

DISTINCTIVE FEATURES OF THE WORKS IN THE "YUSUF AND ZULAYHA" SERIES

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Abstract. This article analyzes the genesis, artistic characteristics, and classification issues of the works belonging to the widely распространён (widely spread) “Yusuf and Zulayho” cycle in Eastern classical literature. In particular, the works “Yusuf and Zulayho” by Abdurahmon Jami, Durbek, and Nurmuhhammad Andalib are comparatively classified and examined.

Keywords: Torah, Qur'an, Bible, plot, Yusuf, Zulayho, Taymus, Maghrib, prophet, prophethood, Rabghuzi, Qul Ali, Ya'qub, Balkh, Central Asia.

The epics belonging to the “Yusuf and Zulayho” cycle are itinerant-plot narratives closely connected with the highest artistic traditions of Eastern classical literature. These works not only reflect the spiritual and aesthetic views of their respective periods, but are also recognized as invaluable literary heritage across world literatures and continue to attract considerable scholarly interest.

The origins of this narrative date back to pre-Christian-era oral folklore. The central concept of *love (ishq)* advanced in these works is primarily interpreted as divine love toward the Creator. In line with Sufi thought, this love represents the human soul's aspiration for perfection and its spiritual purification on the path toward divine beauty. The relationship between Yusuf and Zulayho serves as a symbolic artistic manifestation of this divine love, where human affection is elevated to a means of attaining divine truth.

This theme was first introduced into written literature by Abulqasim Firdawsi. Some sources also note that the poet Shahabiddin Am'aq Bukhari, who lived in Bukhara in the early 11th century, composed a work on this subject.

Nasiruddin Rabghuzi's *Qissas al-Anbiya* (1310) includes the story of Yusuf as a significant component. This narrative holds an important place not only in terms of plot, but also due to its rich artistic and spiritual content. Through Rabghuzi's interpretation, the story of Yusuf acquired a distinctive aesthetic form within Eastern literature and was enriched with religious-philosophical perspectives. The work consists of 72 stories devoted to the lives and miracles of prophets, among which the story of Yusuf is the most extensive. Based on the Qur'anic verse “*We relate to you the best of stories*”, Rabghuzi refers to the Yusuf narrative as *Ahsan al-Qasas* (“The Best of Stories”).

It should be noted that more than 150 manuscript versions of this epic exist, and their interpretations differ considerably. Such variations can be observed in the works of Abdurahmon Jami, Durbek, and Nurmuhhammad Andalib.

Jami's interpretation incorporates a strong Sufi approach. Through the images of Yusuf and Zulayho, the poet depicts the human soul's aspiration toward God, uniting the external form of love with its inner spiritual essence. Zulayho's inner experiences, Yusuf's patience and moral refinement, and their emotional and spiritual connection are portrayed with profound artistic depth. The plot centers on Yusuf's beauty, Zulayho's love and spiritual transformation, and the process of moral elevation through love and patience. The narrative begins with Yusuf's dream

that foretells his destiny, followed by his being sold by his brothers and taken to Egypt. The core themes include purification of the self, endurance, spiritual maturity, and divine love.

Durbek also offers a distinctive artistic interpretation of the “Yusuf and Zulayho” theme. His characters, particularly Yusuf and Zulayho, maintain firm hope for the realization of their aspirations despite hardships. Zulayho’s dream of Yusuf is depicted in 34 verses in Durbek’s work, whereas in Jami’s version this episode occupies a much larger section.

Durbek was the first poet to compose a “Yusuf and Zulayho” epic in Old Uzbek. His work is notable not only for its rich plot, but also for its artistic expression and linguistic features, continuing the literary traditions of its time. Prior to Durbek, Persian versions of the Yusuf narrative were widespread. Motivated by the Qur’an and *Qisas al-Anbiya*, Durbek resolved to create a Turkic-language epic, encouraged by his close companions.

The talented poet Nurmuhhammad Andalib also authored a “Yusuf and Zulayho” epic, which provides valuable information about his life and creativity. In this work, Zulayho is described as seeing Yusuf in a dream twice. The dream episode is narrated in both verse and prose, emphasizing divine inspiration and spiritual awakening.

The phrase “*I am yours, and you are mine*” does not signify ordinary worldly love, but rather expresses the Sufi concept of unity (*wahdat*), the spiritual union of lover and beloved, known as *fanā fi’l-ishq*. Yusuf symbolizes divine beauty, while Zulayho represents the soul longing for God. Her awakening from the dream signifies not only physical awakening but also spiritual enlightenment and advancement to a higher stage of love.

Andalib’s epic is distinguished by its ideological depth, artistic quality, and linguistic richness. One of its defining features is that each major episode of the narrative begins with a dream motif, which plays a central role in intensifying love and spiritual realization.

Overall, the “Yusuf and Zulayho” cycle represents a major artistic-philosophical tradition rooted in Surah Yusuf of the Qur’an. Although the sequence of events is generally preserved across different genres—epic, masnavi, and lyric-epic forms—each author presents unique interpretations shaped by their historical context, worldview, and literary school. Human love gradually transforms into divine and mystical love, becoming a symbolic path toward spiritual perfection.

The classification of works within the “Yusuf and Zulayho” cycle clearly demonstrates the widespread popularity of this narrative in Eastern literature and its continuous enrichment with new artistic and aesthetic layers across different eras. This cycle occupies a significant place in classical literature as a stable tradition that expresses ideals of love, patience, devotion, and divine perfection at a high artistic level.

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