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THE FORMATION AND HISTORICAL DEVELOPMENT OF UZBEK LITERARY SCHOLARSHIP: FROM MYTHOPOETIC THOUGHT TO CONTEMPORARY LITERARY STUDIES

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ABSTRACT
This article examines the formation and historical development of Uzbek literary scholarship from early mythopoetic reflection to contemporary academic literary studies. Building on Uzbek scholarship and situating it within wider Arabic, Persian, Turkic, Russian, and European traditions, the study argues that Uzbek literary thought developed through continuity rather than abrupt disciplinary rupture. A historical-comparative and source-critical method is used to distinguish changing objects of analysis, conceptual vocabularies, institutions, and evaluative criteria across major periods. The analysis identifies four broad stages: mythopoetic thought; classical poetics and the formation of Turkic literary scholarship; twentieth-century transformation, including Jadid and Soviet-era reconfiguration; and the independence period. Particular attention is given to the classical system of aruz, qafiya, and badi'; the contribution of scholars and writers such as al-Farabi, Mahmud Kashgari, Alisher Navoi, and Babur; and the twentieth-century expansion from normative poetics toward literary history, criticism, textual scholarship, and theoretically differentiated approaches. The article further shows that modern Uzbek literary scholarship is best understood as a layered field in which Eastern poetics and Western theoretical models coexist, interact, and are repeatedly reinterpreted. This framework clarifies periodization and strengthens comparative understanding of Uzbek literary studies. It also proposes clearer criteria for future historiographic and comparative research.

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Keywords: *Uzbek literary scholarship, poetics, literary history, Turkic literature, periodization, textual criticism.*

Introduction

The history of Uzbek literary scholarship cannot be reduced to the moment when a modern disciplinary label entered academic use. The source manuscript correctly emphasizes that the term "literary scholarship" became established only in the early twentieth century, while activities recognizable today as literary theory, criticism, textual interpretation, genre reflection, and poetics existed much earlier in Turkic and broader Islamic intellectual traditions. The methodological consequence is important: a history of Uzbek literary studies must trace conceptual practices before the institutionalization of the modern discipline, rather than projecting twentieth-century categories backward without qualification (Hamroyeva, 2026; Valikhodjaev, 1993).

For English-language discussion, this article uses "literary scholarship" as an umbrella term broadly corresponding to literary studies. The phrase includes literary history, literary theory, criticism, poetics, textual scholarship, and related forms of systematic reflection on verbal art. At the same time, historically specific categories should be preserved. Classical Eastern poetics was not simply an early version of a modern university department. It operated through overlapping disciplines such as adab ilmi (the science or cultivated knowledge of literature), 'ilm al-'aruz (prosody), 'ilm al-qafiya (rhyme), and 'ilm al-badi' (rhetorical and figurative artistry). These categories organized knowledge around poetic craft, eloquence, meter, genre, and the ethical and aesthetic functions of language.

The central argument of this paper is that Uzbek literary scholarship developed through layered continuity. Its early forms emerged from mythopoetic and oral-cultural reflection; its classical phase was shaped by Arabic and Persian intellectual traditions while developing a distinct Turkic literary language and poetics; its twentieth-century phase transformed under print culture, Jadid reform, Soviet institutions, new genres, and imported theoretical vocabularies; and its post-independence phase expanded through source studies, textual criticism, specialized author studies, comparative literature, and reassessment of the national canon. This developmental sequence is not purely chronological. Each stage is defined by changes in the object of study, the vocabulary of analysis, the institutions producing knowledge, and the criteria used to evaluate literary value.

Such an approach also helps place Uzbek literary scholarship within world literary history. Comparative work on historical poetics, structuralism, and literary theory shows that disciplines change when literary forms, media, institutions, and interpretive communities change (Lotman, 1977; Veselovsky, 1989; Wellek & Warren, 1949). Uzbek literary studies therefore should be read neither as an isolated national phenomenon nor as a derivative copy of Western theory. It is better understood as a historically situated intellectual tradition formed at the intersection of Turkic, Arabic, Persian, Russian, Soviet, and global scholarly systems.

Method and Analytical Framework

This study employs a historical-comparative and source-critical method. Its primary point of departure is the periodization proposed in Uzbek scholarship, especially the sequence summarized by Hamroyeva (2026): mythopoetic thinking; classical poetics and the formation of Turkic literary scholarship; twentieth-century literary scholarship; and the independence period. That sequence is compared with broader theoretical accounts of poetics and literary historiography, including historical poetics, structural approaches to the artistic text, and general theories of literary study (Khalizev, 1999; Lotman, 1977; Veselovsky, 1989).

Four criteria are used to distinguish one developmental stage from another. First is the object of analysis: for example, ritualized oral expression, poetic craft, the individual literary text, literary history, or the institutional literary process. Second is conceptual vocabulary, including genre names, metrical categories, rhetorical devices, and theoretical concepts. Third is scholarly practice: commentary, anthology, treatise, biography, criticism, textual editing, historical synthesis, or comparative research. Fourth is institutional context, such as courtly patronage, manuscript culture, reformist print networks, Soviet academies, universities, and post-independence research institutions.

This framework avoids equating periodization with political chronology alone. Political change matters because it reorganizes institutions and cultural authority, but the history of literary scholarship must be periodized primarily through changes in literary-theoretical thought and scholarly practice (Boltaboyev, 2016). The distinction between "period," "stage," and "epoch" is therefore analytically useful: a period denotes a relatively bounded temporal segment, an epoch a broader historical formation, and a stage a functional phase within a developmental process. For Uzbek literary scholarship, "stage" is often the most productive term because it highlights transformation in methods and intellectual structures rather than merely the passage of time.

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From Mythopoetic Reflection to Classical Turkic Poetics

The earliest stage is best described as mythopoetic because literary reflection had not yet separated into autonomous theory, criticism, and history. Early Turkic inscriptions and oral-poetic materials preserved in later written sources display sophisticated awareness of formula, parallelism, praise, lament, heroic memory, and socially authoritative speech. The Orkhon-Yenisey inscriptions, for example, demonstrate that verbal artistry and political memory were already intertwined. Mahmud Kashgari's eleventh-century Diwan Lughat al-Turk preserved poetic fragments and ethnolinguistic observations that permit comparison among genres, dialects, oral traditions, and expressive forms. These materials are not "literary theory" in the modern sense, but they constitute evidence of reflexive literary culture and provide a foundation for later systematic classification.

The decisive transition occurred when literary reflection became organized through the learned traditions of the Islamic world. Arabic philosophy and rhetoric transmitted and transformed Greek concepts, while Persian literary culture developed highly influential models of poetic form, courtly ethics, imagery, and criticism. Aristotle's Poetics became one important point of reference, but its reception in Arabic philosophy was selective and creative. Al-Farabi and Avicenna interpreted poetic discourse within broader logical and philosophical systems, emphasizing the cognitive, imaginative, and persuasive operations of poetry (Aristotle, 1996; Kemal, 1991). This history matters for Central Asia because it demonstrates that "Eastern poetics" was itself intellectually plural, combining Greek philosophical inheritance with Arabic linguistic sciences, Persian literary practice, and local Turkic traditions.

Within this environment, the classical science of literature came to be structured around several specialized domains. Prosody explained the quantitative organization of verse; rhyme studies classified patterns and constraints; and badi' systematized rhetorical embellishment and figurative expression. Treatises by figures such as al-Farabi, 'Abd al-Qahir al-Jurjani, Shams-i Qays al-Razi, and later scholars provided conceptual languages for discussing form, eloquence, authorship, and poetic excellence. Persian literary culture further linked aesthetics to ethical and social functions, especially in court poetry, where literary mastery operated within systems of patronage, education, and moral exemplarity (Meisami, 1987).

The formation of a distinct Turkic literary scholarship took place through both reception and adaptation. Turkic authors wrote within a Persianate cultural world in which Persian served as a major transregional language of literary and scholarly exchange, while Turkic languages increasingly developed their own high literary functions (Green, 2019). The Chaghatay literary tradition became especially important. Linguistic scholarship confirms the maturity of Chaghatay as a literary language and the centrality of authors such as Alisher Navoi and Babur to its textual canon (Eckmann, 1966). During the Timurid period, bilingual and multilingual literary culture allowed Persian and Turkic poetics to interact rather than operate as sealed traditions.

Alisher Navoi represents a major turning point because his contribution was simultaneously creative, critical, biographical, linguistic, and theoretical. Works such as Majalis al-nafa'is, Mizan al-awzan, and other prose writings address poets, literary authority, metrical systems, artistic responsibility, and criteria of verbal mastery. Navoi therefore exemplifies a form of literary scholarship embedded in creative authorship. His work helped establish Chaghatay Turkic as a language capable of sophisticated literary and meta-literary discourse. Babur's Mukhtasar continued the development of Turkic aruz studies, while later treatises on prosody and poetic craft demonstrate the durability of the classical system.

This classical stage should not be described as static traditionalism. It was characterized by internal differentiation, commentary, codification, and adaptation. The relationship among Arabic, Persian, and Turkic traditions created a multilingual scholarly ecology. In that ecology, "poetics" named a broad field that included what would later be separated into theory, criticism, biography, rhetoric, metrics, and literary history. The modern narrowing of the term poetics therefore represents a change in disciplinary organization, not the sudden birth of reflection on literature.

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Twentieth-Century Transformation: Jadidism, New Genres, and Disciplinary Differentiation

The early twentieth century introduced structural changes that made inherited poetics insufficient as the sole framework for literary analysis. Uzbek literature expanded through new genres, new media, new audiences, and new social functions. Drama acquired new prominence; prose became institutionally central; journalism and criticism grew through print culture; and poetic practice increasingly included syllabic forms alongside or in place of classical aruz. These changes altered not only literature but also the questions scholars asked about literature.

Jadidism was crucial to this transformation. Central Asian Jadid intellectuals promoted new-method education, print, public debate, and cultural reform while rethinking the relationship between inherited Islamic learning and modern knowledge (Khalid, 1998). Literary criticism became closely connected to debates about language, education, nation, social reform, and cultural renewal. As literature became a medium for addressing modern public life, evaluation could no longer depend exclusively on mastery of classical meter, rhyme, and rhetorical embellishment. Plot, characterization, realism, social function, genre innovation, and readership became increasingly significant critical categories.

The Soviet period further institutionalized literary scholarship. Universities, academies, publishing houses, archives, and standardized curricula created a professional infrastructure for literary history, criticism, and textual research. At the same time, Soviet ideology constrained interpretation by privileging particular historical narratives and evaluative categories. The history of Uzbek literature was frequently organized through socio-political frameworks, class analysis, and officially sanctioned models of literary development. Allworth (1990) shows more broadly how Soviet historiography and nationality policy shaped the representation of Uzbek cultural history. Thus, institutional expansion and ideological restriction occurred simultaneously.

Nevertheless, twentieth-century scholarship also generated important methodological differentiation. The study of manuscripts and classical texts encouraged the growth of source studies and textual criticism. Literary history became more systematic; criticism became a specialized public and academic activity; and theoretical scholarship increasingly engaged Russian and European approaches. Historical poetics, formal analysis, structuralism, and general theories of the literary work offered new tools for studying genre, narrative, composition, and textual organization (Lotman, 1977; Potebnya, 1976; Veselovsky, 1989). The result was not a simple replacement of Eastern poetics by Western theory. Rather, modern Uzbek literary scholarship became a hybrid field in which classical categories remained necessary for premodern texts, while newer methods addressed modern genres and broader historical processes.

This transformation also explains why the term "poetics" narrowed in the twentieth century. In classical usage, poetics could encompass a large portion of systematic literary knowledge. Modern disciplinary structures separated literary theory, history, criticism, bibliography, textual scholarship, and specialized author studies. Poetics increasingly came to refer to the formal organization of a particular text, genre, authorial system, or historical type of artistic construction. The broader field came to be described as literary scholarship or literary studies (Khalizev, 1999; Wellek & Warren, 1949).

Literary Scholarship in the Independence Period

The independence period opened a new stage by changing the institutional and ideological conditions under which literary history was interpreted. Previously marginalized or ideologically constrained authors, texts, religious-intellectual traditions, and reformist movements could be reconsidered with greater attention to primary sources. Textual criticism and source studies acquired renewed importance because reassessing the national literary canon required reliable manuscripts, critical editions, archival evidence, and historically grounded attribution (Hamroyeva, 2026).

One visible outcome has been the expansion of specialized "-studies" fields devoted to major authors and movements: Navoi studies, Babur studies, Mashrab studies, Fitrat studies, and related areas. Such specialization can produce deeper philological knowledge, but it also raises a methodological

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challenge. Author-centered fields become most valuable when they remain connected to broader questions of genre, intellectual history, textual transmission, comparative poetics, and institutional history. Otherwise, specialization risks turning literary scholarship into disconnected micro-traditions.

The independence period has also encouraged renewed comparative work. The historical Uzbek literary field was multilingual and transregional; it cannot be adequately explained within a closed national framework. Persianate literary exchange, Arabic scholarly traditions, Chaghatay textual culture, Russian intellectual mediation, and Soviet academic institutions all formed part of its genealogy (Eckmann, 1966; Green, 2019). Comparative literary scholarship is therefore not an external addition to Uzbek studies but a method appropriate to the historical structure of the material itself.

A further development is methodological pluralism. Classical poetics remains indispensable for analyzing aruz, rhyme, rhetorical figures, and manuscript-era genre systems, while modern theory offers tools for narratology, structural analysis, reception, intertextuality, discourse, and literary sociology. The strongest contemporary scholarship does not force one framework onto all periods. Instead, it matches method to historical object and makes the assumptions of each analytical vocabulary explicit.

Discussion: Principles for Periodizing Uzbek Literary Scholarship

The proposed periodization becomes more convincing when stages are defined by epistemic criteria rather than by dates alone. Table 1 synthesizes the principal characteristics of the four broad stages. The first stage is characterized by embedded literary reflection: theory is inseparable from ritual, memory, oral performance, and political expression. The second stage is marked by codification: literary knowledge is organized into named sciences, treatises, anthologies, metrical systems, rhetorical taxonomies, and biographical evaluation. The third stage is characterized by disciplinary differentiation and institutionalization: criticism, theory, literary history, textual studies, and modern genre analysis become relatively autonomous. The fourth stage is characterized by reassessment, specialization, and methodological pluralism.

Table 1

Developmental Stages of Uzbek Literary Scholarship

Stage	Representative evidence	Dominant mode of literary knowledge	Defining transformation
1. Mythopoetic thought	Orkhon-Yenisey inscriptions; oral-poetic fragments; materials preserved by Mahmud Kashgari	Embedded reflection within oral memory, political speech, lament, praise, and genre practice	Artistic language becomes culturally reflexive before formal disciplinary categories emerge.
2. Classical Turkic poetics	Treatises, tazkiras, prosodic works, Navoi, Babur, Arabic-Persian-Turkic scholarship	Codified poetics through aruz, qafiya, badi', biography, commentary, and rhetorical analysis	Literary knowledge becomes systematized and Turkic develops a mature meta-literary vocabulary.
3. Twentieth-century transformation	Jadid print culture; criticism; Soviet literary histories; archives; critical editions; university curricula	Disciplinary differentiation into theory, history, criticism, textual scholarship, and genre analysis	New genres, media, institutions, and theoretical models expand the scope of literary study.
4. Independence period	Re-editions, dissertations, archival research, specialized author studies, comparative scholarship	Reassessment, source criticism, specialization, and methodological pluralism	The canon is re-examined and Eastern poetics is combined with modern comparative and theoretical approaches.

Note. The four-stage synthesis follows the broad periodization in Hamroyeva (2026) while making the analytical criteria explicit.

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This model also clarifies the relationship between literary history and the history of literary scholarship. The two are interdependent but not identical. Literary history asks how literary works, authors, genres, movements, and institutions change over time. The history of literary scholarship asks how those objects have been described, classified, evaluated, edited, and theorized. A new literary form may trigger a new critical vocabulary, but critical categories can also reshape the canon by determining which texts count as central, innovative, authentic, or representative. Periodization should therefore track both literary change and the changing conceptual apparatus used to understand it.

The Eastern-Western distinction is useful only if treated historically and relationally. Classical Eastern poetics contributed rich technical vocabularies for meter, rhyme, eloquence, figurative language, genre, and authorial mastery. Modern European and Russian traditions contributed new disciplinary distinctions and methodological systems, including historical poetics, structural analysis, and general literary theory (Lotman, 1977; Veselovsky, 1989). Yet neither side is internally uniform. Arabic philosophical poetics differs from Persian courtly criticism; Russian historical poetics differs from structural semiotics; and twentieth-century Uzbek criticism developed under changing reformist, Soviet, and post-Soviet conditions. Table 2 therefore compares not "East" and "West" as fixed civilizations, but dominant analytical tendencies that became influential at different moments.

Table 2

Dominant Analytical Tendencies in Classical Poetics and Modern Literary Studies

Dimension	Classical Eastern poetics	Modern disciplinary literary studies
Primary object	Poetic craft, meter, rhyme, eloquence, genre conventions, exemplary authorship	Texts, genres, literary systems, history, institutions, readership, discourse, and interpretation
Key concepts	Aruz, qafiya, badi', balagha, genre norms, poetic mastery	Historicism, structure, narrative, form, reception, intertextuality, ideology, literary process
Typical scholarly forms	Treatise, commentary, tazkira, anthology, metrical manual, authorial reflection	Monograph, article, literary history, critical edition, theoretical study, archival or comparative research
Validation	Technical command of inherited systems, rhetorical adequacy, authoritative precedent, learned tradition	Source criticism, explicit methodology, theoretical coherence, textual evidence, peer evaluation
Major strength	High precision for formal features of classical verse and rhetoric	Breadth across genres, periods, institutions, media, and interpretive problems
Main risk if used alone	May underdescribe modern prose, drama, social institutions, and newer readerships	May distort premodern texts if historical categories and philological detail are ignored

Note. The comparison is heuristic rather than civilizational: both columns contain internally diverse traditions and substantial historical overlap.

A historically responsible synthesis requires three safeguards. First, premodern concepts should not be translated into modern terms without noting conceptual differences. 'Ilm al-badi', for example, overlaps with rhetoric and poetics but is not identical to either modern category. Second, modern theory should not be treated as universally superior simply because it is later. Classical metrics and rhetorical sciences often provide more precise tools for texts constructed according to those systems. Third, national literary history should be connected to transregional exchange. The Persianate world, Arabic philosophical inheritance, and Turkic literary formation are constitutive elements of Uzbek literary history, not peripheral influences (Green, 2019; Kemal, 1991).

The development of Uzbek literary scholarship may therefore be described as cumulative differentiation. Knowledge does not merely replace one system with another. Older categories survive, narrow, expand, or acquire new functions. Poetics, once a broad umbrella, becomes a specialized term;

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textual criticism, once embedded in manuscript practice, becomes an institutional discipline; literary biography develops into author-centered research fields; and comparative study returns with new theoretical purposes. This cumulative model better explains continuity than narratives based on rupture alone.

Implications for Contemporary Research

Several implications follow from this analysis. First, histories of Uzbek literary scholarship should be source-based and terminologically precise. Manuscripts, treatises, tazkiras, metrical works, critical essays, textbooks, archival documents, and scholarly monographs belong to different genres of knowledge production and should not be treated as equivalent evidence. Their intended audiences and institutional functions matter.

Second, periodization should remain revisable. A four-stage model is useful for synthesis, but each stage contains internal transitions that may justify finer subdivisions. The classical stage, for example, can be separated into early Islamic intellectual formation, medieval codification, Timurid literary scholarship, and sixteenth- to nineteenth-century continuities. Likewise, the twentieth century includes Jadid, early Soviet, mature Soviet, and late Soviet configurations. The value of a periodization lies not in fixing a permanent chronology but in making the criteria of division explicit and testable (Boltaboyev, 2016; Hamroyeva, 2026).

Third, future research should integrate philology with theory. Philology secures texts, variants, authorship, historical vocabulary, and transmission; theory explains patterns, categories, and interpretive significance. Uzbek literary scholarship is especially well positioned for such integration because its archive includes oral-derived materials, manuscript culture, multilingual classical texts, reformist print, Soviet editions, and contemporary digital corpora. A mature historiography should move between these layers rather than privileging only one.

Finally, greater internationalization would strengthen the field. Scholarship on Central Asian intellectual history, the Persianate world, Chaghatay, Jadidism, and Islamic poetics already offers comparative frameworks relevant to Uzbek materials (Eckmann, 1966; Green, 2019; Khalid, 1998; Kemal, 1991). Bringing Uzbek-language scholarship into sustained dialogue with these literatures can make its distinctive evidence more visible while also correcting global literary histories that have often treated Central Asia as marginal.

Conclusion

Uzbek literary scholarship has a history much older than the modern term used to designate it. Its genealogy begins with mythopoetic and oral-cultural forms of reflection, becomes systematic through classical Islamic and Turkic poetics, undergoes major disciplinary transformation in the twentieth century, and enters a pluralized stage of reassessment and specialization after independence. Across these changes, literary scholarship develops in parallel with literature itself: changes in genre, language, medium, audience, and cultural institutions generate changes in the methods used to interpret literary works.

The most productive account of this history is therefore neither a story of uninterrupted tradition nor a story of Western-style modernization replacing an obsolete past. It is a history of layered continuity, translation, institutional change, and conceptual differentiation. Classical Eastern poetics provided durable technical and aesthetic categories; Turkic authors such as Navoi and Babur localized and expanded those traditions; Jadid and Soviet transformations created new public and academic functions for criticism and literary history; and the independence period has enabled renewed source criticism, author studies, comparative research, and methodological pluralism.

Understanding these stages clarifies the intellectual identity of Uzbek literary scholarship and provides a stronger basis for future research. It also demonstrates that Uzbek literary studies belong simultaneously to national, Turkic, Islamic, Persianate, Soviet, and global histories of literary thought.

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