

**OPEN ACCESS**

SUBMITTED 22 June 2025

ACCEPTED 21 July 2025

PUBLISHED 31 August 2025

VOLUME Vol.05 Issue 08 2025

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The Sufi Interpretation of The Concept of Nafs in Alisher Navoi's "Nasoyim Al-Muhabbat" Tazkira

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Abstract: This article examines Alisher Navoi's tazkira "Nasoyim al-Muhabbat", focusing on the interpretations of the concept of nafs conveyed through the words and experiences of saints. The aim of the study is to reveal the Sufi-philosophical essence of the concept of nafs in Navoi's tazkira and to demonstrate its moral-educational significance.

In classical literature, particularly in Sufi writings, nafs is regarded as one of the most central and frequently addressed concepts, often interpreted as the inner enemy that prevents the seeker from attaining truth. The article highlights not only the negative aspects of nafs, but also the possibility of disciplining and transforming it into a subdued state through spiritual struggle and moral training. The views and definitions of Sufi scholars concerning nafs are analyzed by comparing them with Navoi's interpretations in "Nasoyim al-Muhabbat", alongside references to other classical works.

Keywords: Alisher Navoi, nafs, Sufism, tazkira, saints, mujāhada, nafs al-ammāra, nafs al-muṭma'inna, spiritual education, Qushayri, Hujwiri, Ghazali, Jami, mystical literature.

Introduction: Sufi literature constitutes one of the most significant components of the classical spiritual heritage of the East. Within this tradition, biographical works that describe the lives and teachings of saints are known as tazkiras. Alisher Navoi's "Nasoyim al-Muhabbat" is one of the earliest tazkiras written in the Turkic language and holds a special place in the history of Sufi literature.

In Sufi thought, the concept of nafs and the continuous struggle against it occupy a central position in the

human inner world, marking the path of spiritual perfection and purification. Nafs is most often described as the force that drives human beings toward evil, selfish interests, and passions. At the same time, Sufi sources provide detailed explanations about the various stages of nafs and the means of overcoming them.

“Nasoyim al-Muhabbat” is an important source in this regard, as it narrates the lives, views, and spiritual experiences of numerous renowned saints. In this tazkira, the concept of nafs is interpreted in multiple ways through the explanations and comments of saints, and its study provides valuable insights into the essence of Sufi philosophy.

The concept of nafs has also been widely discussed in other classical works, such as Abdurrahman Sulami’s “Tabaqat al-Sufiyya”, Abdulkarim al-Qushayri’s “Risala al-Qushayriyya”, Abul Hasan al-Hujwiri’s “Kashf al-Mahjub”, and Jami’s “Nafahat al-uns”, which inspired Navoi’s composition of “Nasoyim al-Muhabbat”. In modern scholarship as well, numerous studies, articles, and theses devoted to Navoi’s works have addressed the issue of nafs as a key subject of inquiry.

The present study seeks to analyze the meaning and essence of the concept of nafs in Alisher Navoi’s “Nasoyim al-Muhabbat”, exploring how it is represented in the words and experiences of saints. The main objective of the article is to provide a philological and philosophical analysis of this concept within the framework of the tazkira and to evaluate it in the broader context of Sufi heritage.

METHODS

The primary source for this study is Alisher Navoi’s tazkira “Nasoyim al-Muhabbat”, specifically the edition prepared by Hamidkhon Islomiy and published in 2017 by Movarounnahr Publishing House [Navoi, 2017].

During the research, various Sufi sources were also consulted, particularly the works of classical mystics such as Imam al-Ghazali, al-Qushayri, and al-Hujwiri, in which the concept of nafs is extensively discussed. These interpretations were compared with Navoi’s treatment of the subject in Nasoyim al-Muhabbat. In addition, selected Qur’anic verses and Hadiths were employed to provide a stronger theoretical foundation for the arguments presented in the article.

Methodologically, the study applies philological analysis, comparative approaches, and contextual interpretation. Furthermore, the theoretical framework of the research is informed by the Sufi doctrine of the stages of nafs.

RESULTS

Among the people of Sufism, it became customary to renounce worldly desires and possessions, to avoid allowing satanic whispers into the heart, to live with minimal food and clothing, and to earn one’s livelihood solely through lawful labor. In “Nasoyim al-Muhabbat”, Navoi records the words of Sarri al-Saqati, the teacher of Junayd al-Baghdadi: “The beginning of gnosis is to purify the nafs and dedicate it to God” [Navoi, 2017: 65]. This statement indicates that every form of knowledge and spiritual journey must begin with disciplining the nafs. Similarly, the Syrian shaykh Tahir al-Maqdisi is cited as saying: “The limit of gnosis is the renunciation of the nafs and the mastery over them in both great and small matters” [Navoi, 2017: 118].

This demonstrates the central role of nafs within the conceptual framework of Sufism. In the view of the Sufis, nafs represents the greatest obstacle on the path to spiritual perfection, and therefore it must be disciplined through asceticism (riyāzat), remembrance of God (dhikr), and constant struggle (mujāhada). Without controlling the nafs, closeness to God is considered impossible.

Derived from the Arabic word meaning “soul” or “self,” nafs is one of the most prominent and frequently discussed subjects of Sufi literature. It is often portrayed as the primary enemy of divine love and intimacy with God. For example, in “Nasoyim al-Muhabbat”, Abu Muhammad al-Rasibi (d. 978) is quoted as saying: “The greatest veil between you and God, exalted is He, is being preoccupied with your nafs or relying upon others as weak as yourself in your worldly affairs” [Navoi, 2017: 226]. This illustrates how indulgence in the desires of the nafs or reliance on creation rather than the Creator creates a barrier between the human being and God.

To weaken the nafs, Sufis engaged in practices that went against its inclinations—eating little, sleeping little, restraining arrogance before friends and foes alike, avoiding insistence on one’s rights even when justified, showing patience in adversity, suppressing anger, and engaging in honest physical labor. They believed that anything that pleased the nafs would strengthen it, while anything that burdened it would weaken it. For the Sufis, the struggle with the nafs was not a temporary endeavor but a lifelong battle. Thus, the nafs could never be entirely eradicated, and it had to be continually restrained from gaining dominance. This idea—that the nafs must always be kept occupied to prevent it from leading the seeker astray—is found in numerous anecdotes recorded in Nasoyim al-Muhabbat.

For example, Mansur al-Hallaj’s son, Ahmad ibn Husayn, reports his father’s advice: “Preoccupy your nafs with a task before it preoccupies you” [Navoi, 2017: 138]. Similarly, Abu Mansur Gowkulah is described as

continuously digging wells and refilling them simply to keep his nafs from falling into mischief. Navoi also recounts how Abu 'Abdullah al-Dinawari (828–900), while idly sitting on a boat, unraveled and resewed the threads of his patched cloak to avoid the temptations of the nafs.

These narratives illustrate the persistent struggle of Sufis to subdue their inner self. The idea is also echoed in Hujwiri's "Kashf al-Mahjub", where nafs is defined as "the very existence, essence, and reality of a thing" [Hujwiri, 2020: 259]. According to this interpretation, nafs is not merely a source of evil, but rather an inseparable part of human existence. While it cannot be eliminated, it can be educated, purified, and subordinated.

In this sense, knowing one's nafs was regarded as one of the most important tasks for every seeker (sālik). As Hujwiri states: "Acquiring knowledge in this regard is a duty upon every seeker of truth, for he who does not know his nafs cannot know anything else. A servant who sets out to know God must first know his own nafs." [Hujwiri, 2020: 260]

DISCUSSION

It is important to recall that the nafs is described in various stages: nafs al-ammāra (the commanding nafs), nafs al-lawwāma (the self-reproaching nafs), nafs al-mulhima (the inspired nafs), and nafs al-muṭma'inna (the tranquil nafs). The Sufi path requires a seeker to polish and elevate the nafs throughout a lifetime, moving it from the lowest stage, the rebellious ammāra, toward the highest stage of tranquility, muṭma'inna. Imam al-Ghazali, in his "Ihya ulum al-din", defines nafs al-muṭma'inna as follows: "When the nafs, in obedience to God's command, is able to subdue carnal desires, it is called the tranquil nafs" [Ghazali, 2006: 4].

In "Nasoyim al-Muhabbat", Navoi records the words of Hatam al-Asamm (d. 823), who described the spiritual journey as passing through four forms of metaphorical death: mawt al-abyad (white death) — hunger; mawt al-aswad (black death) — enduring the harm of people; mawt al-ahmar (red death) — resisting the desires of the nafs; and mawt al-akhḍar (green death) — patching one's cloak [Navoi, 2017: 73]. These symbolic "deaths" emphasize the necessity of renouncing bodily and emotional comforts in order to achieve spiritual progress.

The symbolism of the patched cloak (khirqa), often worn by dervishes, is especially significant. The more patches it bore, the greater the testament to the hardships endured and the long spiritual journey undertaken. Thus, sewing additional patches symbolized advancement in disciplining the nafs.

The constant vigilance over the nafs is further illustrated by the example of Junayd al-Baghdadi. Although his master Sarri al-Saqati repeatedly urged him to address public gatherings, Junayd refrained for fear that speaking might please his nafs. He only consented after the Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) appeared in a dream, commanding him to teach people. This demonstrates the Sufi conviction that any act tinged with self-satisfaction risks empowering the nafs.

In Sufi doctrine, only those who overcome the nafs and render it submissive can attain true gnosis (ma'rifa). This struggle, known as mujāhada, derives from the Arabic root j-h-d, shared with the terms jihad (striving) and jahd (effort). In the Sufi context, mujāhada signifies a continuous and rigorous struggle against the nafs, requiring absolute dedication. The Qur'an also emphasizes this principle: "As for those who strive for Us, We will surely guide them to Our paths. Indeed, Allah is with the doers of good" (al-'Ankabut 29:69).

As Abdulkarim al-Qushayri observes in his "Al-Risala al-Qushayriyya": "Know that if one does not begin his journey with mujāhada, he will never be able to advance along the path. Abu 'Uthman al-Maghribi said: 'Whoever expects doors to be opened for him and revelations to be granted without undertaking mujāhada is gravely mistaken'" [Qushayri, 2022: 241]. This underscores that both the beginning and continuation of the Sufi path, as well as the attainment of gnosis, are inseparably linked to the struggle with the nafs.

CONCLUSION

Alisher Navoi's "Nasoyim al-Muhabbat" is a profound example of Sufi literature in which the concept of nafs and its various definitions occupy a central role in discussions of human spiritual development. In the tazkira, nafs is consistently portrayed as a force that misguides people, drawing them into greed, passion, and worldly desires. At the same time, Navoi emphasizes that disciplining the nafs, struggling against it, and maintaining this struggle throughout one's lifetime are essential conditions for spiritual purification on the Sufi path.

Navoi approaches the issue of nafs not only from the perspective of individual self-discipline, but also as a principle with broader social and moral implications. For him, overcoming the nafs is the foundation for cultivating the perfect human being (insan-i kamil) and for fostering justice, enlightenment, and spiritual renewal within society. An individual who conquers the nafs can elevate himself morally and serve his community selflessly.

Thus, the concept of nafs in "Nasoyim al-Muhabbat" should be viewed not only as a theoretical or doctrinal

element of Sufi philosophy, but also as a timeless and practical guide for spiritual and ethical self-improvement. The enduring relevance of this concept demonstrates its significance both for understanding Navoi's literary and mystical heritage and for addressing contemporary moral and educational challenges.

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