

# Composition and Genre Issues in The Tazkira Nasāyim Al-Maḥabba

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## ABSTRACT

This article examines the tazkira Nasāyim al-Maḥabba by Alisher Navoi as an object of study, focusing on its compositional structure and genre characteristics. The aim of the research is to analyze the extent to which the work preserves the traditional features of Sufi tazkiras, while also identifying its general and distinctive aspects, as well as the author's stylistic approach manifested in its composition.

The study reveals that the information about the sheikhs is presented according to a certain biographical model, partially organized based on their spiritual lineage (silsila), hierarchical classification (ṭabaqāt), and historical period. However, this arrangement is not strictly maintained, and in some cases the sequence of categories is disrupted. The analysis demonstrates that biographical narration, mystical interpretation, and artistic expression are harmoniously integrated in the tazkira, which serves as a key factor in defining its genre nature.

**Keywords:** Tazkira, genre, composition, sheikh, Sufism, Navoi, tradition.

## INTRODUCTION

In classical Eastern literature, the tazkira represents a distinctive biographical-literary genre that compiles information about the lives, works, and activities of poets, writers, or Sufi figures. Etymologically, the term “tazkira” denotes “remembrance,” “memoir,” or “recollection.” The tradition of writing tazkiras first emerged in Arabic and Persian literary contexts and was later widely adopted in Turkic literature.

Despite thematic variations, the most common types of tazkiras are literary and Sufi tazkiras. Literary tazkiras typically provide information about poets and writers, including their biographies, literary heritage, and samples of their poetry. In contrast, Sufi tazkiras focus on the lives of renowned sheikhs and saints, presenting their spiritual status within Sufi orders, their aphorisms, and exemplary life events. In this regard, while the former serves as a source on literary processes, the latter constitutes an

important source for the study of mystical and spiritual teachings.

In Sufi literature, beginning from the 12th century, tazkiras dedicated to the biographies of spiritual masters (mashāyikh) and saints became widespread. Among them, Ṭabaqāt al-Şūfiyya by Abu Abd al-Rahman al-Sulami, written in Arabic, is considered one of the earliest foundational works of this genre. In this work, the lives, activities, and views of early Sufis are systematically arranged into five categories (i.e., five classes of Sufis).

This work was later expanded by Abdullah Ansari of Herat, who supplemented it by including additional figures—some assigned to a sixth category—and compiled a Persian work based on the sayings and wisdom of Sufi masters delivered in his gatherings, also titled Ṭabaqāt al-Şūfiyya. It was precisely this version that later served as a primary source for the tazkiras of Abdurahman

Jami and Alisher Navoi.

The tazkira *Nasāyim al-Maḥabba min Shamāyim al-Futuwwa* by Alisher Navoi was composed in the final years of his life (1495–1496). It contains accounts of 770 saints who lived and created from the early 7th century to the late 15th century across regions such as the Middle East, Central Asia, Eastern Turkestan, and India. The work presents their biographies, wise sayings, extraordinary deeds (referred to in the tazkira as *kharq al-‘āda*), and miraculous acts.

## METHODS

The study employs established research methods in literary studies. In particular, textual analysis and structural analysis are applied to examine the compositional structure and genre characteristics of the work. In addition, analytical-descriptive and statistical methods are used to investigate the presentation of information about sheikhs and saints within the tazkira. A comparative-analytical method serves as the primary approach for evaluating the work within the broader tradition of Sufi tazkira writing.

## RESULTS

One of the key factors determining the value of any literary work is its compositional structure and genre characteristics, as these elements reveal not only the internal organization of the text but also the coherence with which the author’s ideas are conveyed. From this perspective, works belonging to the tazkira genre should not be regarded merely as collections of biographies; rather, they possess a composition grounded in specific theoretical principles.

Although *Nasāyim al-Maḥabba* by Alisher Navoi follows the conventional structural framework of traditional tazkiras, it also differs in certain respects from other works of the genre, including *Nafahāt al-Uns* by Abdurahman Jami.

First and foremost, the independent introductory section of the work occupies a distinct place. In accordance with the conventions of classical literature, this section begins with praise to God (*ḥamd*) and a eulogy to the Prophet Muhammad. In the *ḥamd* section, Navoi writes: “Praise be to God, who opened the hearts of His friends with the breezes of the gardens of love and divine grace, and gladdened their souls with the fragrances of the gardens of

chivalry and truth” [Navoi, 2017: 26].

In this passage, the author artistically depicts how God opens the hearts of His friends—that is, the Sufis—with the breezes of divine love and grace, and fills their souls with the fragrances of exaltation and truth. At the same time, he implicitly alludes to the title of the work, *Nasāyim al-Maḥabba min Shamāyim al-Futuwwa* (“The Breezes of Love from the Fragrances of Chivalry”), thereby laying the foundation for understanding the symbolic meaning of the title from the very beginning of the text.

The main body of the tazkira consists of the biographies of sheikhs and saints. However, their sequence does not strictly follow the rigid chronological classification based on *ṭabaqāt* (generational layers) found in *Ṭabaqāt al-Şūfiyya* by Abu Abd al-Rahman al-Sulami and later expanded by Abdullah Ansari of Herat. Although Navoi, after mentioning Uwais al-Qarani, initially refers mainly to Sufis belonging to the first category, this order is not consistently maintained throughout the entire classification.

This raises the question of the underlying principle according to which Sufis are categorized into particular groups or strata. In this regard, Abu Abd al-Rahman al-Sulami, in the introduction to *Ṭabaqāt al-Şūfiyya*, explains that in his earlier work *Kitāb al-Zuhd*, he discussed ascetics among the Companions, Followers, and their successors, organizing them according to their historical periods and respective categories. He writes:

“Thus, I developed the idea of compiling a new book entitled *Ṭabaqāt al-Şūfiyya*, in which I gathered information about the lives of saints who lived after them. In this work, I classified the Sufis into five groups and provided information about their leading figures, sheikhs, and scholars. Within each category, I included approximately twenty of the most prominent Sufis who lived in the same or closely related periods” [Sulami, 2023: 24].

Following the mention of Uwais al-Qarani in *Nasāyim al-Maḥabba*, the work proceeds with descriptions of early Sufi figures such as Habib al-Ajami, Abu Hazim al-Makki, Ataba ibn Ghulam, Malik ibn Dinar, Muhammad al-Wasi, Abdullah ibn Mubarak, Abu Hashim al-Sufi, and Dhu al-Nun al-Misri. Many of these figures are associated with Hasan al-Basri—either as his disciples, contemporaries, or interlocutors. Subsequently, the work presents accounts of

the four leading imams of Islamic jurisprudence—Abu Hanifa, Al-Shafi'i, Ahmad ibn Hanbal, and Malik ibn Anas—along with others. In these accounts, narratives connected to the Prophet Muhammad are also included.

In the subsequent sections, descriptions are given of figures such as Muhammad Aslam al-Tusi, Ahmad Kharb, Israfil al-Maghribi, Fudayl ibn Iyad, Maruf al-Karkhi, Abu Sulayman al-Darani and his relative Dawud ibn Ahmad al-Darani, as well as Ibrahim ibn Adham, among others. Notably, in the accounts of later Sufi masters, the name of Ibrahim ibn Adham is repeatedly mentioned, indicating that the entries of his disciples, contemporaries, and associates are arranged in close succession.

In general, the first *ṭabaqa* (layer) of Sufis mentioned in Nasāyīm al-Maḥabba mainly consists of figures associated with Khurasan and its major intellectual and spiritual centers, such as Herat, Nishapur, and Merv. At the same time, saints active in Kufa, Baghdad, Syria, and Egypt are also prominently represented in the earlier sections. This reflects the broad geographical scope of early Sufism.

As noted above, Alisher Navoi does not arrange the *ṭabaqāt* in a strictly sequential order. In other words, it is difficult to determine precisely where the descriptions of the second or third *ṭabaqa* begin. For instance, representatives of the second *ṭabaqa* are sometimes presented alongside figures from the third or even fifth *ṭabaqa*. Conversely, individuals belonging to the second *ṭabaqa* may reappear within sections devoted to the third. This suggests that the author did not rely solely on chronological criteria but also considered factors such as spiritual lineage (*silsila*), rank, and significant life events when organizing the material. For example, among representatives of the first *ṭabaqa*, the account of Sari al-Saqati—a second-*ṭabaqa* figure and teacher of Junayd of Baghdad—is included (position 44), after which the descriptions of first-*ṭabaqa* figures continue. Although the second *ṭabaqa* appears to begin at position 66 with Sahl al-Tustari, entries for third-*ṭabaqa* figures such as Abu Hamza al-Khurasani (70) and Abu Hamza al-Baghdadi (71) are also included in the same sequence.

In the entry on Abu Hamza al-Khurasani, Navoi writes: “He passed away in the year 290 (902/903 CE), before Junayd and Nuri, and after Abu Sa'id al-Kharraz and Abu Hamza al-Baghdadi” [Navoi, 2017: 76]. It should be noted here that Junayd of Baghdad, together with his teacher Sari al-Saqati, belongs to the second *ṭabaqa*. Likewise, Abu al-

Hasan al-Nuri, described as a contemporary of Junayd, is also classified within the second *ṭabaqa*. However, Abu Hamza al-Khurasani, despite being their contemporary and even having died earlier, is placed in the third *ṭabaqa*. This further demonstrates that affiliation with a particular *ṭabaqa* is not determined solely by chronological factors such as age or period of life.

Additionally, in many cases, after the mention of a particular Sufi master, his relatives, descendants, or sometimes disciples are listed consecutively. For instance, among the fifth *ṭabaqa* figures from Merv, Abu al-Abbas al-Sayyari is followed by his nephew and disciple Abu al-Wahid ibn Ali al-Sayyari. Similarly, after the entry on Mansur al-Hallaj (third *ṭabaqa*), his disciples and successors—Abd al-Malik Iskaf, Ibrahim ibn Fatik, Faris ibn Isa al-Baghdadi, and his son Ahmad ibn Husayn al-Hallaj—are presented in succession.

In subsequent sections, although the specific *ṭabaqa* affiliation of each Sufi master is not always explicitly stated, representatives of the second and third *ṭabaqāt* predominantly appear in an interwoven manner. Moreover, due to the absence of strict consistency between the categories, figures belonging to the fifth and even the sixth *ṭabaqa*—such as Abu al-Abbas al-Nihawandi (entry 178)—are occasionally included within the same sequence. It is noteworthy that Sufis are classified into five categories in the work of Abu Abd al-Rahman al-Sulami and into six categories in the *tazkira* of Abdullah Ansari of Herat.

For this reason, it can be argued that the descriptions of fourth- and fifth-*ṭabaqa* representatives are mainly presented after the entry on Abu Bakr al-Qattani (223). In the subsequent passages, particular attention is devoted to Abu Bakr al-Shibli (226), as well as to his disciples and contemporaries.

Information regarding the *ṭabaqa* affiliation of Sufi figures in Nasāyīm al-Maḥabba appears relatively frequently up to approximately the 350th entry; thereafter, such references gradually lose consistency and eventually disappear altogether. In later sections, Alisher Navoi presents, in succession, prominent Sufi masters and their disciples, including Abu Nasr al-Sarraj (361), Abu al-Fadl al-Sarakhi (362), Abu Ali al-Daqqaq (367), and Abu Sa'id Abu'l-Khayr (374).

He also includes major Sufi authorities whose works

served as foundational sources for both Nafahāt al-Uns and his own tazkira, such as Abu Abd al-Rahman al-Sulami (379) and his father Husayn ibn Muhammad al-Sulami (380), Abu al-Qasim al-Qushayri (382), Ali ibn Uthman al-Hujwiri (385), as well as Abdullah Ansari of Herat (403). Alongside them, Navoi mentions their teachers—Yahya ibn Ammar (404), Abu Abdullah al-Taqi (405), Abu al-Hasan al-Bishri (406), and Abu Mansur Muhammad al-Ansari (409)—as well as other prominent contemporaries, presenting them in a continuous sequence.

Thus, the compositional structure of the tazkira develops in such a way that whenever a particular Sufi master is discussed, other figures connected to him—whether through lineage, discipleship, or spiritual affiliation—are often mentioned alongside him. In some cases, disciples are presented together with their teachers, while in others, Sufi masters belonging to the same silsila are arranged consecutively.

This structural principle demonstrates that in Nasāyim al-Maḥabba, not only chronological or categorical criteria but also spiritual and initiatic relationships serve as an organizing framework. As a result, the biographical narratives function not merely as historical records but also as a cohesive representation of the inner continuity of the Sufi path.

## DISCUSSION

In Sufism, there exists the concept of silsila (Arabic: “chain”), which denotes the uninterrupted continuity of spiritual transmission based on the master–disciple (murshid–murīd) relationship. This concept represents the transmission of spiritual knowledge and practice from one generation to another. All major Sufi lineages ultimately trace their origins back to the Prophet Muhammad and his Sunnah, and are transmitted through the founders of various Sufi orders—such as Abdul Qadir Gilani in the Qadiriyya and Bahauddin Naqshband in the Naqshbandiyya—to subsequent generations.

The silsila is not merely a list of sheikhs; rather, it represents a continuous chain encompassing each Sufi’s spiritual education, moral training, mystical states, ethical principles, forms of dhikr, and ascetic practices received from their master. Through this chain, each disciple is connected to their spiritual guide, who in turn is linked to earlier masters, ultimately forming an unbroken connection to the Prophet. For instance, in Nasāyim al-

Maḥabba, numerous saints are mentioned whose spiritual lineage is traced back to Bayazid Bastami. Among them is Abu al-Hasan Ishqi, who himself became the founder of the Ishqiyya lineage. Although many Sufis—such as Mahmud Shaykhzada, Khudoyquli Shaykh, Shaykh Muhammad Sufi, and Abu Musa Shaykh—are associated with this lineage, their spiritual genealogy ultimately connects to Bayazid Bastami and, through him, to the Prophet.

More broadly, Nasāyim al-Maḥabba presents well-organized accounts of major Sufi lineages, including the Khwājagān lineage, which historically extends from Yusuf Hamadani to Bahauddin Naqshband, as well as numerous Central Asian Sufi masters associated with Ahmad Yasawi, often identified by titles such as “Ota” or “Bobo.” Among the lineages described in the tazkira, the Khwājagān silsila is one of the most consistently and systematically presented. Alisher Navoi constructs this lineage as a continuous chain linking one master to another, thereby offering a coherent historical narrative of the Sufi path. Although the foundational principles of this order were formulated by Abdulkhaliq Gijduvani (1103–1179), the sequence in the tazkira can be considered to begin with Abu Ali al-Farmadi (1016–1084), who was the spiritual guide of Yusuf Hamadani, the teacher of Abdulkhaliq Gijduvani.

It should be emphasized that one of the key stylistic features of Nasāyim al-Maḥabba is the frequent inclusion of interpretations and commentaries by Abdullah Ansari of Herat. This feature is also characteristic of Nafahāt al-Uns by Abdurahman Jami. In both works, when recounting events from the lives of saints or citing their aphorisms, the authors incorporate Ansari’s reflections as interpretive commentary.

The recurrence of Ansari’s statements in these tazkiras is not incidental. Both works rely heavily on his Ṭabaqāt al-Šūfiyya as a primary source, and his interpretive framework serves as an important methodological tool for explaining the lives and teachings of Sufis. In addition to this work, other foundational texts—such as Ṭabaqāt al-Šūfiyya by Abu Abd al-Rahman al-Sulami, al-Risāla by Abu al-Qasim al-Qushayri, and Kashf al-Maḥjūb by Ali ibn Uthman al-Hujwiri—also constitute the textual foundation of the tazkira, as Navoi frequently draws upon them.

Alongside Ansari, the views and interpretations of other

prominent Sufi figures—such as Abu Bakr al-Shibli, Abu Abdullah al-Khafif, and Abu Sa'id Abu'l-Khayr—are also incorporated. These reflections often concern their contemporaries, disciples, or companions, thereby creating an internal network of spiritual dialogue within the text. Thus, the compositional structure and genre characteristics of the tazkira extend beyond simple biographical sequencing to encompass a dynamic representation of spiritual communication among Sufis. As Abdurahman Jami notes in the introduction to *Nafahāt al-Uns*, citing Abdullah Ansari of Herat: one should remember at least a single saying from each spiritual master, or at least retain their names, for even this remembrance may prove beneficial in the hereafter [Jami, 2021: 94]. Similarly, Alisher Navoi explicitly acknowledges in the introduction to *Nasāyim al-Maḥabba* that he adopts Jami's stylistic approach, particularly in referring to Ansari as "Shaykh al-Islām" and to Jami as "Hazrat Makhdūm" [Navoi, 2017: 39].

Ansari's statements appear in the tazkira in various contexts—sometimes as interpretations of Sufi sayings, and at other times as explanatory remarks on specific events. For example, in the account of Abu Hashim al-Sufi, following the narrative of the first khānqāh built for Sufis, Ansari's statement emphasizes the spiritual value of communal spaces. In other instances, his brief comments clarify ambiguous expressions. For example, in the account of Abu Bakr al-Shibli, a seemingly paradoxical statement—"He died as an unbeliever; may God have mercy on him"—is clarified by Ansari with the remark "He referred to his ego (nafs)," thereby resolving potential misunderstanding. Similarly, in the account of Abu Abdullah ibn Jalla, Ansari explains a symbolic exchange between two Sufis by distinguishing between recognition of outward identity and recognition of spiritual rank.

The frequency of Ansari's commentaries increases notably after the entry dedicated to him (entry 403), as subsequent entries include his teachers, relatives, and contemporaries. This pattern continues until approximately entry 429, after which such references become rare.

Although less systematically than Ansari's, the reflections of other Sufi masters are also incorporated. For instance, after the entry on Abu Abdullah al-Khafif (304), a sequence of approximately twenty entries includes interpretations attributed to him, temporarily assuming a role similar to that of Ansari. Likewise, around the entry on Abu Sa'id Abu'l-Khayr (374), numerous accounts

emphasize his observations about contemporaries and events he personally witnessed. Such a method contributes to the internal coherence of the tazkira's composition and demonstrates the author's intention to present the work through multiple Sufi perspectives, thereby enriching its interpretive depth.

## CONCLUSION

In conclusion, the genre characteristics and compositional structure of the tazkira *Nasāyim al-Maḥabba* by Alisher Navoi represent a distinct stage in the development of the tazkira-writing tradition. The commentaries of Abdullah Ansari of Herat function as the principal interpretive layer within the work. In this respect, *Nasāyim al-Maḥabba* shares significant similarities with *Nafahāt al-Uns* by Abdurahman Jami, as both works rely on Ansari's *Ṭabaqāt al-Ṣūfiyya* as a primary source.

The compositional structure of the tazkira is shaped through the integration of biographical narratives, Sufi doctrines, and mystical wisdom. The inclusion of statements by multiple saints within a single entry, as well as the author's additional interpretations and commentaries, is frequently observed throughout the work.

Therefore, it can be argued that *Nasāyim al-Maḥabba* represents a significant example of the synthesis of biographical and didactic modes within the tazkira genre, demonstrating both continuity with tradition and the author's individual stylistic contribution.

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