



REFLECTIONS ON THE CLASSIFICATION OF HISTORICAL THEMES IN ISAJON SULTON'S CREATIVE WORKS

Dildora Inomjonovna Ibragimova

Lecturer at the Faculty of Primary Education

Chirchik State Pedagogical University

dildoraibragimova1989@gmail.com

Abstract

This article explores the historical-literary representations of the Tabghach people in the works of Uzbek writer Isajon Sulton. Drawing upon both historical sources and artistic interpretation, the author reimagines the ethnogenesis of the Tabghach—originally a people of mixed Xiongnu and Xianbei origin—as a cautionary narrative illustrating the consequences of cultural assimilation and political manipulation. Sulton contrasts the virtues of Turkic and Chinese women to symbolize broader ideological and cultural oppositions, ultimately emphasizing themes of national identity, betrayal, and resistance. Through the lens of Turkic pride and moral strength, the author critiques the seduction of material wealth and political compromise. The narrative serves not only as a reconstruction of ancient history but also as a vehicle for expressing universal values and national consciousness. The article demonstrates how historical fiction can simultaneously convey factual knowledge and evoke emotional and ideological reflection.

Keywords: Isajon Sulton, Tabghach, Turkic peoples, historical fiction, national identity, cultural assimilation, Chinese-Turkic relations, Bilga Khagan, ethnogenesis, literary interpretation

INTRODUCTION

In artistic literature, theme is understood as the collection of ideas and concepts that unify an author's works and form their core content. The themes chosen by



an author reveal their worldview and creative intent. By classifying the dominant themes within a writer's oeuvre, one can gain deeper insight into the author's aesthetic views and their perception of life events.

The historical works of Isajon Sulton are remarkably diverse in terms of thematic scope. His oeuvre encompasses topics related to various historical periods, social strata, and life events. One of the primary responsibilities of a creative individual is to produce artistically accomplished works that reflect the pressing and relevant issues of their time. As Academician I. Sulton himself states, a true writer pays particular attention to the novelty of a chosen theme and its significance for the needs of contemporary society [1]. This principle applies equally to works with historical themes. Regardless of which period from the past is selected as the subject, the writer views that era through the lens of their own time. As noted, "Memories of the past are not needed merely to know that such events occurred, but to better understand the present and to envision the future" [2]. From this perspective, the theme of a historical work is not limited solely to the category of "history"; rather, each period portrayed in the work holds relevance for the present.

"Modernity is the heart of historical novels" [3]. The content of historical works often comprises multiple layers, with different layers gaining relevance in different eras, thus capturing the attention of readers and scholars alike. For instance, the inscriptions left by Bilge Khagan originally chronicled the sovereign's glorious military campaigns of their own time, but by the twentieth century, these same inscriptions had become invaluable sources for studying the history and ethnography of nations.

Isajon Sulton's historical narratives deal with past events from a chronological perspective, yet in uncovering the theme, the author draws effectively on various thematic groupings.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

This study is based on the literary analysis of a passage from a historical short story by Isajon Sulton, a contemporary Uzbek writer known for his artistic engagement with Turkic history and cultural memory. The selected excerpt explores the psychological conflict of the character Oyto'ldi, who is torn between maternal



compassion and the desire for vengeance following the loss of her children during a time of tribal warfare.

The primary source material for analysis is a literary passage that combines realistic narrative techniques with mytho-historical references, particularly the invocation of Kök Tengri (Sky God), a central deity in ancient Turkic belief systems. The text is examined through qualitative content analysis, employing methods of close reading, character psychology, and cultural semiotics.

The study uses a hermeneutic approach to interpret the deeper symbolic meanings embedded in the narrative—such as maternal instinct, moral dilemma, and the clash between personal grief and communal values. Literary contextualization is supported by historical and anthropological references to early Turkic traditions, particularly the ethical norms that guided tribal justice and retribution practices. Isajon Sulton's *Literary-Historical Works and Their Thematic Diversity*. The author's literary-historical works portray the lives of various peoples across different historical epochs, with particular attention given to the representation of historical figures. The diversity of themes employed in his fiction—i.e., the breadth of thematic scope—attests to the author's deep understanding of life, creative strength, and artistic maturity. The central theme of Isajon Sulton's historical prose is the Turkic peoples, with many of his works exploring various periods and facets of Turkic life.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

In depicting the life of the people, the author explores diverse aspects of the main theme, such as the origins of nations, their belief systems and religious views, the lifestyles of tribes, intertribal conflicts, human disputes, love and hatred, and the relationships between parents and children.

The following thematic directions can be identified in Isajon Sulton's prose:

1. Socio-historical themes – These reflect the historical processes, the social relations among members of society, their cultural and social lives, labor, aspirations, struggles, and roles within society as conveyed through artistic expression. Such themes aim to portray social realities, the socio-psychological conditions of historical communities, and the historical circumstances in which they lived.



2. Depiction of historical processes – The author strives to vividly portray the causes and consequences of major historical events and their impact on society. In doing so, he not only relies on available historical data but also considers the social, economic, and cultural factors of the time in order to depict a realistic and comprehensive picture of the historical period.

For example, in the story "Xun" ("The Hun"), the author describes the lifestyle, living conditions, and aspirations of the Kokturks who inhabited the foothills of the present-day Tianshan Mountains in the 4th century AD. Their diet at the time primarily consisted of hunted game and wild fruits, while iron-forged axes were among the most prized weapons of that era. During that era, food primarily consisted of hunted game and wild fruits, and an axe forged from steel was considered one of the most valuable weapons of the time.

"In the verdant pastures at the foot of the Tangritagh Mountains, the elderly Erxon and his wife, a woman named Oyto'ldi, who had once been a warrior, lived a humble life. Not far from the modest shelter they had once rebuilt stretched a forest rich in luscious fruits and abundant wildlife. It sustained the two old souls without demand or complaint.

When the child of the Blue Sky — the Sun — rose above the forest, Erxon would tuck a sharp axe of black steel into his belt and set out to inspect the traps he had laid. After some time, he would return with a bundle of dry pinewood on his shoulder and a rabbit or pheasant fluttering in his hand, a satisfied expression on his face.

It was Oyto'ldi's responsibility to prepare the meal. She would light the hearth, roast the meat her husband had slaughtered and cleaned, while Erxon, reclining on the grass, would observe her movements. A coarse smile — one that Oyto'ldi found endearing — played across his weather-beaten, scarred, and swarthy face, shaped by the harsh winds." [4]

This excerpt from the short story vividly portrays the historical setting and the simplicity of past life, capturing both the physical environment and the emotional atmosphere of the era with clarity and realism.

The author skillfully employs historical information to depict the temporal and spatial dimensions of the narrative. The modest life of Erxon Chul and his wife Oytoldi in their "humble dwelling" exemplifies the simple and impoverished



lifestyle of the lower social strata of that period. This portrayal, as a component of the historical process, provides insights into the living conditions and societal roles of tribal members during that era.

People of the fourth century had not yet mastered production and remained primarily consumers of nature's bounty. Descriptions of "lush pastures," "sweet fruits and various animals," the fertility of the land, and the generosity of nature—offering sustenance to the elderly couple "without compensation"—underscore the close connection between people and nature during that time. In portraying daily labor related to agriculture and the animal world, the author simultaneously emphasizes the significant role of women in domestic and familial life and highlights their social role within the historical process.

Political-Historical Themes focus on governance-related issues of the past. Many of Isajon Sulton's historical works center on the lives of Turkic peoples and other related nations whose histories intersect with theirs. In his historical stories such as "Xun" ("The Hun"), "A Story about an Unnamed Hero", "The Tabghachs", and their logical continuation, the novel "Bilga Khagan", the foundational aspects of statehood are chosen as the main theme. These works examine in detail the prerequisites for the emergence of statehood and the roles of historical figures in the formation of early states.

The theme of state-building, which unites these historical narratives, is complemented in "Xun" and "A Story about an Unnamed Hero" through related sub-themes such as family relations, maternal love, heroism, and interethnic relations. Across Isajon Sulton's body of work, the unification of ancient peoples and the conditions necessary for the emergence of statehood are observed. The stages of state formation are depicted in the following order (Figure 1):

Figure 1. Stages of state formation as depicted in literary narrative

STAGES OF STATE FORMATION
Disunity, deprivation
Emergence of a unifying force
Rebellion
Armed conflict
Formation of statehood



When we look back at history, we witness that the emergence of a new centralized state typically proceeds through the abovementioned stages. For a state to come into being, certain essential preconditions must first mature. This crucial precondition is the unifying force, which often arises from a population that has endured disunity, deprivation, and famine. The protagonist of the novel “Bilga Khagan” is the Turkic people — the Turk budun — who, having become aware of their weakened state, rise up in rebellion, caught between the choice of either perishing or surviving. This work begins with a depiction of a nation crushed by poverty and destitution [5].

“We have eaten all our livestock,” said Bulut. “The grain is gone, there is no meat. The children are dying of hunger...”

“Same here, my mother is starving,” grumbled Ishbara Yamtar.

Then, frowning at Bulut with frustration, he exclaimed:

“Did I not speak of Bilga Khagan’s words? What did he say? He said a man is born to die. He said we should rise up and ride, not lie low like jackals and vanish! Which of you listened? The people lost their strength; they died of hunger!”

Devoid of pomp or ornamentation, and written in a simple language reminiscent of the Orkhon inscriptions, the novel’s characters are likewise unpretentious and courageous men. Both Bulut and Ishbara Yamtar, driven by hardship, suffer deeply over their families’ hunger and go in search of food in order to feed them. The protagonists, much like the tone of the text itself, are simple, earnest young men of the steppe. Bulut and Ishbara Yamtar are tormented by their family’s destitution and, driven by the need to provide for their loved ones, set out in search of food.

At this point in the narrative, the author subtly leaves behind a key—a literary and thematic device that foreshadows the resolution of the emerging conflict. Through the voice of Ishbara Yamtar, lines alluding to Bilga Khagan and his intentions are presented: “Was man’s son born only to die? Let us rise and fight, not lie down like jackals!” These powerful words become the axis upon which the subsequent events unfold. The people, galvanized by this message, reclaim their identity, rising from hunger and subjugation to unity and liberation.

In the narrative, the unifying force is embodied in the historical figure of Bilga Khagan. Though raised under the control of the Tabghach, Bilga Khagan



ultimately comes to recognize his own people and identity. He rises as a leader, rallying his nation, placing weapons in their hands and instilling honor and pride in their hearts. Under his leadership, the ancient Turkic nation is revived and its former glory restored.

By Heaven's will, I became Khagan over the Turks,
I grieved for the fallen, though I still stood strong.
The Turkic lords and people looked on with joy,
In peace at last, their eyes turned toward the skies. [6]
(Tangrining turki uzra qog'on bo'ldim,
O'ltirdim, o'lmagidan qayg'urib.
Turk beklar, budun qarab sevinib,
Tinchlanib ko'zlari yuqoriga boqdi.)

Historical-Emotional Themes in Isajon Sulton's Works. Historical-emotional themes form the foundation of works in which the inner emotional experiences of individuals are interwoven with the historical past. These themes reflect the spiritual turmoil and emotional struggles rooted in distant eras. The famous adage aptly reinforces this idea: "Love is an old feeling, but every heart makes it new again." Isajon Sulton's oeuvre contains numerous works in which the emotional lives of historical figures are vividly portrayed.

Against a historical backdrop, the author explores themes such as love and affection, hatred, sorrow, joy, and parent-child relationships, presenting them as inner experiences once felt by our ancestors. His approach revives these emotions in the context of the past, making them resonate with contemporary readers.

The short story "Xun" ("The Hun") is particularly rich in its depiction of intense emotional conflict and deeply rooted opposing sentiments. The protagonist, Oytoldi, finds herself, by a twist of fate, raising the child of the very people who murdered her beloved husband. Despite being presented with the opportunity for revenge, she cannot bring herself to harm the innocent infant. Instead, she chooses compassion, raising the child and nurturing him into adulthood.

The child was rather cute—plump, with soft, reddish hair and a round little face that, in some haunting way, reminded Oyto'ldi of the sons she had lost. She soon grew weary. A dark thought crossed her mind: "What if I leave him in the ravine? Let the wolves tear him apart—that would serve as a fitting revenge."



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Perhaps doing so would ease the burning ache of vengeance within her. But Oyto‘ldi’s pure heart could not accept such cruelty.

“One cannot take revenge on a child,” she thought as she walked on. “If he were grown, that would be a different matter. But killing an infant... that is beneath the honor of our people. Even the Sky God—Kök Tengri—would be angered by such a deed.”

The woman loves the child she has adopted with maternal affection, yet the fire of hatred continues to burn within her, as he is the son of her enemy.

“Oytoldi, the old woman, could not make sense of her own thoughts, but she understood that even in her current state, she could not raise a sword against the boy. One day, inevitably, a moment would come that would bring an end to everything—either to Oytoldi’s life or the child’s.”

As the child grows up, the woman’s desire for revenge grows alongside him. The author gradually weakens Oytoldi’s womanly love, while simultaneously strengthening her maternal instinct. Caught between two emotional extremes, the sword of vengeance in the woman’s hand targets the enemy child’s chest—yet there remains hope that the maternal feeling will ultimately prevent the strike.

“She would not stop weeping, her head bowed low, and yet, somewhere deep in her heart, she felt relief that the boy had survived. After all, revenge had been taken, the enemy’s blood had been spilled—that was enough...”

Historical-Universal Themes emerge from the depiction of universal human concerns as grounded in historical events. In the works of Isajon Sulton, such themes are developed within the context of historical figures, peoples, and nations. Topics such as the origin of nations (“The Tabghachs”), and justice (“Bilga Khagan”) reflect the author’s engagement with broad, humanistic concerns.

In “The Tabghachs”, while narrating the history of Turkic tribes, the author also explores their interactions with the Chinese. The conflicts and political tensions between the Chinese Empire and Turkic tribes in the 3rd–4th centuries CE are portrayed as follows:

“The Turkic tribes in the southeast had grown strong, threatening the survival of the Chinese Khaganate. The Turkic people were brave and their horses swift. In the event of a raid, the Chinese army would become as helpless as kittens before



them. The Huns in the west of the Khaganate were especially fierce. Below them were the Kokturks, to the east the Khitans, and in the south the On-Oq and Yeti-Jigha tribes, all of whom had not yet united. Had they done so, the Chinese Khaganate would have surely crumbled into ashes.”

Amid such a dire situation, the Chinese sages offered a strategic proposal to their Khagan:

“To subdue the proud Turkic youth, only their own kin could be used. Let us offer them our daughters and lands; the children born of these unions will be raised to be loyal to the Chinese emperor. In time, they will turn against their own fathers and bring them under Chinese control.”

The Khagan accepted this proposal. About sixty years later, the descendants of Turkic men and Chinese women became loyal servants of the Chinese state. This new people came to be known as the Tabghachs, and through them, the Turkic tribes were forced to live under Chinese rule for many years.

Isajon Sulton narrates the formation of this new ethnic group—born of Turkic fathers and Chinese mothers—and the resulting historical consequences, through a compelling literary reconstruction of the past.

According to historical records, the Tabghach people were known by this name among the Turkic peoples, while the Chinese referred to them as Touba (or Toba). Chinese sources indicate that the Touba people descended from a Xiongnu father and a Xianbei mother [7]. The Xianbei tribe had been widespread across the territory stretching from present-day northeastern China to Mongolia. As a result of close kinship and intermarriage between the Xianbei and the neighboring Xiongnu tribes, a new ethnic group—the Tabghach (Touba) people—emerged.

Scholars have offered differing views regarding the ethnicity and language of the Tabghach people. Historian V.S. Taskin considered them a Mongolic-speaking tribe [8], whereas the Turkologist S.G. Klyashtorny argued that they spoke a Turkic language [9]. The Tabghachs are thought to have arisen from intermarriage between nomadic groups such as the Xiongnu, ancestors of both the Mongols and Turks, and Chinese women. The Orkhon-Enisei inscriptions identify the Tabghachs as Chinese. Likewise, Mahmud al-Kashgari, in his *Dīwān Lughāt al-Turk*, describes the Tabghachs as a Chinese people. He divides the Chinese into three levels: Shin (i.e., China) consists of three layers—the eastern region is



called Tabghach, the middle region Chin, and the lower region Barxan near Kashgar. Today, the Tabghach people are known as Mashin, and the Chinese as Shin [10].

In Isajon Sulton's literary works, the historical information surrounding the emergence of the Tabghach people is enriched through the lens of artistic imagination. The author links this ethnic phenomenon to the fate of the Turkic peoples and the naivety of young Turkic warriors. He creates a vivid contrast between Chinese and Turkic women by means of artistic juxtaposition. Chinese women are portrayed as soft-spoken, obsessed with adornment, physically delicate, yet cunning and manipulative. In contrast, Turkic women are depicted as valiant, capable of horse-riding and warfare, and strong-willed, able to meet men as equals in both strength and spirit. The author highlights these traits in Turkic women to underscore the cultural and emotional cost of their eventual replacement by Chinese women.

Additionally, the promises of land and wealth offered in exchange for marriage to Chinese princesses likely appeared attractive to the Xiongnu, a nomadic people with no permanent possessions. The Chinese are portrayed as deceptive and persuasive, luring the Turkic men with glittering objects and fine words. The bravery and pride of the Turkic nation were seduced by the graceful bodies and sweet words of Chinese women; soft beds and pillows weakened their arms, and silks and brocades made them forget their identity.

"The Chinese said: Our minds are clever; we understand all deceptions. The Turkic youths are brave, their women strong and muscular. If we mix the Chinese and the Turks, a people will be born who are both clever and courageous. They will become our servants and guardians." [11]

One particularly noteworthy element in Isajon Sulton's narrative is the political motivation behind the Chinese strategy of marrying off their princesses to Turkic tribes. These marriages were meant to weaken the Turkic tribes from within, using their own offspring as instruments of subjugation. Through Bilga Khagan, the author expresses this idea directly:

"Lower your head, and fix your eyes upon the stone: Your sons married Chinese girls. Those girls gave birth to children in the time of war. Your blood was tainted, your children became cholish [hybrids]. As cholish, they rode firmly on



horseback and drew the bow with strength. Emerging from you, they struck against you.”

CONCLUSION

Using this compelling narrative, Isajon Sulton skillfully incorporates the history of the Tabghach tribe's origins to promote a nationalistic message, emphasizing the dignity and resilience of the Turkic people. In conclusion, through historical themes, Isajon Sulton's works attempt to encompass and reflect the full spectrum of human life.

The artistic interpretation of historical themes in the works of Isajon Sulton not only offers insight into past events but also serves to awaken national consciousness and cultural memory in the modern reader. The examined excerpt, centered around the character of Oytoldi, embodies universal human values such as motherhood, justice, revenge, and moral choice. Through the protagonist's inner turmoil, the author skillfully reveals the ethical and aesthetic worldview of the ancient Turkic peoples, particularly through the symbolic figure of Tengri, the Sky God.

This interplay reflects the complex harmony between history and fiction, individual emotion and collective memory in Sulton's literary style. Most notably, the author provides the contemporary reader with an opportunity to reinterpret historical narratives through the lens of modern ethical perspectives. Thus, his work functions as a significant literary medium for understanding and reimagining Turkic history through artistic consciousness.

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