



THE PROBLEM OF THE NAFS IN LITERATURE

Sanobar Tulaganova

Leading Researcher, Doctor of Philological Sciences,
Professor Institute of Uzbek Language, Literature and Folklore,
Academy of Sciences of the Republic of Uzbekistan

Abstract

This article analyzes the artistic expression of the concept of nafs (the self, or ego) and its philosophical-spiritual interpretation in the works of Abdulla Qodiriy. Based on examples from the novel “Bygone Days” (O‘tkan kunlar), the study examines the author’s use of the expression “to dedicate one’s nafs”, through which Qodiriy conveys Islamic and Sufi worldviews in artistic form. The novel depicts different levels of the nafs (ammara, lawwama, mutmainna) through its characters, reflecting the inner spiritual struggle of an individual on the path toward perfection. The research employs Sufi, Sharia-based, and psychoanalytic approaches to explain the moral and spiritual essence of the nafs in the artistic context.

Keywords: Nafs, soul, Sufism, nafs al-ammara, nafs al-mutmainna, Abdulla Qodiriy, psychological analysis, Jadidism, psychoanalysis.

INTRODUCTION

A work of art reflects the moral and spiritual world of a human being, expressing the delicate balance between the nafs and the soul. The creative legacy of Abdulla Qodiriy, especially his novel “Bygone Days,” is not only a literary manifestation of national awakening but also an exploration of the inner moral struggle within the human spirit.

In the novel, the problem of the nafs occupies a central place in the relationships between characters. Particularly, the expression “to dedicate one’s nafs” used during the marriage ceremony demonstrates the author’s profound understanding of the concepts of nafs and spirit. Through this phrase, Qodiriy represents not merely physical but also spiritual and moral submission.



The purpose of this study is to reveal the artistic embodiment of the nafs in Abdulla Qodiriy's novel and to determine the reasons behind the author's use of this term based on Islamic and philosophical thinking.

METHODOLOGY

The methodological foundation of this research is based on the literary, philosophical, and psychological analysis of the concept of nafs. The main objective of this article is to reveal the religious, Sufi, and humanistic perspectives of Abdulla Qodiriy in addressing the problem of nafs in his novel "Bygone Days" (O'tkan kunlar). To achieve this goal, textual, philosophical-analytical, psychoanalytic, Sufi, comparative, and historical-contextual approaches were employed.

First, different editions of the novel were comparatively analyzed to explore the linguistic and spiritual layers of the phrase "to dedicate one's nafs". This analysis helped uncover the author's moral and spiritual meanings embodied in the expression. From a philosophical perspective, the concept of nafs was interpreted based on Islamic sources such as Aristotle's "Great Ethics", Imam al-Ghazali's "Ihya Ulum al-Din", and the works of Shaykh Muhammad Sadiq Muhammad Yusuf. In addition, Western psychoanalytic theories—particularly those of Freud and Jung—were applied to examine the inner world and nafs-related struggles of Qodiriy's characters.

Through the Sufi approach, the spiritual stages of the nafs—nafs al-ammara, nafs al-lawwama, and nafs al-mutmainna—were analyzed in connection with the characters' psychological and moral states. Comparative analysis revealed the conceptual harmony between Eastern and Western understandings of human psychology and spirituality. Furthermore, the historical context of the novel's creation—namely, the spiritual atmosphere of the late 19th and early 20th centuries, the ideas of the Jadid movement, national awakening, and religious-enlightenment trends—was taken into account.

This integrated methodological framework allowed the study to analyze the problem of nafs not from a single perspective, but in a complex way—through literary, philosophical, and psychoanalytic lenses. Thus, the research focuses on



uncovering the artistic representation of the nafs in Qodiriy's work as a reflection of human spiritual development, moral choice, and inner perfection.

RESULTS

A work of art is a creation full of mystery and subtle spiritual phenomena. The process of its creation itself can be regarded as a metaphysical and spiritual event that transcends rational comprehension. The very essence of creativity lies in the act of creation—expressing a new thought, a refined metaphor, a symbol infused with philosophy, and a unique individual style. A genuine work of art conquers the boundaries of time and space, continually revealing new meanings with each re-encounter.

In Abdulla Qodiriy's "Bygone Days," the scenes connected with the wedding ceremony are among the most vivid and emotionally charged. The author has structured the composition of the novel so harmoniously that every word, movement, mood, emotion, and descriptive element complements and explains one another, creating a unified artistic whole. The reader experiences a unique spiritual "state," a gradual intensification of emotional resonance.

Yusufbek Hoji's only son, Otabek — an educated, progressive young man from Tashkent, open-minded and reform-oriented — stands as both the author's ideal and a collective image of the Jadid intellectuals' aspirations. He is depicted as a thoughtful and passionate man who amazes others with his ideas about marriage and social progress, representing the prototype of the "New Uzbek."

On the other hand, Kumush's weakening spirit and her mysterious internal suffering, along with Hasanali's genuine concern, keep the reader deeply emotionally engaged. Every scene confirms the author's skill in shaping a consistent and psychologically convincing concept. The reader, immersed in subtle emotions, senses an unspoken anticipation of an important encounter.

In the chapter "The Wedding. The Girls' Gathering," the lyrical and color-rich descriptions reveal Kumush's emotional state so vividly that her mood becomes contagious to the reader. The phrase "The wedding was very spiritual" ("Tuy juda ham ruhlik") carries profound meaning, emphasizing the ceremony's sacred and soulful atmosphere. The repetition of the word "ruhlik" (spiritual) reinforces this effect, creating a sense of deep emotional participation. Through warm,



expressive depictions — first of Otaboyim, then of Kumush — the reader is drawn closer to the characters' emotional worlds. As the author notes, a certain “melancholy” pervades everyone present, and this sentiment touches the reader as well.

The reader, moved by the delicate emotions of “the flower among tulips,” is gently led by the author toward the subsequent chapter, where the long-awaited meeting between the two young people becomes the focal point. The narrative's emotional momentum draws the reader's full attention to this anticipated encounter, highlighting Qodiriy's mastery in creating psychological tension and spiritual depth within the framework of traditional realism.

DISCUSSION

Despite the century that separates us from Abdullah Qodiriy's time, his artistic mastery, his deep insight into the human soul, and the mysterious power of his creative expression continue to engage readers' minds and stimulate reflection.

In the chapter “Unexpected Happiness” of the novel *O'tkan kunlar* (“Bygone Days”), there is a remarkable episode:

“It was very difficult to obtain consent from Kumushbibbi. The mullah asked: ‘You, Kumushbibbi, daughter of Mirzakarim, do you entrust your nafs (self/soul) to Otabek, son of Yusufbek Khoji, a Muslim from Tashkent, through your uncle Muhammadrahim, son of Yuldosh?’ The question was repeated six or seven times, and only after the insistence of the elders was her consent finally obtained.” [1:43]

Here, the key word that draws attention is “**nafsingizni**” (your soul/self) — why does the author choose this expression instead of “yourself”?

When we compare different editions of the novel, we find variations. In later editions, the phrase appears as “o‘zingizni bag‘ishlamoq” (“to give yourself”), omitting nafs. In the 2008 edition, the same simplified version is used. This raises a question: was this phrasing a reflection of local custom in 19th-century Margilan marriage ceremonies, or was it an intentional literary choice by Qodiriy himself?

It is clear that the author's choice of the word nafs was deliberate. Historical sources show that Qodiriy was well-educated, having studied under prominent



religious scholars of his time, and that he possessed deep knowledge of Islamic jurisprudence and Sufi philosophy.

There are two crucial distinctions:

1. To give one's nafs (soul/self)
2. To give oneself

The Uzbek word bag'ishlamoq means "to devote," "to offer," or "to sacrifice." While "giving oneself" often refers to a physical or personal act, giving one's nafs implies a deeper spiritual and psychological submission. Thus, the difference between these two expressions reflects the distinction between the body (jasad) and the spiritual self (nafsa).

According to Islamic doctrine, marriage (nikoh) is not merely a social contract but a sacred covenant that unites body (tan) and soul (nafsa). Qodiriy's use of nafs aligns with the Qur'anic and Sufi understanding that the true bond in marriage involves the merging of two spiritual selves in divine harmony.

From this perspective, Kumush's act of "offering her nafs" to Otabek signifies not only physical consent but also the surrender of her desires, ego, and future emotional self. This reflects Qodiriy's profound comprehension of Sufi principles such as nafs al-ammara (the commanding self), nafs al-lawwama (the self-reproaching self), and nafs al-mutma'inna (the serene self).

In classical Islamic literature, nafs (from Arabic: "soul," "self," or "inner being") embodies both positive and negative human tendencies. The Qur'an mentions nafs over a hundred times, often emphasizing the necessity of its purification. Imam al-Ghazali, for instance, describes nafs as the inner human essence that must be disciplined and illuminated through faith and self-awareness.

Sufi scholars teach that the struggle against the nafs (jihād al-nafs) is the greatest of all spiritual battles. As Mawlana Rumi says:

"O seeker of Truth! Know that Moses and Pharaoh have not died; they live within you and are still at war in your heart. Expel the Pharaoh within you to let the Moses within triumph."

Thus, nafs is not an abstract concept — it is the essence of human moral conflict. From a psychoanalytic point of view, Qodiriy's portrayal of nafs can also be read through the lenses of Freud's "id" and Jung's "shadow," representing the tension between instinct and conscience. The characters' actions — Otabek's moral



courage, Kumush's devotion, Zaynab's jealousy, and Homid's lust — all illustrate the different faces of the nafs.

The novel therefore serves not only as a love story but also as a philosophical reflection on the human struggle for self-mastery. The nafs becomes both the source of conflict and the path to perfection (kamolot).

Qodiriy's nuanced depiction of spiritual psychology anticipates the synthesis of Islamic mysticism and modern humanism. His interpretation aligns with contemporary ethical philosophy: the idea that moral integrity is achieved only through the purification of desire and the elevation of the soul.

As Shaykh Muhammad Sodiq Muhammad Yusuf explains in his work "Ruhiy tarbiya" (Spiritual Education), true human development occurs through three stages — purification (poklanish), renewal (tiklanish), and moral refinement (hulqlanish) — all of which begin with the cleansing of the nafs.

Hence, Qodiriy's use of "nafsingizni bag'ishlamoq" encapsulates the entire spiritual journey from worldly attachment to divine surrender, symbolizing the unity of ethical, emotional, and metaphysical dimensions of human existence.

Thus, without studying the science of the nafs (the self or ego), one cannot attain the knowledge of the ruh (spirit), or in other words, it is impossible to study them separately. Humankind came into existence and has since struggled with their own nafs in pursuit of perfection. This struggle is considered a powerful force that drives humanity forward. The question at hand is delicate and requires utmost attentiveness. It is not without reason that it is said:

"The spirit is of the Merciful, the nafs is of Satan;

Joining the two is not permitted."

This issue has drawn the attention of the Navoi scholar I. Haqqul in his book Return to Navoi. Vol. 3, specifically in the article titled The Contradiction of Spirituality and Nafs. He provides an interesting analogy regarding the relationship between the nafs and ruh, which we would like to reference. He writes:

"There has always been a kind of love between the nafs and the ruh. This is because the nafs is feminine (unusaf), while the ruh is masculine (zukurat). Just as in the material world, Mother Eve was created from Adam, in the realm of power, the nafs was also created from the ruh. This is the basis of affinity and



intimacy between the nafs and the ruh. In fact, the nafs is an animalistic spirit that, through its closeness to the spiritual ruh, acquires a kind of sexual characteristic." [7:35]

The scholar presents very intriguing reflections in the article, yet finding a definitive solution seems impossible.

Western scholars, such as Freud and Jung, also consider the nafs a central problem. The science of nafs encompasses human desires, inclinations, wishes, and aspirations. Freud emphasizes this directly in his discussions of libido, where the issue of the nafs is paramount. In his literary analysis, such as the article Dostoevsky and Patricide, the nafs is analyzed psychologically as a primary concern. In that work, the son's relationship to the father, seeing him as a rival, may seem unnatural from a Muslim perspective, as fathers are highly revered in the East.

In Jungian terms, the nafs embodies human archetypes, memories, and desires in a generalized form. Thus, the human nafs becomes a major issue both in literature and in the study of human life. Literature studies humans and analyzes them, which invites some reflection.

So, should we consider humans themselves, or the stirrings of the nafs, which is a part of the spirit? Saying it is not the human might seem somewhat extreme. This contemplation leads us toward discussion. Whether we like it or not, we breathe along the path of the nafs, live our days, and carry out our existence. Humans spend their lives in different ways: some truly live, some merely pass the time, and others exist in a state of mere survival. Words, even if used as synonyms, each carry profound meaning and differ subtly in their interpretation. In sacred texts and stories, the central issue is often the nafs or the ruh. In Sufi literature and in the works of Navoi and Babur, the manifestations, appearances, causes, and consequences of the nafs are expressed as central philosophical issues, which no one can deny.

A creator who has found the path from the nafs toward the ruh can be considered a person who has realized their true self. If we refer to the history of classical literature, the central issue in Sufism is also regarded as the nafs, and liberation from it—the freeing of oneself from its traps—is considered a core problem. A person who rises above their nafs attains perfection.



If we pay attention to the works of Hazrat Navoi, the nafs is depicted as a decisive problem in human life. In his works “The Veil of the Self” and “The Edifice of the Self”, he writes:

"Whoever frees themselves from the veil of self,
No veil can be placed before the eyes they direct elsewhere."

Liberating oneself from the “veil of self” means transcending the claims of the “I,” recognizing the One God, and surrendering all one possesses on this path. Or he writes:

"Whoever destroys the edifice of the self,
Becomes truly annihilated in its essence.
Without destroying this edifice, the seeker
Cannot truly possess this reality."

Here, the concepts of the “edifice of the self” and the “veil of the self” embody profound and serious issues. Destroying the edifice of the self is itself a decisive stage on the path.

In Aristotle’s *Organon*, eight works are mentioned: Categories (“Ma’qulāt”), Hermeneutics (“Al-‘Ibāra” or “At-tafsir”), Analytics (“Al-qiyās”), and Poetics (“Sanā’i’ al-nafisa”). The work *Psychology* is translated as “Al-nafs, Al-ruh” [3:8]. Thus, even in Aristotle, the science of psychology was referred to as the science of nafs. The difference appears only in the naming.

Ibn Sina (Avicenna) offers an interesting perspective on the immateriality of the ruh:

"The spirit is a luminous substance. The incoming spirit is called light. When the eye sees light, the nafs rejoices; in darkness, it feels constrained. For light is like a vehicle carrying the nafs, and darkness is its opposite."

The sixth part of *Al-Shifa* is titled “Kitab al-Nafs” (The Book of the Soul). In his *Canon of Medicine*, it is stated:

"The hottest thing in the body is the spirit, and its seat is the heart."

Our observations confirm that when Abdulla Qodiri uses the word nafs, he likely intends the meaning we have considered above.



CONCLUSION

In Abdulla Qodiri's novel "O'tkan Kunlar" (Days Gone By), the issue of nafs emerges as a central theme on the path of human spiritual perfection. Through his characters, the author vividly depicts the internal struggles of human beings—the conflict between nafs and ruh, material needs and spiritual values, personal interest and moral duty.

The phrase "forgive your nafs" in the novel, derived from the author's religious and philosophical worldview, is not meant as physical obedience, but rather as a symbol of spiritual surrender and inner unity. Qodiri interprets nafs not solely in a negative sense, but also as an inner force that can lead a person toward purification and perfection.

By harmonizing perspectives from Sharia, Sufism, and human psychology, he connects the nafs with both individual character and the spirit of society. In this sense, "O'tkan Kunlar" can be appreciated not only as a love story but also as a philosophical and moral program about overcoming the nafs, attaining spiritual purity, and realizing true human values.

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