

**MODERN WOMEN IN BAHMANYOR'S *SHAHANSHAH* AND CALVINO'S
METAFICTIONAL WORLDS: A COMPARATIVE STUDY****Shakhzoda Nazarova**

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Email: shahzoda.nazarzoda@gmail.com**Abstract**

Bahmanyor, a prominent Tajik male author, stands out for his nuanced exploration of women and femininity in his literary works, particularly in *Shahanshah*. This novel introduces the archetype of the modern urban Tajik woman, contrasting her with traditional rural women and historical female figures. Through the characters of Chisto and Sito, two sisters embodying contemporary freedoms, Bahmanyor examines the evolving social liberties of Tajik women. This paper analyzes the depiction of these urban women, their independence, and their juxtaposition with historical and rural female archetypes, situating *Shahanshah* within the broader context of Tajik and post-Soviet literature. The narrative is non-linear and fragmented, incorporating: Intertextuality (references to historical, literary, or cultural sources), metafiction (self-aware commentary on writing, storytelling, and reality), multiple perspectives and voices, blurring of reality and imagination, cultural/historical critique (questioning power, identity, and societal change). These elements align with postmodern and metafictional styles, as analyzed in this study (with comparison with Italo Calvino's *If on a winter's night a traveler* and *One Thousand and Nights* two sister figures) highlighting six key postmodern features in the novel, positioning it as a sophisticated example in Tajik literature.

Keywords

Modern woman, One Thousand and One Nights, Shahanshoh, metafictional storytelling, the Urban woman, frame story, outer narrative

Introduction

Bahmanyor is among the few male Tajik writers who have extensively explored the theme of women and femininity. His earlier work, *Sarmaddeh*, is celebrated for its vivid portrayal of rural women's lives, capturing their daily experiences with intricate detail. (Bahmanyar, 2007) In contrast, *Shahanshah* shifts focus to urban women, presenting a modern, cosmopolitan femininity that challenges traditional norms. (Sa'di, 2021)

This paper examines how Bahmanyor constructs the image of the modern Tajik woman through the characters Chisto and Sito, comparing their portrayal with historical and rural female figures in his oeuvre and other Tajik literary works. It argues that *Shahanshah* serves as a critical contribution to Tajik literature by introducing the urban woman as a symbol of social progress, while also reflecting the tensions between tradition and modernity.

Comparing the sisters in Bahmanyar's *Shahanshah* (Chisto and Sito) and in Italo Calvino's *If on a winter's night a traveler* (Ludmilla and Lotaria) to Scheherazade (Scheherazade and Dunyazad), the legendary storyteller from *One Thousand and One Nights*, reveals intriguing parallels and contrasts. Scheherazade is the central framing figure: an intelligent, courageous, well-educated woman who marries the vengeful King Shahryar and saves her own life (and

ultimately those of other women) by telling captivating, interlinked stories every night for 1,001 nights. She deliberately interrupts each tale at a suspenseful moment at dawn, using narrative mastery, wit, and emotional intelligence to reform the king and survive male oppression. Her younger sister Dunyazad (or Dinarzad) plays a crucial supporting role by prompting the stories each night, creating a sisterly collaboration that enables the storytelling. (One Thousand and One Night, 1939)

In Bahmanyar's novel, Chisto (the elder, bold, assertive, liberated urban woman) and Sito (the younger, delicate, reserved, more traditionally feminine sister) do not directly replicate Scheherazade's life-or-death storytelling frame. However, their dynamic echoes aspects of Scheherazade and Dunyazad in subtler, culturally resonant ways.

- Both pairs feature biological sisters who embody complementary facets of femininity and work together (implicitly or explicitly) to navigate challenging realities. Scheherazade is the dominant, resourceful elder who drives the narrative survival strategy, while Dunyazad (the younger) provides gentle prompting and support from the sidelines—much like Chisto's outward confidence and agency contrast with Sito's quieter, grounding presence.

- The sisters in *Shahanshah* represent a spectrum of Tajik womanhood amid post-Soviet urban change (tradition vs. modernity), using their bond to adapt and thrive without overt conflict. This mirrors Scheherazade's use of storytelling to bridge crisis and effect cultural/psychological reform—here, the "crisis" is societal transition rather than execution, and the "tool" is lived identity and sisterly resilience rather than nightly tales.

- While no literal storytelling frame exists, Bahmanyar's warm, reflective portrayal of the sisters evokes the Persian/Tajik oral tradition that underlies *One Thousand and One Nights*, where women preserve cultural continuity through subtle influence and harmony.

The parallel is more thematic and structural (sisterly complementarity in the face of change) than literal; Chisto and Sito do not "tell stories to survive" in the same overt way, but their interactions symbolize a quiet form of empowerment and cultural negotiation.

The Urban Woman analyzes in metafictional storytelling

One Thousand and One Nights (often called *The Arabian Nights* in English, though its roots are deeply Persian/Iranian via the earlier *Hazār Afsān* or "A Thousand Tales") is the archetypal framed narrative and nested storytelling collection in world literature. Its core structure—a frame story of Scheherazade (شهرزاد) telling tales to King Shahryar (شهریار) over 1,001 nights to delay her execution—serves as the container for hundreds of embedded tales, many of which contain further stories-within-stories (mise-en-abyme). This device creates suspense, buys time (literally life-saving), reflects on the power of narrative, and weaves moral, erotic, adventurous, and fantastical threads across Persian, Indian, Arabic, and other influences.

Both Bahmanyar's *Shahanshah* (2007) and Calvino's *If on a winter's night a traveler* (1979) engage with storytelling traditions that echo aspects of the *Nights*, but in very different ways. Bahmanyar's approach is closer to the organic, culturally rooted Persian/Tajik heritage of the *Nights*, while Calvino's is a postmodern, self-conscious reinvention that explicitly nods to it. (Calvino, 1981)

Frame Story / Outer Narrative

- **One Thousand and One Nights:** The frame is Scheherazade's nightly storytelling to survive. The outer tale (her marriage, the king's rage, her sister Dinarzad's prompting) provides the motivation for endless narration. The frame resolves happily when the king is reformed through the tales.

- **Bahmanyar's *Shahanshah*:** No overarching "life-or-death" frame like Scheherazade's. The novel is a more conventional character-driven narrative (urban Tajik life, sisters Chisto and Sito, narrator's reflections). Any framing is subtle—perhaps the narrator's retrospective voice or cultural reflections—but it lacks a dramatic external container. It draws more from Persian oral/folk traditions (anecdotes, memories, short tales told in conversation) than a rigid frame.

- **Calvino's *If on a winter's night a traveler*:** The frame is the second-person "You" narrative—the Reader's quest to finish a book amid constant interruptions. This mirrors Scheherazade in a meta way: the act of reading (and desiring completion) drives the "telling," but here it's frustrated rather than life-preserving. Critics and readers often compare it directly to the *Nights* as a modern, ironic version where the "sultan" is the impatient reader, and the "Scheherazade" is the fragmented text itself.

Nested / Embedded Stories (Story-within-a-Story)

- **One Thousand and One Nights:** Extreme nesting—Scheherazade's tales frequently contain characters who tell further stories (e.g., the fisherman tells the jinni a tale, which includes another layer). This creates suspense (cliffhangers at dawn) and thematic echoes (stories about storytelling, justice, deception).

- **Bahmanyar's *Shahanshah*:** Milder, organic embeddings. Characters recount personal anecdotes, family legends, folk-like episodes, or cultural memories during conversations or reflections. These serve thematic purposes (illuminating modernity vs. tradition, gender roles) rather than structural interruption. It echoes the Persian roots of the *Nights* (oral tradition, dastan-style digressions) but without the multiplicative, suspense-driven layering.

- **Calvino:** The most radical parallel—10 aborted embedded novels interrupt the frame exactly like Scheherazade's nightly cuts, but deliberately sabotaged (printing errors, translations, forgeries). Each "night" begins a gripping tale that ends mid-flow, mimicking the dawn interruption in the *Nights*. Calvino explicitly references the *Nights* in discussions and reader interpretations see his novel as a postmodern homage/frustration of that endless-tale mechanism.

The purpose of storytelling differs markedly across the three works. In *One Thousand and One Nights*, storytelling serves the urgent goal of survival—Scheherazade uses her nightly tales to buy time and preserve her life while also achieving moral reform by gradually softening the king's heart through the power of narrative. In Bahmanyar's *Shahanshah*, storytelling functions more subtly as a means of cultural reflection, the exploration of identity, and the conveyance of emotional depth, with embedded anecdotes reinforcing themes of Tajik heritage and social change. In Italo Calvino's *If on a winter's night a traveler*, the purpose centers on the desire for narrative completion and its inevitable frustration, while simultaneously offering a critique of reading practices, literary consumption, and the commodification of stories.

The suspense mechanism also varies significantly. *One Thousand and One Nights* relies on dramatic cliffhangers delivered at dawn, creating genuine life-or-death stakes that compel the king (and the reader) to demand continuation. In *Shahanshah*, suspense is far gentler and more thematic: occasional digressions and integrated anecdotes provide reflective pauses without high dramatic tension or risk. By contrast, Calvino engineers deliberate interruptions—systematic

breaks after each embedded novel's opening—that function as an intellectual and erotic tease, heightening the reader's longing while denying satisfaction.

Narrative layers show another clear distinction. *One Thousand and One Nights* employs deep mise-en-abyme, with stories nesting inside stories inside further stories, creating an almost infinite regression of tales. In *Shahanshah*, narrative layers remain occasional and tightly integrated: brief anecdotes or personal recollections appear naturally within the main flow, never overwhelming the primary plot. Calvino, however, constructs a highly systematic structure of more than ten aborted beginnings plus the outer frame narrative, producing a controlled yet radical proliferation of unfinished layers.

The cultural roots of each work reflect their distinct literary lineages. *One Thousand and One Nights* draws from Persian and Indian origins before becoming an Arabic compilation, embodying a rich cross-cultural oral and written tradition. *Shahanshah* grows out of modern Tajik/Persian prose while echoing folk and oral storytelling traditions native to the region. Calvino's novel is firmly rooted in Western postmodernism, yet it deliberately nods to Eastern frame-tale traditions, most notably the structure of the *Nights*.

The tone of each text further sets them apart. *One Thousand and One Nights* is enchanting, moralistic, erotic, and adventurous, blending wonder with ethical lessons. *Shahanshah* maintains a warm, lyrical, and sociological tone, focusing on human relationships and cultural nuance. Calvino's work is playful, ironic, and deeply metafictional, delighting in its own artifice while questioning the act of reading itself.

Finally, resolution handles closure in contrasting ways. *One Thousand and One Nights* reaches a happy, transformative ending: the king is reformed, the tales conclude, and Scheherazade's life is secured. *Shahanshah* follows a more conventional novelistic resolution, bringing its central characters and themes to a satisfying close. In *If on a winter's night a traveler*, the resolution is ironic and only partial—the frame narrative ends romantically, but the embedded tales remain forever unfinished, leaving the reader suspended in perpetual anticipation.

- **Bahmanyar** shares the most with the *Nights* in cultural lineage (Persian storytelling heritage, subtle embeddings for reflection and heritage preservation) but uses them sparingly and organically, without the dramatic frame or endless nesting. *Shahanshah* feels like a modern Tajik descendant of that tradition—focused on lived identity rather than fantastical survival-through-tales.

- **Calvino** engages the *Nights* more structurally and self-reflexively: his interrupted beginnings parody Scheherazade's technique, turning the life-saving suspense into readerly frustration/desire. Many analyses call it a "postmodern Arabian Nights" where the reader is the sultan, endlessly teased but never fully satisfied.

The *Nights* provides the ancient blueprint for narrative-as-survival and infinite layering. Bahmanyar quietly inherits its spirit in a grounded, cultural way; Calvino explodes and ironizes it into a metafictional labyrinth.

The story-within-a-story (also called embedded narrative, framed tale, mise-en-abyme, or nested storytelling) is a device where one narrative level contains another distinct story told by a character, narrator, or through a text-within-the-text. (Waugh, 1984) This technique can create layers of meaning, delay closure, reflect on storytelling itself, or comment on cultural/psychological realities. (Calvino, 1982, 26)

Calvino's novel is one of the most extreme and systematic uses of this device in 20th-century literature. Bahmanyar's *Shahanshah*, by contrast, employs subtler, more organic forms of embedded storytelling typical of much Persian/Tajik prose influenced by classical traditions (e.g., *One Thousand and One Nights*, folk tales, or reflective digressions). The comparison is therefore asymmetrical: Calvino uses nested stories as the structural engine of the entire book, while Bahmanyar integrates them more selectively for thematic depth and cultural texture.

In *Shahanshah*, Bahmanyar introduces Chisto and Sito, two sisters who epitomize the modern urban Tajik woman. Unlike the rural women of *Sarmaddeh*, who are rooted in village traditions and customs, Chisto and Sito embody a cosmopolitan lifestyle. (Bahmanyar, 2013) They live independently in a city apartment, free from parental oversight, as their parents work abroad. Their social circle includes male friends, such as Chisto's dance instructor and their enigmatic neighbor Bobokalon, reflecting a break from traditional gender segregation.

The novel also features a domesticated dog, a symbol of modernity, contrasting with the traditional role of dogs as guard animals or shepherds' companions in *Sarmaddeh*. In *Shahanshah*, the dog is a pet, devoid of utilitarian function, underscoring the urban setting's detachment from rural traditions. Historically, dogs in Tajik literature, including Bahmanyar's works, often symbolized loyalty or protection, but in *Shahanshah*, the dog's role as a companion highlights the sisters' modern sensibilities.

Characterization of Chisto and Sito

Bahmanyar's *Shahanshah* is a more conventional character-driven novel set in an urban Tajik environment, focusing on themes of modernity, gender (via sisters Chisto and Sito), identity, and social change.

Embedded stories appear in milder forms:

- **Anecdotal or reflective digressions:** Characters (especially the narrator or secondary figures) recount personal memories, folk-like tales, family histories, or cultural anecdotes that briefly "nest" inside the main plot.
- **Oral storytelling moments:** In line with Persian/Tajik literary heritage, conversations or gatherings include someone telling a short tale, proverb-linked story, or life episode that mirrors or comments on the main narrative (e.g., a story about love, migration, or tradition to illuminate the sisters' experiences).
- **No evidence of multiple parallel aborted novels** or engineered interruptions; the overall arc remains linear/coherent, with embedded elements serving thematic enrichment rather than structural sabotage.

Chisto, the elder sister, is portrayed as bold, assertive, and quintessentially feminine, while Sito, the younger sister, is more delicate and reserved, retaining traces of traditional Tajik femininity. Both sisters, educated in Russian, frequently use Russian phrases and exhibit behaviors influenced by Russian and Western cultural models. Their linguistic and cultural hybridity positions them as progressive figures, contributing to the refinement of the Tajik language through neologisms and intellectual discourse.

The novel's narrator, a stand-in for the author, develops a complex relationship with the sisters. His initial curiosity about Chisto evolves into a one-sided romantic attraction, while his preference for Sito reveals a tension between his traditional inclinations and the sisters' modern outlook. This dynamic underscores the narrator's struggle to reconcile his traditional Eastern masculinity with the sisters' postmodern freedoms.

Similarities in writing style and approach between Bahmanyar's *Shahanshah* (شاهانشاه) and Italo Calvino's *If on a winter's night a traveler* are limited and asymmetrical, given Calvino's extreme postmodern experimentation versus Bahmanyar's more grounded, lyrical Tajik/Persian prose. However, several meaningful parallels emerge when examining their craft as writers:

Both novels employ self-reflexive elements that draw attention to the act of narration or reading. Calvino pushes this to its limit through overt metafiction—second-person address to the reader ("You"), explicit commentary on the reading process, and the novel's structure as a commentary on itself. In *Shahanshah*, Bahmanyar uses subtler self-awareness: the narrator (a semi-autobiographical writer figure) reflects on storytelling, cultural representation, and his own observations, creating a mild metanarrative layer that echoes the Persian tradition of reflective asides without Calvino's radical disruption.

Both authors innovate with language to assert cultural or literary identity. Calvino experiments with style by shifting genres across the ten embedded beginnings, parodying literary conventions and showcasing versatility. Bahmanyar innovates linguistically through neologisms, revived archaic Tajik-Persian terms, polysemy, and rich figurative expressions—enriching modern Tajik prose and resisting linguistic homogenization (e.g., Soviet-era influences). In both cases, the writing style serves as a form of resistance or revival: Calvino against ideological rigidity in literature, Bahmanyar for Tajik cultural continuity.

Both integrate embedded or layered storytelling as a deliberate technique. Calvino's interruptions and aborted novels create a puzzle-like structure that foregrounds narrative construction. Bahmanyar incorporates occasional anecdotes, personal memories, or reflective digressions that deepen themes (e.g., identity, change) without breaking the flow. While Calvino's layering is systematic and deconstructive, Bahmanyar's is organic and integrative—yet both use these devices to reflect on how stories are told, remembered, or consumed.

Both novels feature a reflective male observer-narrator who contemplates desire, society, and narrative itself. Calvino's "You" Reader and ironic authorial voice probe the pleasures and frustrations of reading/writing. Bahmanyar's narrator observes urban Tajik life (especially through the sisters Chisto and Sito) with ambivalence, blending personal longing with cultural commentary. This introspective stance makes the act of writing/observing part of the thematic fabric in both works.

Finally, both demonstrate playfulness with form to explore broader questions. Calvino's irony, genre parody, and reader involvement playfully question narrative authority and completion. Bahmanyar's warm, lyrical shifts between rural echoes and urban realism subtly play with novelistic conventions to explore social transition—less overtly ludic, but still inventive in blending folk/oral influences with modern prose.

In essence, the core similarity lies in their self-conscious craftsmanship: both writers treat the novel not just as a vehicle for story but as an artifact that comments on its own making, cultural context, and reception—though Calvino does so aggressively and postmodernly, while Bahmanyar does so gently and rooted in Tajik/Persian heritage. These shared concerns make the comparison intellectually rewarding despite the stylistic gulf. (Lewis, 2002)

The two novels—Bahmanyar's *Shahanshah* and Italo Calvino's *If on a winter's night a traveler*—share several notable similarities in their approaches to writing, even though their styles and cultural contexts differ significantly.

Both authors adopt a self-conscious, reflective stance toward narration. Calvino makes this explicit through second-person address to the reader, direct commentary on the reading and writing process, and a structure that constantly foregrounds its own artificiality. In *Shahanshah*, Bahmanyar employs a subtler form of reflexivity: the narrator (a semi-autobiographical writer figure) muses on storytelling, cultural representation, observation, and the challenges of depicting Tajik life, creating a gentle metanarrative layer rooted in Persian literary traditions of introspection and asides.

Both writers innovate linguistically to serve thematic and cultural ends. Calvino shifts styles across the ten embedded story openings, parodying genres and demonstrating versatility while questioning narrative conventions. Bahmanyar enriches Tajik Persian prose with neologisms, revived archaic terms, polysemy, and inventive figurative language—revitalizing the language in a post-Soviet context and resisting linguistic uniformity. In both cases, stylistic experimentation becomes a tool for asserting identity: Calvino against ideological or commodified literature, Bahmanyar for Tajik/Persian cultural continuity.

Both integrate layered or embedded storytelling as a core technique. (Braginskiy, 1972) Calvino uses systematic interruptions and aborted narratives to build a puzzle-like structure that highlights narrative construction and frustration. Bahmanyar incorporates occasional anecdotes, personal recollections, folk echoes, or reflective digressions that deepen character, evoke memory, and mirror central themes (e.g., love, change, heritage) without disrupting the main flow. While Calvino's layering is aggressive and deconstructive, Bahmanyar's is organic and harmonious—yet both treat stories-within-stories as a way to comment on how narratives are created, remembered, and received.

Both feature a contemplative male observer-narrator who probes desire, society, and the act of telling. Calvino's ironic "You" Reader and implied authorial voice explore the pleasures and limits of reading/writing. Bahmanyar's narrator observes urban Tajik society (especially the sisters Chisto and Sito) with ambivalence, blending personal emotion with cultural insight. This shared introspective gaze makes the writer's role part of the thematic substance in each novel.

Finally, both demonstrate playful or inventive handling of form to address larger questions. Calvino's irony, genre parody, and reader involvement playfully interrogate narrative authority, completion, and consumption. Bahmanyar's lyrical shifts between rural echoes and urban realism subtly play with novelistic conventions to explore social transition and identity—less overtly ludic, but still creatively blending oral/folk influences with modern prose.

These shared approaches make both novels examples of self-aware craftsmanship: the writers treat the novel not merely as a story container but as an artifact that reflects on its own construction, cultural positioning, and reception—though Calvino does so radically and postmodernly, while Bahmanyar does so gently and within Tajik/Persian heritage.

Bahmanyar is a prominent Tajik writer known for innovative prose in post-Soviet Tajik literature. His two major novels, *Sarmaddeh* (published in parts: first in 2002, expanded in 2014) and *Shahanshah* (2007), represent peaks of his career and often appear together in collections. While interconnected, they differ significantly in setting, style, themes, and reception. Both explore Tajik identity in the post-Soviet era.

Feature nuanced portrayals of women and femininity (rare among male Tajik writers): Contains autobiographical echoes and social commentary; Bahmanyar's innovative break from traditional Tajik prose molds.

Sarmaddeh is a celebration of rural, traditional Tajikistan—an "ideal village" that readers emotionally connect with—while Shahanshah shifts to urban modernity, displacement, and historical reflection, making it more critical and experimental. Characters in Shahanshah even dream of living in a place like Sarmaddeh, highlighting the contrast between nostalgic rural idealism and complex urban reality. (Gulrukhsar, 2019) (Jalal, 1969)

These novels together showcase Bahmanyar's evolution from rural-focused storytelling to broader explorations of cultural transitions.

Chisto (the elder sister) and Sito (the younger sister) are central female characters in Bahmanyar's 2007 novel *Shahanshah*. They represent the archetype of the modern urban Tajik woman in post-Soviet Tajikistan, serving as a deliberate contrast to the rural, traditional women depicted in Bahmanyar's earlier masterpiece *Sarmaddeh*:

Chisto: Bold, assertive, and quintessentially feminine. She embodies confidence, independence, and a forward-facing modernity. Her personality is outgoing and challenging of norms, reflecting urban freedoms and self-expression.

Sito: More delicate, reserved, and introspective. She retains subtle traces of traditional Tajik femininity—gentleness, emotional depth—while adapting to city life. This makes her a bridge between old and new worlds.

The sisters live independently in an apartment in a city resembling Dushanbe, free from direct parental oversight (their parents work abroad). This setup symbolizes emancipation and the shift from communal rural family structures to individualistic urban living.

A key symbol associated with them is the domesticated pet dog they keep as a companion (rather than a utilitarian guard or working animal, as in rural Tajik traditions). This highlights: Detachment from village practicality; Embrace of personal companionship and modern sensibilities; Broader cultural transitions in gender roles and lifestyle.

Their interactions with the semi-autobiographical protagonist (a writer displaced from rural Sarmaddeh) drive explorations of relationships, identity, and societal change. Building on the acclaim of his earlier masterpiece *Sarmaddeh*—a lyrical celebration of rural Tajik life steeped in tradition, community ties, and historical folklore—the later work shifts focus to the urban landscape of post-Soviet Tajikistan.

Central to this exploration are the characters Chisto and Sito, two independent sisters living in Dushanbe. They represent the emergence of the modern, educated Tajik woman: autonomous, cosmopolitan, multilingual, and unburdened by strict parental or societal oversight (with their parents working abroad). Through them, Bahmanyar contrasts evolving gender dynamics with the rooted, nature-bound women of rural settings (as depicted in *Sarmaddeh*) and archetypal historical female figures accessed via the novel's innovative metafictional and time-travel elements.

Chisto and Sito epitomize evolving gender roles—educated, autonomous, and cosmopolitan—contrasted with rural women (rooted in community and nature) and historical female archetypes (accessed via the novel's time-travel elements).

They challenge rigid patriarchal norms, exploring unconventional relationships, professional/intellectual pursuits, and personal freedom in a modernizing society.

Their lifestyle reflects post-Soviet Tajikistan's blend of influences, critiquing alienation from roots while celebrating new liberties. Bahmanyar examines the intellectual's role in society and the complexities of urban displacement, with women's experiences symbolizing broader cultural reflection.

Overall, the analysis positions Shahanshah as a bold, though less widely embraced, evolution in Bahmanyar's oeuvre—pioneering metafiction in Tajik literature to interrogate identity, femininity, and cultural shifts in a rapidly modernizing world.

While *Sarmaddeh*'s rural women are nostalgic ideals of harmony, resilience, and cultural continuity, Chisto and Sito are critical portrayals of change—independent yet potentially detached. This shift underscores Bahmanyar's evolution in depicting femininity as dynamic and multifaceted.

Chisto and Sito are innovative for Tajik literature, offering a nuanced, sensitive view of modern women (rare among male authors). They contribute to the novel's moderate metafictional and experimental elements, supporting social commentary on tradition versus modernity in a transitional era. Though *Shahanshah* divided readers initially for departing from rural themes, these characters enrich its legacy in exploring urban Tajik identity.

Multiple scenes involve conversations and shared moments between the sisters and the writer-protagonist. Chisto's confident, challenging demeanor often pushes debates on societal norms, while Sito provides emotional depth and subtle bridges to tradition. These interactions explore unconventional relationships, intellectual exchanges, and the protagonist's displacement, with the sisters influencing his views on urban life.

In innovative, metafictional elements, Chisto, Sito, and another character (referred to as Babakalaan in some analyses) actively shape the story. Scenes where they "collaborate" with the narrator challenge his traditional perspectives, blurring lines between characters and author. This highlights the novel's experimental style and themes of evolving social liberties for women. (Hutcheon, 1988)

Through time-travel elements, scenes implicitly or explicitly juxtapose the sisters against historical/rural female archetypes. Their modern independence (education, multilingualism, cultural progressiveness) critiques rigidity in traditional gender roles, with the protagonist reflecting on cultural hybridity in post-Soviet Tajikistan. (Bakhtin, 1970)

These scenes drive the novel's social commentary, making Chisto and Sito archetypes of contemporary Tajik women—educated, autonomous, and progressive. Their presence marks a shift from the nostalgic rural focus of *Sarmaddeh*, enriching discussions on modernity amid alienation. The collaborative aspect adds a playful, cerebral layer, underscoring women's agency in narrative and society.

Conclusion

Bahmanyar's *Shahanshah* is a pivotal work in Tajik literature, introducing the archetype of the modern urban woman through the characters of Chisto and Sito. By contrasting their independence and cultural hybridity with historical and rural female figures, Bahmanyar highlights the evolving role of women in Tajik society. While the novel may not match the literary finesse of *Sarmaddeh*, its contribution to the portrayal of urban femininity and its critique of traditional norms make it a valuable text for understanding the trajectory of Tajik and post-

Soviet literature. Future studies should revisit *Shahanshah* to reassess its place in the canon and its impact on the representation of women in Tajik literary discourse.

Bahmanyor's portrayal of Chisto and Sito reflects the slow but steady modernization of Tajik society. The sisters' independence, multilingualism, and engagement with global cultural practices—such as drinking coffee, enjoying wine, and appreciating intellectual cinema—position them as pioneers of a new Tajik femininity. However, the narrator's occasional discomfort with their postmodern choices reveals a lingering traditional mindset, highlighting the tension between modernity and cultural heritage.

The novel also explores unconventional relationships, such as Chisto's friendship with a homosexual dance instructor, which challenges the narrator's traditional worldview. Through these interactions, Bahmanyor critiques the rigidity of traditional Tajik masculinity, suggesting a need for greater openness to diverse identities.

While *Shahanshah* has not achieved the widespread acclaim of *Sarmaddeh*, it remains a significant contribution to Tajik literature for its portrayal of the urban woman. The novel's focus on Chisto and Sito as archetypes of modern Dushanbe women—educated, multilingual, and culturally progressive—marks a departure from traditional literary representations. However, the novel's narrative style lacks the poetic finesse and coherence of *Sarmaddeh*, possibly reflecting Bahmanyor's intent to adopt a new expressive mode suited to the urban context.

The collaborative nature of the novel's creation, involving Chisto, Sito, and Bobokalon, further underscores its innovative approach. These characters not only shape the narrative but also challenge the narrator's traditional perspectives, enriching the text's exploration of modernity.

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