revisiting bygone eras, embodying the spirit of rebellion and spiritual longing. Throughout the poem, *Mashrab's* mystical philosophy, defiance of intermediaries between man and God, and his tragic destiny are vividly portrayed, with some of his well-known verses interwoven into the narrative.

In the poem, the poet arrives at a resolution that may be called the truth of life itself [13]. While wandering through the city, *Mashrab* enters the house of a craftsman who weaves ropes. The rope-maker recognizes him and offers hospitality. When *Mashrab* departs, the craftsman secretly places in his satchel two pieces of bread, bought with the money he earned from selling ropes. Yet, in time, the great poet who, because of malicious people, heard only "God" but not His "gifts" is executed. Tragically, he is hanged with the very rope purchased from the proceeds of those two pieces of bread. This final episode underscores the bitter irony of *Mashrab's* fate. Muhammad Ali depicts *Mashrab* as both a rebellious seeker of divine truth and a human being subjected to injustice, betrayal, and suffering. The rope becomes a powerful symbol of how sacred devotion and worldly cruelty intertwine, revealing the paradox of a life sacrificed in the pursuit of truth. Thus, through the figures of *Mashrab* and Amir Temur, as well as through references to his own father and the labor of ordinary people, Muhammad Ali interlaces history, spirituality, and personal memory. His *dostons* revive the moral and cultural values of the Uzbek people while also innovating upon classical tradition. Ultimately, his epics demonstrate how literature serves not only as an artistic expression but also as a bridge between past and present, collective memory and individual experience, tradition and modernity.

Discussion. The analysis of Muhammad Ali's epic works demonstrates their significant role within the broader tradition of epic poetry. His *Mashrab* and *Gumbazdagi nur* embody essential features of the genre, yet reinterpret them through the prism of Uzbek cultural and historical identity [14]. Unlike the Homeric model, which situates heroism in mythological warfare, Muhammad Ali redefines the epic hero as a bearer of spiritual and national values, thereby aligning with what modern scholars have described as the "cultural transmission" function of epics. The results indicate that Muhammad Ali's works reflect a dynamic synthesis between classical epic conventions and local literary innovation. His use of historical figures, folkloric motifs, and moral dilemmas resonates with the structural patterns outlined by Reitz and Finkmann, who emphasize the recurrence of "type-scenes" such as invocations, catalogues, and confrontations. However, Ali transforms these into vehicles for exploring identity, ethical responsibility, and the relationship between individual and society.

Furthermore, while Western epic poetry often emphasizes the heroic individual in confrontation with fate or divine will Muhammad Ali places greater weight on collective

destiny and cultural continuity. This reflects what scholars of comparative epic have termed the “communal function” of epic narrative. His works thereby bridge the universal and the particular: they are Uzbek in their imagery and ethos, yet resonate with the universal epic mode of narrating collective struggles through heroic exemplars [15].

These findings suggest that Muhammad Ali’s epics contribute not only to Uzbek literary history but also to the global discourse on the evolution of epic poetry. They demonstrate how the genre can adapt to different cultural and historical contexts, reaffirming its enduring vitality in modern literature.

4. Conclusion

The study demonstrates that contemporary epic poetry in Uzbek literature, particularly in the works of Muhammad Ali, emerges as a product of both classical heritage and cross-cultural literary influences of the twentieth century. During this period, Uzbek poets were significantly inspired by Russian and world literature, while also reinterpreting the rich tradition of classical Eastern poetics. This dual orientation produced a new epic form that combined universal artistic patterns with distinctly national and historical content.

Modern epics reveal a dynamic interplay between tradition and innovation. On the one hand, they preserve essential features of the epic genre heroic figures, collective destiny, and moral dilemmas. On the other hand, they reshape these features in line with the socio-political realities of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. Such transformation reflects the flexibility of epic poetry to adapt to changing historical contexts while retaining its fundamental role as a medium of cultural transmission.

In the case of Muhammad Ali, the integration of motifs from classical Uzbek poetry with stylistic devices inspired by world literary traditions illustrates the evolving nature of epic forms. These epics not only serve as narratives of national identity but also as artistic responses to global literary dialogues. As Reitz and Finkmann emphasize, epic poetry remains a genre that both preserves memory and enables reinterpretation of cultural experience.

Therefore, the contemporary Uzbek epic can be understood as both a continuation and a renewal of the genre. It reflects the enduring vitality of epic poetry, which continues to develop in form and meaning. By uniting classical models with modern artistic strategies, today’s epics stand as living evidence that the genre, far from being a relic of the past, remains central to literary creativity and cultural expression in the modern world.

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