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METHODOLOGICAL JOURNAL<http://mentaljournal-jspu.uz/index.php/mesmj/index>THE GRADUAL DEPICTION OF WOMEN'S IMAGES IN  
CLASSICAL UZBEK LITERATURE**Nodira Djohongirovna Kholikova***Head of the Department of Uzbek Literature**Chirchik State Pedagogical University**Chirchik, Uzbekistan*

## ABOUT ARTICLE

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**Abstract:** This article explores the gradual evolution of female characters in classical Uzbek literature through the analysis of various works. It highlights the development of women's worldview and social activity, the stages of artistic interpretation, and the unique features of the literary portrayal of women in this tradition. The genesis and progressive development of the female image—from figures mentioned in the Holy Qur'an such as Maryam (Mary), Aisha, Bilqis, and Zulaykha, to the beloved heroines in the works of Khorezmi, Sayyid Qasimi, and Alisher Navoi; from the revered mother of Zahiriddin Muhammad Babur, Eson Davlatbegim, to the female characters depicted in the writings of Mirzo Ulughbek and Abulghazi Bahadurkhan—is examined through specific examples that trace this evolutionary process.

## **Introduction**

From the origins of human artistic thought to the present day: the gradual development of the image of women.

It is evident that the image of women has undergone specific stages of development from the very beginnings of human artistic thought to the present day.

According to sources concerning the creation of humankind, the Almighty created Eve (Momo Havvo) from the left rib of Adam (Hazrat Odam), bestowed upon her ninety-nine of the hundred parts of beauty, and made Adam deeply desirous of her.

Indeed, the fact that an entire surah in the Holy Qur'an is titled An-Nisa ("The Women") demonstrates the special reverence afforded to women in Islam. This surah pays particular attention to legal matters related to women, their rights, and their duties and responsibilities.

Before the advent of Islam, humanity held fundamentally flawed and irrational views about women. Especially in Western societies, false theories and defamatory beliefs prevailed—such as the idea that a woman was an agent of the devil created to lead men astray.

Historical sources indicate that the Middle Ages were particularly harsh for women. In Europe, any passerby could accuse a girl of witchcraft. Between the 14th and 18th centuries, an estimated 40,000 to 50,000 people were burned at the stake in Europe on accusations of witchcraft, the majority of whom were women.

One notable example is the infamous Rumor trial held in the Netherlands in 1613, where an unprecedented number of women—63 in total—were burned at the stake.

Even during the pre-Islamic jahiliyyah (ignorance) period, women were treated with extreme cruelty: newborn girls were buried alive, women were denied any form of rights or freedoms, and were regarded with contempt.

The restriction of women's rights was also observed in many developed civilizations before the rise of Islam, including Japan, China, Egypt, Rome, and India.

## **Materials and methods**

One of the noteworthy aspects of the Holy Qur'an is that many women are portrayed as mothers or wives of prophets. Notably, one of its chapters—Surah Maryam—is named after a woman and mentions her 34 times across various verses. In a well-known hadith, the Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) stated: “The best women of Paradise are Maryam bint Imran, Asiya bint Muzahim, Khadijah bint Khuwaylid, and Fatimah bint Muhammad.”

Other prominent female figures mentioned in the Qur'an, such as Aisha (may Allah be pleased with her), Queen Bilqis, and others, later became inspirations for countless works in classical Eastern literature. For example, the story of Yusuf and Zulaykha—referred to in the Qur'an as “the most beautiful of stories”—devotes particular attention to the female figure. The narrative describes the prophet Yusuf's life after being sold into slavery in Egypt and the infatuation of Zulaykha, the wife of the Egyptian minister, with him.

The theme of women is also central in Qissasi Rabghuzi, a collection of stories based on the Qur'an. This work, regarded as one of the earliest examples of prose in the Turkic language, was completed in 1310 CE (Hijri 710) by the scholar and judge Nasiruddin Rabghuzi of Rabat Oghuz in the Khorezm region, at the request and patronage of Mongol ruler Toqbugha Khan. The stories span from the lives of Adam and Eve to the Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him), conveyed through wise narratives and parables. The author portrays Eve alongside Adam, Sarah with Abraham, Hagar with Ishmael, Zulaykha with Yusuf, Mary with Jesus, and Khadijah and Aisha with the Prophet Muhammad in a vivid and distinctive manner.

In classical Uzbek poetry, too, the image of women holds special significance. From the shortest lyrical form—the fard—to large-scale epics such as masnavis, the portrayal of women is a recurring theme. One of the early examples of Turkic love literature, Khorezmi's Muhabbatnoma (“The Book of Love”), stands out for its poetic depiction of female beauty. The work consists of eleven love letters from the lover to his beloved, enriched with lyrical forms such as ghazal, qit'a, and fard.

Khorezmi skillfully conveys the lover's emotional suffering and inner turmoil through the beloved's beauty:

“When your ruby lips open, sugar scatters,  
As though a rosebud gently unfolds.  
When you smile, sugar is shy,  
And pearls hide from the beauty of your teeth.”

The poet chooses unique and refined metaphors in painting the portrait of his beloved. The letters express the adoration of a lover enraptured by the beauty and manners of the beloved.

Another major figure of the Timurid literary period, Sayyid Qasimi, contributed significantly to epic poetry with his four masnavi works. Among them, *Ilahiynoma* ("The Divine Book") can be seen as a literary monument to feminine loyalty and devotion. The epic begins with the following lines:

“There was once a graceful lady,  
A peerless, gentle and noble beloved.  
A queen in the realm of beauty,  
Her eyes commanding and her charm, an army.”

This masnavi differs significantly from Qasimi's other works in that it is entirely dedicated to the praise of women. The work, as its title suggests, recalls Fariduddin Attar's *Ilahiynama*, although it is in fact based on a single story from that source. At its core stands the image of a woman as the embodiment of faithfulness and sincerity.

#### RESULT AND DISCUSSION

The depictions of women found in classical literature were continued in historical sources. Ruy González de Clavijo, a Castilian envoy to the court of Sahibqiran Amir Temur, mentions Bibi Khanum in his Diary, referring to her as "Kano." Saray Mulk Khanum (1341–1408), who was known in her time by the titles "Minor Bilqis," "Great Lady," and "Noble Princess," was first seen by the envoy on September 8, 1404, during a reception held in the "Dilkusho" garden. When describing her appearance, he noted that her face was heavily powdered for sun protection and lightly veiled with white gauze, and that she wore a bright

red-golden dress adorned with precious stones and a jewel-encrusted cap and helmet. He also reported that about fifteen women held up her gown while more than three hundred noblewomen followed her. The attention, interest, and relatively objective observations of foreign authors regarding the ladies of the Timurid Renaissance are indeed valuable.

In this context, the renowned traveler and scholar Ibn Battuta's observations on the lives of Turkish women in the first half of the 14th century are particularly noteworthy. Traveling through Anatolia, the Golden Horde, and Central Asia, he encountered women whose social roles left him at times astonished and amazed. He wrote: "Among the Turkish peoples, women are treated with great respect and reverence. They hold a status even higher than men. When a woman goes to the market, her husband accompanies her, and onlookers regard the men as their wives' servants." Indeed, in those times, Muslim women did not universally veil their faces. Many sources confirm that women in Turkish and Mongol societies enjoyed greater freedom and higher status compared to other nations. Nomadic Turkish peoples had unwavering faith in women's strength and capabilities—and for good reason. Although men were the heads of households, the honor and dignity of the family rested on the woman's shoulders. As Professor Q. Yo'ldoshev notes, "For thousands of years, Uzbek women have considered it their highest virtue to protect the honor of themselves and their loved ones."

The high regard for women in Turkic societies is also evidenced by samples of oral folk literature:

When the sheikh comes, his disciple appears,  
Could a woman not be the minister of her man?!  
Could she not correct a man's mind?  
Could she not subtly guide him on the right path?

These lines, spoken by Barchinoy to her mother in Alpomish, reveal the inner strength and wisdom of women. The family-oriented Uzbek woman never places herself above the head of the household, yet she demonstrates her power through intelligence and subtlety. Even in the oldest examples of Turkic oral literature, the education and upbringing of women were

given special importance. “Most importantly, because women—referred to as khatun—were the mothers of future khans, their upbringing and status were treated with great significance. These views are well illustrated in *Alpomish* through the characters of Barchin and Qaldirg’och.” Barchin’s beauty, intellect, and moral maturity harmonize with virtues such as bravery, courage, patriotism, and love for the people. The portrayal of Barchin by poet Fozil Yo’ldosh o’g’li presents her not only as *Alpomish*’s loyal beloved, but also as a woman who resists injustice and engages in social struggles.

There are numerous sources confirming the high social standing of women among Turkic peoples. One such example can be found in the Orkhon-Yenisei inscriptions, where Bilge Khagan respectfully refers to “my mother Khātun Umay,” indicating her significant role in the life and welfare of the family and clan.

In the medieval era, Alisher Navoi, the greatest thinker and literary sovereign of his time, approached issues of family, motherhood, and womanhood with sincerity and seriousness. In his lyrical works, the beloved woman is idealized through her beauty, loyalty, and, at times, her cruelty and oppression:

“Your brows and eyes are beautiful, your lashes too,  
Your face and words are lovely, your lips as well,  
Your sleeves and moles are delightful, your beard too—  
How can I describe it all, from head to toe you're beautiful.”

In all four epics of Navoi’s *Khamasa*, female characters play pivotal roles, including Layli, Shirin, Dilorom, Ravshanak, Mehrnoz, and the Pure Beauty. “Navoi’s Shirin is a noble girl. She values Farhad’s sincere love and reciprocates it. In Navoi’s epic, Shirin is presented as a manifestation of the Creator.” Shirin’s image is among the most famous in medieval Eastern literature, refined over centuries and across cultures. Literary scholars have often explored the origins of this character. Nurboy Jabborov, drawing on *Tarikh-i Muluk-i Ajam*, interprets her as a historical figure, while Azerbaijani scholar S. Shikheeva argues for her Turkic origins.

Navoi's trust in the talents and capabilities of women is clearly expressed in the character of Mehinbonu:

"Mehinbonu, who nurtured knowledge,  
Was the sovereign queen of the wise."

In Farhad and Shirin, Navoi portrays ten female scholars and artists, including poets, dancers, logicians, astronomers, philosophers, orators, historians, sages, mathematicians, and masters of riddles and puzzles. Through these figures, he offers a glimpse into the intellectual and sociopolitical landscape of his time.

When speaking of women in classical Uzbek literature, the works of king and poet Zahiriddin Muhammad Babur also deserve attention. His poems reflect themes of love, loyalty, reunion and separation, and describe the beloved's enchanting beauty, delicate nature, and traditional Eastern virtues. In his famous memoir Baburnama, Babur frequently refers to the women who accompanied him throughout his life. Historical figures such as Eson Davlatbegim, Shohbegim, Khadichabegim, Zuhra begim Ogha, and Malika Bayda are depicted as women who held prominent roles in the affairs of court, state, and society. Even with minimal detail, Babur emphasizes their influence—positive or negative—on the lives of rulers and the affairs of the state and nation. His depictions of his elder sister Khanzada Begim, who remained close to his heart until the end of his life, reflect the noble and devoted character of Turkic women: proud yet gentle, loving toward their siblings, and utterly selfless.

Among the monarchs who ruled Turan during the Middle Ages and contributed to the world of science and literature, we must also mention the Timurid scholar Mirzo Ulughbek (1394–1449), author of *Tarikh-i Arba'a Ulus* ("History of the Four Nations"), and Khwarazmshah Abulgozi Bahadurkhan (1603–1664), author of *Shajara-i Tarākima* and *Shajara-i Turk*. Unlike Babur's work, their writings trace history from the creation of Adam, through the lives of the prophets, the lineage of Oghuz Khan, and the genealogies of Turkish and Mongol peoples, integrating the sociopolitical history of Central and Middle Asia of their time.

## Conclusion

1. Since ancient times, love has served as a foundational theme in literature, and closely tied to it, the image of the woman has occupied a central position. The fact that the Holy Qur'an—the sacred text of Islam—includes a chapter titled An-Nisa ("Women") demonstrates the special respect afforded to women in our religion. The inclusion of female figures such as Maryam (Mary), Aisha (r.a.), Bilqis, and Zulaykha in various surahs of the Qur'an later laid the groundwork for numerous stories and artistic works in classical Eastern literature. The poet and prose writer Nosiruddin Rabghuzi, in his work *Qisas al-Rabghuzi*, praised prominent women in Islam alongside his portrayals of the prophets. Khorezmi's *Muhabbatnoma* (Book of Love), which artistically interprets female beauty through the image of the beloved, occupies a significant place in Turkic literature as one of the earliest such literary treatments.

2. Sayyid Qosimi, one of the major figures of Timurid-era literature and contributor to the development of epic poetry through his four masnavis, immortalized female devotion in his work *Ilahiynoma*. Several historical and literary female figures in the oeuvre of Alisher Navoi—such as Alanquva, Zoli Zar, Halima Ona, the "second Bilqis" Khadichabegim, Shirin, and Mehinbonu—stand as artistic embodiments of his poetic craftsmanship. In classical literature, women are often represented as beloved figures, embodying sacred and symbolic meaning. Beyond the lyrical heroines of poets like Khorezmi, Navoi, and Babur, archetypal representations of devotion and love such as Zulaykha, Shirin, Layli, and Dilorom also emerged as canonical figures in classical literature. These characters are depicted as virtuous and pious women.

3. The female images presented in Babur's autobiographical work *Baburnama* reflect a distinctly personal and historical perspective. Through figures such as Eson Davlatbegim, Shohbegim, Khadichabegim, Zuhra begim Ogha, and Malika Bayda, the memoir highlights the elevated status women held in royal and governmental affairs. In addition, Babur portrays the experiences of royal women through his accounts of his mother, Qutlug' Nigor Khanim—who accompanied her son through exile and warfare—and his elder sister, Khanzada



Begin, whose life was marked by unfulfilled desires and tragedies. These portrayals reveal the hopes, dreams, and sorrows of royal women.

4. The female figures found in the works of Mirzo Ulughbek and Abulg'ozi Bahadurkhan are distinguished by their religious and mythological significance. Figures such as Eve (Momo Havvo) and Alanquva are frequently referenced in religious sources and are valuable for the insight they offer into the origins of humankind, its generations, and genealogies. These portrayals contribute essential knowledge regarding ancestral lineage and its cultural implications.

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