

Contemporary Biofiction in Uzbek Literature: The Revival of National Identity

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Abstract: Uzbek biofiction is a new genre often seen as a type of historical novel. Most studies focus on its style, structure, and how it mixes facts with fiction. Researchers also look at its use of cultural elements like legends, tales, and proverbs, comparing it to similar works from other countries. However, they often stick to a strict view that limits the genre to history. Modern Uzbek biographical novels, like Nodir Normatov's *The Last Testament of Ruzi Choriev*, go beyond telling historical stories. They explore current issues like self-identity and national identity. These novels show the genre's potential to reflect and influence society, which means it's time to rethink how we classify and understand them.

1 INTRODUCTION

In his 1957 manifesto in the form of a lecture at the Library of Congress entitled "The Biographical Novel," prominent American writer Irving Stone defines the biographical novel as "a true and documented story of the human being's journey across the face of the years, transmitted from the raw material of life into delight and purity of an authentic art form." (Stone, 1) This description emphasizes the genre's foundation in factual events, which are then artistically transformed to create a compelling and aesthetically enriching narrative. In this process, the biographical novel transcends the conventional boundaries of biography, offering a narrative that is both informative and artistically pleasing.

Contemporary critics of biographical novels often highlight the symbolic meaning drawn from the real person's life. These novels are artistic interpretations of the subject's life journey, filtered through the writer's worldview and intended message for the reader.

Michael Lackey, while differentiating the goal of biographer from the goal of biographical novelist, asserts "the biographer's goal is to give readers biographical truth, which is an accurate representation of the subject's life, while the biographical novelist's goal is to give readers fictional truth, which is based on and rooted in the life

of an actual historical figure but then converted into a literary symbol that could be used to illuminate much more than just the individual subjects life." (Lackey, 67-68)

Michael Lackey's distinction between the goals of biographers and biographical novelists is quite insightful. While biographers aim to present biographical truth, which involves an accurate portrayal of the subject's life based on factual evidence, biographical novelists seek to convey fictional truth, which goes beyond mere historical accuracy to explore deeper symbolic meanings.

By transforming real-life figures into literary symbols, biographical novelists can discuss broader themes and ideas that extend beyond the individual's life. Through this process, they offer readers a lens through which to examine universal truths, societal issues, and philosophical concepts.

2 THE GLOBAL LANDSCAPE OF BIOFICTION STUDIES

The global literary landscape has witnessed the significant rise and popularity of biographical works, which have evolved into a beloved genre. Over the past two centuries, the study of biographical literature has become prominent, leading to the establishment of theories and perspectives on its history, theory, and

characteristics. The genre, with its origins in ancient inscriptions, has developed into a specialized form of artistic literature. The 20th century marked the widespread acceptance of the biographical novel worldwide, integrating scientific and artistic thought. Among countless attempts to scrutinize the genre and its abilities as an aesthetic form it is noteworthy to mention several names. Virginia Woolf links the emergence of biographical writing to increased interest in human psychology and inner life, propelled by advancements in psychological sciences (Woolf, 128). French scholar André Maurois attributes the interest in biographies to the disquiet of the 20th century, where individuals seek solace and answers from their ancestors' lives (Maurois, 25-26). Russian scholar G.E. Pomerantseva connects the genre's popularity to the timeless human desire for immortality (Pomerantseva, 9). American writer Irving Stone emphasizes the psychological appeal of biographical works, suggesting they allow readers to actively participate in historical events (Stone, 11). Belarusian scholar T.E. Komarovskaya highlights the emotional impact of biographical novels, citing their portrayal of real individuals as a source of credibility and reader engagement (Komarovskaya, 4).

The biographical novel of the postmodern period, which developed in the latter half of the 20th century, reflects a significant transformation influenced by postmodernist trends. Scholars such as Linda Hutcheon, who emphasizes the unconventional portrayal of historical figures in these novels, argue that "even real historical figures take on a different, particularized, and ultimately ex-centric status" in postmodern historiographical fiction (Hutcheon, 113-114). Bulgarian scholar Madeleine Danova asserts that the biographical novel aligns more with postmodern than modern literature, describing it as a "hybrid genre" that blends autobiography, biography, and documentary elements within a fictional framework (Danova, 11). British researcher Bethany Lane notes that postmodern biographers use intertextual means – citations, plagiarism, and allusions – to create hypertext/hypertext relationships, showcasing a profound study of their protagonists (Lane, 283). Serbian researcher Mirjana Knezevic contends that despite postmodern distortions, biographical novels provide genuine insights into the lives of their subjects, bringing historical figures to life for contemporary readers (Knezevic, 47). Michael Lackey views biofiction as a work of art, emphasizing that biographical novels should not be expected to maintain historical accuracy but rather present a contemporary artist's interpretation (Lackey, 84).

These research findings demonstrate the enduring and evolving appeal of biographical novels. They highlight the genre's ability to merge facts with artistic creativity, offering deep emotional and psychological engagement for readers. The works underscore the biographical novel's role in fulfilling the human desire for understanding personal and historical identity, making it a significant and beloved form of literature across different cultures and time periods.

3 UZBEK BIOFICTION STUDIES

Meanwhile, Uzbek biofiction studies have lagged behind for 70 years. They are still labeled as historical novels. The first acknowledged biographical novel by the famous Uzbek writer Oybek appeared during World War II in 1941 and was published in 1948 under the title *Navoiy*. (It is important to highlight the genre since the roots of Uzbek biography date back to the 5th century. Over time, various classical forms such as *holot*, *noma*, *manogib*, *tazkira*, *qissa*, and *doston* evolved into biographical writings, eventually developing into genres like the *portrait*, *memoir*, *story*, and *novel*.)

The later novels written during the soviet era include *Ulugbek's Treasure* (1973) by Odil Yakubov, *Starry Nights* (1969-1978) and *Humayun and Akbar* (1980) by Pirmql Qodirov, *Spitamen* (1985) by Maqsud Qoriev and several more.

Ulugbek's Treasure (1973) by Odil Yakubov is a biographical novel about Mirzo Ulugbek, a 15th-century astronomer and ruler. It explores his scientific achievements, challenges from conservative forces, and political strife. The novel highlights Ulugbek's enduring legacy and the importance of knowledge and intellectual freedom amidst adversity.

Starry Nights (1969-1978) by Pirmql Qodirov is a biographical novel that centers on the life of Babur, the founder of the Mughal Empire. The novel explores Babur's early struggles, his conquests, and his efforts to establish his rule in India. It highlights his personal reflections, cultural contributions, and the significant challenges he faced in uniting diverse regions under his leadership.

Humayun and Akbar (1980) is another significant biographical novel by Pirmql Qodirov continues the historical narrative, focusing on Babur's descendants. It describes the lives of the Mughal emperors Humayun and his son Akbar, examining their political struggles, achievements, and Akbar's efforts to promote cultural and religious tolerance within the empire.

Spitamen (1985) by Maqsud Qoriyev is a historical novel that recounts the life and exploits of Spitamen, a Sogdian warlord and national hero who fiercely resisted the invasion of Alexander the Great in Central Asia.

Later novels written during Independence years are *Avicenna* (1995) by Maqsud Qoriyev, *The Last Testament of Ruzi Choriev* (2008) by Nodir Normatov, *The Great Empire* (1996-2013) tetralogy by Muhammad Ali, *Tamburlaine's Chain* (2017) by Poyon Ravshanov, *Chulpon* (2023) by Nabi Jaloliddin, *Sultan Jaloliddin Manguberdi* (2024) by Bakhtiyor Abdugafurov and many more.

Avicenna (1995) by Maqsud Qoriyev is a historical novel that explores the life and legacy of Ibn Sina, also known as Avicenna, one of the most prominent philosophers and physicians of the Islamic Golden Age. The novel narrates Avicenna's early years in Bukhara Emirates, Khorezm Khanate, his extensive travels, and his contributions to medicine, philosophy, and science.

The Great Empire (1996-2013) by Muhammad Ali is a tetralogy that chronicles the rise and fall of the Timurid Empire, focusing on its most significant rulers and events. The series vividly portrays the political, cultural, and military achievements of the Timurids, highlighting the complexities of their reigns and their impact on Central Asian history.

Chulpon (2023) by Nabi Jaloliddin is a biographical novel that delves into the life and works of Abdulhamid Chulpon. He was a prominent Uzbek poet, playwright, novelist, and enlightener who played a significant role in the cultural and intellectual life of early 20th-century Uzbekistan.

Sultan Jaloliddin Manguberdi (2024) by Bakhtiyor Abdugafurov is a biographical novel that chronicles the life and exploits of Sultan Jaloliddin Manguberdi, a prominent Khorazmian leader and warrior who resisted the Mongol invasion led by Genghis Khan in the early 13th century.

But despite the fact that all these novels are based on the life and activities of a real person, a historical figure, they are all labeled as historical novels.

Why? This is explained in G. Murodov, the Uzbek scholar and literary critic's research in the following way:

"In literary studies, perspectives on historical novels vary, with some researchers arguing that such novels should center on historical figures. N. Khudoyberganov, in *The Call of Conscience* about Nazir Safarov, supports this view, citing Belinsky's idea that a major historical figure should be depicted amidst significant events. Belinsky, however, evaluated the historical novel through Walter Scott's

works, calling Scott "the father of historical novels," despite most of Scott's protagonists being fictional.

Two main forms of historical novels have emerged:

1. *Traditional Historical Novel*: Known as the "Walter Scott novel" in global literary studies, it has not been distinctly recognized in Uzbek criticism.

2. *Historical-Biographical Novel*: Researchers like S. Petrov and M. Sattarov have identified various types of historical novels, including historical-heroic and historical-revolutionary. These classifications are based on the novels' ideological and artistic content and can include both the "Walter Scott novel" and the historical-biographical novel. In Central Asian literature, historical novels initially appeared as traditional historical novels and later evolved into historical-biographical novels, influenced by their traditional predecessors." (Murodov, 15-16).

Thus, the biographical novel in Uzbek literary criticism has not been distinctly separated from the framework of the historical novel. Scholars of Uzbek literature such as S. Mirvaliev, I. Varfolomeev, A. Kattabekov, I. Samandarov, A. Nosirov, and G. Murodov have studied biofiction as a form of historical novel. Following established Uzbek theories, heavily influenced by Russian Formalists like R. Jakobson, V. Shklovsky, A. Propp, and Yu. Tynyanov, these novels are scrutinized structurally. The focus is put on the investigation of imagery, composition, plot and story (syujet and fabula), characters, and chronotope. However, more recent investigations have gone beyond structure to explore psychologism, heteroglossia, and dialogism, influenced by Russian theorist M. Bakhtin. Additionally, discerning truth from fiction in biographical novels has become a significant issue in these studies.

However, the field is developing. The biographical novel is slowly and gradually beginning its journey toward independent recognition. In 2010, Irving Stone's lecture, *The Biographical Novel*, presented at the Library of Congress, was translated into Uzbek by the notable academician Ozod Sharafuddinov. This lecture was published as part of the collection entitled *World Critics on Literature*. The translation was well-received, with another prominent critic, Ibrohim Gafurov, underscoring the importance of the lecture in his commentary. Gafurov states that

"The literary biography in our literature is not in a barren state. Navoi's beautiful works about Jami, Sayyid Hasan Ardasher, and Pahlavon Muhammad, as well as Babur's *Vaqoe* and *Shayboniynoma*, are classic examples of this genre. In 20th-century Uzbek

literature, there are notable examples such as Said Ahmad's biographical stories, Yuldosh Shamsharov's novel about Sufizoda, Yashin's novel dedicated to Hamza, and several significant works by Naim Karimov, Shukur Khulmurzayev, and Dadakhon Nuriy, which are considered good examples of biographical novels, stories, and tales. However, despite these works, the great potential of this genre has not yet been fully realized. Very few studies have been written about its genre characteristics.

In this regard, readers who have read Irving Stone's works will be fully convinced of the immense place, influence, and significance of this genre in the new world literature. Irving Stone presents so many astonishing examples from his creative laboratory that it firmly establishes the idea that artistic research is such a vast and beneficial endeavor. Irving Stone vividly demonstrates the similarities and distinguishing features between biography and biographical novels, and between historical works and biographical novels, through clear examples. Therefore, you will be convinced once again of the great work Ozod Sharafuddinov has done by introducing us to this article." (Gafurov, 387-388)

This claim has great importance. Biofiction studies should develop in Uzbek criticism so that the immense potential of the biographical genre can be fully realized. Although there are notable examples of biographical novels in Uzbek literature, the genre's full capabilities have yet to be explored.

Among small number of researches, my comparative research *The Peculiarities of the Biographical Novel: A comparative study of I.Stone's, M.Qoriyev's and N.Normatov's works* (2018), I sought to find parallels between American writer Irving Stone's novels and Uzbek biographical novels such as *Avicenna* (1995) by M. Qoriyev and *The Last Testament of Ruzi Choriev* (2008) by N. Normatov. F. Khajieva labeled these works as biographical novels and aimed to highlight their structural and stylistic similarities to demonstrate that these works can confidently and prominently be called biographical novels or biofiction.

But, my current focus is on the symbolic impact of biofiction on the reader. While reading Nodir Normatov's *The Last Testament of Ruzi Choriev*, the reader can perceive the Soviet and post-Soviet issues of self-identity and national identity through the life description of Ruzi Choriev.

So, What is the novel about? And Who is Ruzi Choriev? The postmodern novel *The Last Testament of Ruzi Choriev* describes the life and activities of a prominent XX century Uzbek artist Ruzi Choriev,

through the lens of his friend and biographer Nodir Normatov. Both came from the Surkandarya, the city in Southern Uzbekistan, bordering with Afghanistan, with picturesque landscape and typical Uzbek mindset.

Ruzi Choriev was raised in an orphanage after World War II, mostly by Russian teachers, and was surrounded by a Soviet mindset, like many other Uzbeks. He primarily spoke Russian and married a Russian woman. His russified mentality, imbued with socialistic ideology, made him very famous during his lifetime, and he was loved by Uzbeks.

Normatov, the biographer of the artist, sought to depict Choriev in his distinct writing style, which embodies the Uzbek mentality and way of thinking. In his literary works, Normatov portrays all characters, including Choriev, as reflections of typical Uzbek people, with their mannerisms and peculiarities. Normatov's Ruzi Choriev is a flexible, generous, hardworking, hospitable, and kind-hearted patriot like all other Uzbeks.

It is noteworthy to add that, after gaining independence in 1991, Uzbeks began to search for their national identity, history, and culture. Writers centered their works around these themes, employing various styles, themes, settings, and genres to showcase national self-awareness. This trend is evident in numerous literary works from the 1990s, including *The Last Testament of Ruzi Choriev*.

The novel consists of myriads of fragmented episodes. Among the events described kaleidoscopically in the novel, there is a chapter entitled *A Wedding in Poshkhurd for a Film*.

In the 1980s, a film about the artist Ruzi Choriev was commissioned by *Uzbektelefilm*. Filming coincided with the fasting period of Ramadan, and the script required a wedding scene in the village. Due to Ramadan, all weddings were postponed, posing a problem for the director. But village people decided to organize wedding for Ruzi Aka, but only after the breaking of the fast.

The wedding drew a large crowd, with people climbing walls and trees to participate. The bride and groom sat in a place of honor, receiving blessings and well-wishes. Ruzi Aka expressed his heartfelt wishes, and the film director was pleased. After the wedding, school principal remarked that everyone was happy except for two people – the bride and groom. When Ruzi Aka questioned this, it was explained that the wedding was arranged for the film and the couple had not completed the necessary religious and civil ceremonies. Therefore, they had to return to their homes. Another wedding would be arranged after Ramadan.

The wedding was organized for the sake of film. It was imitation. But all people were really happy and it was discernible that Uzbeks are breaking Islamic traditions and celebrating wedding during Ramadan. In fact the 80's soviet politics was aimed at anti-religious activities. But Uzbeks, flexible in nature never neglected their cultural traditions and were ready to play the role in the sake of their favored people, in this case Ruzi Choriev. The described event symbolically represents Uzbeks of those times, when people were deprived of cultural values in the sake of Soviet doctrine. The celebration was done but the bride and groom will wait till all traditional norms will be followed.

Paradoxically, but Uzbeks are unique in nature. We are open and welcoming to new cultures and values. This can be seen in traditions, and even our language. Uzbek weddings are very famous for their massiveness. This cultural attitude, deeply ingrained and passed down through generations, is carefully preserved and enriched over time, embodying cultural layers in each step of development. The roots of these grand ceremonies trace back to Zoroastrian culture, evident in modern celebrations such as bonfire processions for the bride and groom and the symbolic lighting of candles representing the couple.

With the advent of Islam, elements like the nikah ceremony and the payment of mahr (a mandatory gift from the groom to the bride) and qalin (bride price) were adopted from Arabic culture. During Soviet times, marriage registration and certain Western traditions were incorporated into these celebrations. Western influences include brides wearing white ceremonial dresses, grooms black suits, the exchange of wedding rings, the couple standing with all guests in the center, and grandiose dinners. These rituals have expanded the traditional celebrations rather than diminishing them.

The Uzbek language, itself, can be another example to openness and it manifests all the cultural layers evident in modern times. For examples, Uzbek language, which belongs to Turkic family of languages, at the same time possess the words from Persian, Arabic, Russian and even English languages. So, Nodir Normatov's Ruzi Choriev carries more than three languages, including Russian, Uzbek and Tajik (Surkhandarya dialect). Ruzi Choriev mostly spoke in Russian, as Soviet time required, but in one episode he bets with his friend that he is able to speak Uzbek fluently for two hours without using any Russian word, and eventually despite his opponent's skepticism, he wins. Within Russian surface, Nodir Normatov creates the Uzbek essence.

This episode from the novel echoes the current problems of language shifts and language instability. Nowadays, the Uzbek language does not have a finalized script. Within a hundred years, the Uzbek alphabet has changed four times: from Arabic script to Latin (1929), from Latin to Cyrillic (1940), and from Cyrillic back to Latin (2005). These frequent changes have led to widespread illiteracy, even in writing the name of the country. "Uzbekistan" can be written in several interchangeable ways: O'zbekiston, O'zbekiston, and O'zbekiston, the last version is considered to be correct, so far.

The next crucial issue connected with *the self and creative identity of the Uzbek artist* has several implications for the reader.

It is well-known that during the Soviet regime, all forms of art were subordinated to socialist realism. Artists were dictated to create works imbued with socialist themes. As Nodir Normatov notes in his biofiction, "...during the Soviet era, many artists made a living by drawing Lenin's portrait. Were you hungry? Draw Lenin's picture, and you have money!" (Normatov, 158). Normatov criticizes this one-sided/lopsided approach and, with the supportive words of renowned art critic Akbar Khakimov, highlights Ruzi Choriev's paintings that carry significant national character.

In his article "Painting of Uzbekistan in the XIX-XX Centuries," renowned art historian and academician Akbar Hakimov wrote: One of the distinctive features of the fine arts of the 60s-80s was the renewal of traditional painting rules, the search for new, influential forms, and the aspiration for an expressive symbolic style. Artists gradually began to free themselves from the rules and iron laws of socialist realism that had held them in a stranglehold." (Normatov, 158-159)

To support this view, Normatov includes numerous illustrations from Ruzi Choriev's gallery into his novel. These pictures make the biofiction both illustrative and impactful. For example, Normatov uses a collection of paintings depicting village people and traditional settings, emphasizing the rich cultural heritage and identity of Uzbek art.

Nowadays Ruzi Choriev is considered as a representative of Oriental Realism. Most of his works focus on national themes. People are with their own past, present, problems, hopes and joys. This subtle connection of verbal expression of each personage in the novel makes the reader feel that authenticity, Uzbek selfness and traditions.

The symbolic struggle of artists during the Soviet era is captured in the words of Akbar Hakimov, who describes the 60s-80s as a period of breaking free

from the constraints of socialist realism. The search for new, expressive forms and the philosophical comprehension of life signify the artists' rebellion against the restrictive norms imposed by the state.

Ro'zi Choriev's work, particularly his expressive style seen in paintings like *Madonna of Surkhandarya*, *Bride*, and *Our Contemporary*, represents this innovative spirit. These works, though not immediately accepted, symbolize the artist's pursuit of creative freedom and the desire to capture deeper, more personal truths beyond the state's propaganda.

So, each fragment of the novel symbolically portrays the artist's journey from compliance to rebellion, reflecting the broader cultural and ideological shifts in the Soviet Union and the resilience of artistic spirit amidst oppressive regimes.

4 CONCLUSION

The field of Uzbek biofiction studies has historically been overshadowed by a broader categorization as historical novels, despite its rich and distinct literary tradition. While notable works such as Oybek's *Navoiy* (1948) and subsequent novels from the Soviet era onwards have contributed significantly to the genre, they have often been subsumed under the umbrella of historical fiction. This categorization has persisted due to differing perspectives on the definition and classification of historical novels within literary studies, influenced by Western and Russian literary theories.

However, recent scholarship, including comparative studies such as the author's own research, has sought to delineate the biographical novel as a distinct genre within Uzbek literature. By examining structural and stylistic parallels between Uzbek biographical novels and works from other literary traditions, scholars aim to underscore the unique characteristics and potential of biofiction.

Moreover, the symbolic impact of biofiction on readers is increasingly recognized as a crucial aspect of its significance. Through narratives like Nodir Normatov's *The Last Testament of Ruzi Choriev*, readers are invited to engage with complex themes of self-identity and national identity within the context of Soviet and post-Soviet Uzbekistan. These novels serve as literary windows into the cultural resilience, adaptability, and enduring traditions of the Uzbek people, while also shedding light on broader socio-political and artistic struggles.

Additionally, the creative identity of Uzbek artists, particularly during the Soviet era, reflects a

symbolic struggle against the constraints of socialist realism and a quest for artistic freedom. Through the works of artists like Ruzi Choriev, readers witness the evolution of Uzbek artistry and the enduring quest for authenticity amidst ideological pressures.

Uzbek biofiction is starting its journey and is shaping its content in its unique Uzbek way, imbued with national mentality, images, historical figures, themes and culture.

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