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# The image of Alexander the Great in the poem by Abai Kunanbayuly

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## Abstract

This article is devoted to the study of the work of the great Kazakh poet Abai Kunanbayuly. In the course of the study, the works of prominent Russian-Soviet orientalists V.V. Bartold, E.E. Bertels, and I.S. Braginsky were used. Based on a comparative analysis, the corresponding conclusions were drawn on the artistic-figurative component of many works written on the theme of Iskander. The features and differences of medieval and national literature in the interpretation of the same image are revealed. The versatility and the humanistic spirit of Abai's creativity in the context of his poem are shown.

**Keywords:** Iskander, Abai Kunanbayuly, V. Zhukovsky, Nazira, literary communications.

# La imagen de Alexander el Grande en el poema de Abai Kunanbayuly

## Resumen

Este artículo está dedicado al estudio de la obra del gran poeta kazajo Abai Kunanbayuly. En el curso del estudio, los trabajos de prominentes orientalistas ruso-soviéticos V.V. Bartold, E.E. Bertels y I.S. Braginsky fueron utilizados. Basado en un análisis comparativo, las conclusiones correspondientes se extrajeron del componente artístico-figurativo de muchas obras escritas sobre el tema de Iskander. Se revelan las características y diferencias de la literatura medieval y nacional en la interpretación de la misma imagen. Se muestra la versatilidad y el espíritu humanista de la creatividad de Abai en el contexto de su poema.

**Palabras clave:** Iskander, Abai Kunanbayuly, V. Zhukovsky, Nazira, Comunicaciones literarias.

## 1. INTRODUCTION

One of the most common subjects of world folklore and literature are those related to the image of Alexander the Great. We can say that Alexander the Great became a common folklore and literary hero for both Western and Eastern literature, differing from each other in the variety of plot conflicts and the diversity of interesting motifs. In this sense, the image of Alexander the Great is a kind of character uniting the world folklore and literary space, first of all, as a collective artistic image created in the literature of the peoples of the world for many centuries.

Unfortunately, the image of Alexander or, as it is commonly called him in the East, Iskander, is not sufficiently studied in modern

literary criticism. Therefore, studies of previous years do not lose their relevance, even in connection with new views on literature and images created in it over the past decades. So, in Kazakh literary criticism, to this day there is no common opinion regarding Abai Kunanbayuly's poem "Iskander" (in the modern Kazakh language – "Eskendir"). The early scholars of Abai's work, such as Mukhtar Auezov and Mitrofan Silchenko, attributed his poem to the Nazira tradition. So M. Auezov said that:

Abai had a very special attitude towards Pushkin. The passages he translated from "Eugene Onegin" are more likely not a translation, but an inspired retelling of Pushkin's novel. At the same time, Abai followed the ancient tradition of "Nazira," legalized in eastern poetry, by virtue of which the poet reveals the plot and themes of his predecessors in a new way. So, we know the rehash of the plots "Leili and Majnun", "Farhad and Shirin" and poems about Alexander the Great (Iskander) among poets of Tajik, Azerbaijani and Uzbek antiquities. Abai himself sang in one of his poems Alexander (Iskander) and Aristotle in terms of such a rehash, following in this the example of the Azerbaijani classic Nizami and the Uzbek Navoi" (MUKHTAR AUEZOV.1961)

But later researchers refuted this point of view, not attributing the poem of Abai to those sung in the tradition of Nazira. In this regard, as E.E. Bertels noted:

European Orientalists have established that all six great poems of Navoi are Nazira, and therefore, having applied the nickname of the "translator" to the great poet, they calmed down, deciding that, therefore, to study his works it's not necessary, it is enough to describe their manuscripts (E.E. BERTELS. NIZAMI AND NAVOI. 1965).

Such tendencies regarding the literature of Turkic-language literatures were quite influential. Their influence can be seen in a number of studies of the Soviet period. So in the 60-70 years of the twentieth century, a critical point of view was formed regarding the Nazira tradition. In particular, the studies of S. Kaskabasov and E. Kostyukhin regarding the poem by Abai Kunanbayuly “Iskander” were not recognized, not written in the tradition of Nazira. So, S. Kaskabasov, on the analysis of Abai’s poem, comes to the conclusion that this poem is not “Nazira”. S.Kaskabasov, says that: "Iskander" of Abai is not a Nazira. The poem is an independent work written in a genre intermediate between the dastan and the novel. Eastern tradition here is most likely only in addressing the name of an outstanding personality popular in the East” (Kaskabasov S.2014) and (ALI-ZADE A. A. 2007). E. Kostyukhin, however, says: “Abai’s poem cannot be considered as the Nazira from the formal side. Abai does not comply with the main principles of Nazira - the preservation of the meter and the basic, key points of the traditional plot” (KOSTYUKHIN E. 1972). Although Abai’s poem “Isakander” refers to a number of the most studied works, such disagreements remain unresolved. To this, the work of Abai, in contrast to previous authors, is written in a modern form for the author, in a form of poem, rather than an eastern dastan.

But first, clarify a number of the following issues:

1. What is the tradition of Nazira?

2. What are the differences between Nazira in the classical eastern and national literature;

3. Are all the works on the canonical theme formed in the Eastern literature can be attributed to their Nazira?

In the writings of prominent orientologists, E.E. Bertels and I.S. Braginsky, Nazira was considered as an original work, and as an unwritten contest of poets among themselves. So E.E. Bertels gives the following explanation:

Nazira is a kind of poetic work in which the poet answered some poem of his predecessor or contemporary, preserving the meter and rhyme of his poem, and sometimes even individual turns of speech, but trying to surpass opponent or to refute one or another of his statements. Therefore, to study this or that poet, so to speak “immanently,” without taking into account his relations with other authors, is an occupation that does not allow reaching any significant conclusions (BERTELS E.E. 1960).

I.S. Braginsky, however, gives the following definition:

The approach of Nazira was a creative competition, a contest between the poet and his predecessors. Originality, innovative craftsmanship were not manifested in the novelty of the plot, genre and poetics (under the terms of Nazira, these components had to be strictly repeated); the manner of expressing and deepening the same components, and thereby the identification of individual poetic ingenuity, were decisive. Only an outstanding poet who was able to create works that were most consonant with their time and exceeded the work of

predecessors, voluntarily constraining his creative abilities, withstood this competition and won it (BERTELS E.E. 1960).

Also, it should be noted that the Russian-Soviet orientalist V.V. Bartold said that “In the XV century. in Central Asia, first in Samarkand, then in Herat lived the poet Mir Ali-Shir, who became a classical poet for all Muslim Turks, but in that time and then Turkish literature remained translated or imitative, throughout the space from China to the Balkan Peninsula and Egypt , Turkish writers were influenced by Persian patterns” (BARTOLD V.V. 1977). Here, speaking of the "imitative", V.V. Bartold, refers to the tradition of Nazira.

Therefore, a number of orientalists regarding nazira expressed their opinions, speaking of nazira as imitations. But modern researcher A.B. Kudelin, who devoted a separate study to this issue, analyzing a wide range of theoretical materials, argues that:

Nazira cannot be qualified as imitation, and authors of Nazira should not be called imitators, copyists, and even more so epigones. The variation of patterns in the imitation of followers thus acquired a special meaning, and the individual and collective dialectically linked together in a chain of endless inter conversions on the path of unlimited improvement (A. B. KUDELIN. 2016).

From the above explanation, given that here the Nazira tradition, considered on the scale of Persian literature, taking into account the peculiarities of Turkic literature, a number of the following assumptions can be made:

Firstly, as a result of the differences between the Persian and Turkic languages, there are significant differences in the system of versification. Although, in some classical Turkic literature, the Aruz system was adopted, it was not widely used in all literature. If we talk about Kazakh literature, the poetic word has found its development in the basis of the traditional syllabic system of versification. Therefore, speaking of Nazira in Kazakh literature, it is difficult to talk about maintaining the meter and rhyme of the verse in its original form. Therefore, when it comes to Nazira in Turkic literature, then, first of all, the theme and storyline of the work are taken as the basis, and not the system of versification. In Kazakh literature, not only the works of oriental authors were chosen as canonical themes, and such a trend originates, precisely from the work of Abai Kunanbayuly and his followers.

Secondly, both E.E. Bertels and I.S. Braginsky, in the understanding of Nazira, pay special attention to the creative processing of the original work in terms of its adaptation to the contemporary time for the poet, the development or refutation of the point of view of predecessor. So the appeal of poets to canonical works was connected precisely with their desire to show their understanding of the classical theme and image. Moreover, each poet sought to make the canonical image of the hero more understandable and close to his contemporaries. Moreover, re-singing the canonical storyline, it was not always taken in its entirety, attention was focused on it only on the most key moments of the plots, which were most understandable and in demand by his contemporaries.

Thirdly, there are significant differences between the classical Oriental and separate national literature. So, medieval oriental literature was limited both by the number of readers and connoisseurs of fiction. The period of separation of national literatures took place in parallel with the development of printing, that is, literary works began to have a more public character. Therefore, the attitude of writers to the themes of Nazira in the eastern and national literature differed significantly. If the medieval reader demanded from the writer a more refined treatment of a previously known topic, then the reader of national literature demanded newer topics and interesting subjects. In national literature, even for the familiar topics, more interesting subjects, with new images, were already required.

## **2. METHODOLOGY**

Therefore, without a contrastive-comparative analysis of a number of works by various writers from different eras within the framework of one topic, it is difficult to say whether Abai's poem "Iskander" is Nazira or not.

## **3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION**

Abai Kunanbayuly and the neoclassical trend of Nazira.

The poem "Iskander"

The history of the emergence of separate national literatures can be observed on the example of Kazakh literature, in particular on the transformation of the classical image and the theme of Iskander, which takes a special place in world literature. In Kazakh literature, poets and writers such as Abai Kunanbayuly, Ibrai Altynsarin, Akyt Ulimzhiuly, Magzhan Zhumabaev, Mangystau Tynyshtykuly, Mirtazy Mustafauly, who lived and worked in the second half of the 19th and early 20th centuries, devoted their works to this topic.

In the works of a prominent Kazakh scientist, academician Seit Kaskabasov, there are studies in the field of Kazakh non-tale prose related to the image of Iskander Zulkarnayn (Dhu al-Qarnayn). So, on the materials of Kazakh folklore and literature, S.Kaskabasov subdivides the stories of the legendary narration about Iskander into three groups:

The first group is the legendary tales of Iskander, who seeks eternal life, rooted in the “Qasas ul Anbiya” of Ragbuzi;

The second group is novels consisting of two subgroups: the first - about Iskander Zulkarnayn not just as a “two-horned”, as the sovereign of two worlds, light and darkness, this and other worlds, the plots of which also go back to “Qasas ul Anbiya”; the second, about the "Two-horned", going back to the Persian "Khudai-nama", to the writings of Balami and Tabari, to Firdowsi and Nizami;

The third group is the narratives related to Iskander's repentance, after he saw a fragment of a skull that outweighed all the riches of this world, but outweighed only by a handful of the earth, which meant the finiteness of human life, and its gluttony for earthly blessings. This group of plots dates back to the Talmud (NON-STYLIZED IMITATIONS IN ORIENTAL LITERATURE.2016).

The plot of the poem, according to S. Kaskabasov, is associated with the third group of plots about Iskander, which is, connected with the Talmud. The poem begins with the following lines:

Осы жұрт Ескендірді біле ме екен?

Македония шахары оған мекен.

Филип патша баласы, ер көңілді,

Мақтан сүйгіш, қызғаншақ екен.

(Does this people know who this Iskander is?

The city of Macedonia was his haven.

That he has a warlike spirit, was the son of King Philip.

He loved praise and was an envious.) (KASKABASOV S. 2002).

From the very first lines, the author of the poem challenges all previous Eastern authors who have ever narrated about Iskander, specifically pointing to him as a real historical Alexander the Great. Abai's poem turned out to be capacious; in every verse, the poet invested a huge significant meaning. In it, one can find answers too many motives of the great poets of the East preceding him, such as Firdowsi, Nizami, Navoi. It is not difficult to notice that from the very beginning of the poem, Abai speaks critically of the protagonist of his poem, which in itself is a contrast of his "Iskander" with all the images created before. Here, historical Alexander is presented to the reader, not as the righteous and just two-horned king, half-prophet, but an avid, ruthless and bloodthirsty conqueror-enslaver.

According to the plot of the poem, Iskander, who has conquered many countries and cities of the world, is in one of his next transitions through the desert. After a long and exhausting journey, he with his troops meets a wonderful stream, waters of which delight him so much that he decides to go upstream to conquer that country and city from the territory that this life-giving spring originates from. After a long journey, in front of him, in the crevice of the mountains, a huge impregnable wall appears, from beneath of which this stream flows. Attempts to open the gates by force did not succeed, and he approached these walls in solitude, shouted loudly, demanding the gates to be opened, to which the guard answered him, and saying:

Мықтымын деп мақтанба ақыл білсең?

Мықты болсаң, өзіңнің нәпсіңді жең!

Іші тар көре алмастың біреуі сен,

Ондай кісі бұл жерге келмейді тең.

(Do not brag that you are strong if you are intelligent

If you are so strong, then overcome your pride.

You are one of the greedy, envious,

And to people like you there is no place in this abode).  
(KASKABASOV S. 2002).

At the request of Iskander, the same guard throws him only a bundle of scarf. Arriving at his camp and opening the bundle, he discovers only a piece of the bare bone, which he throws to the side in fury. But his wise mentor Aristotle, having picked up this piece of the eye bone, explains to him his meaning of this sign. For clarity, he asks to bring the bowl with the scales. On one side of the scales, he puts all the riches of Iskander, which were outweighed by this small bone. At the same time, only a handful of the earth thrown onto the bowl with the eye bone, and at the same moment, it was outweighed by wealth. Aristotle explained the meaning of this by saying that only grave sand can saturate the eyes of a person. And from whatever degree of

possession of earthly goods people would have after their death, all the boundaries between the eye bones of people are erased.

In S. Kaskabasov's studies, regarding the work of Abai, he determines that the canonical plot of the poem was taken from the Talmud, and he was also familiar with V. Zhukovsky's poem "Two Stories. New Year's gift to the publisher of the "Moskvityanin" (KASKABASOV S. 2014). Therefore, with his rehash, Abai gives Iskander themes, not only Eastern, but primarily Western, through a deep penetration into the idea of the work, as well as the introduction of the image of Aristotle, instead of the impersonal sage.

Along with this, it is reliably known that Abai read the Firdowsi's "Shahnameh" in the original (Abai (Ibrahim) Kunanbayuly. (ABAI (IBRAHIM) KUNANBAYULY. 2005), was well acquainted with the work of Navoi, and, presumably, he also knew Nizami. Also, it is unusual that he chose not one of the eastern plots associated with Iskander, but the Talmudic, intertwined by V. Zhukovsky intentionally. Thus, showing his position, in response to the question: "Who is this Iskander Zulkarnayn?" Abai's poem turned out to be full of pathos of humanism and pacifism, completely despising pride, boasting, and greedy passion for earthly goods, as the main vices of mankind.

Now, let us compare its differences and similarities with "Iskander Nama" of such authors as Firdowsi, Nizami and Navoi, as

well as Akyt, with one of Abai's contemporaries who wrote the original version on this subject.

Iskander Zulkarnayn in the works of oriental authors.

«Shahnameh» by Firdowsi

On the scale of all Eastern literature, the “Shahnameh” by Firdowsi is considered the first literary image of Iskander. By writing this significant work, the beginning of a turbulent literary process for many future centuries was laid, which inspired many generations of writers to write the next “Iskander Name” in the Nazira tradition.

With the emergence of Islam in the East, the active processes of its spread and development began. Along with religion, its culture also spread, primarily Arabic graphics, as the basis on which all the norms and canons of religious rites were written. At the same time, Persian, Turkic and a number of other scripts were formed on the basis of Arabic script. This, in turn, led to the development of related literary processes associated with the adoption of aesthetic and ethical principles, formed and embedded in centuries-old written and oral Arabic literature. Regarding the aesthetic preferences formed in Arabic literature, researcher B.Ya.Shidfar, says that “the aesthetic feeling of the listener is satisfied only with forms and plots familiar to him/her, he expects from the poet not a new plot, which will be perceived as something unusual, strange, uninteresting, but as much as masterful and inventive variations on the theme of the already known and

familiar plot” (ABAI (IBRAHIM) KUNANBAYULY. 2005) and (MUKHTAR AUEZOV. 1997). Thus, the theme of Iskander Zulkarnayn became one of the usual theme for the eastern reader and listener. Also, it is necessary to take into account the undeniable fact that Zulkarnayn is, first of all, a Koranic character associated with the mythology of the Semitic peoples (SHIDFAR B.YA. 1974), who then transformed into the Iskander through the Shahnameh, absorbing the collective image of the righteous king and fair sovereign.

#### **4. CONCLUSION**

The literature of a certain period always reflects the reality that occurs in the period. The cycle of a work devoted to the image of Iskander is united by a theme, but among different authors, the motives for writing the work are fundamentally different. Thus, the creations of medieval authors such as Firdowsi, Nizami and Navoi were addressed to specific rulers and ruling circles, appealing to justice and wise rule. Moreover, the esthetic feelings of the ruling circles, as the most educated, were taken into account. It is also natural that the artistic preferences of the medieval East were at a fairly high level. But in the period of the formation of national literatures, the motives for writing a work ceased to pursue the goal of appeal only to the rulers, they are addressed to a wide circle of readers.

And for many, writers of national literature addressed the wider masses in this way with instructive and didactic ideas. If in the Middle

Agas the ruling circles were the arbiters of fate, then in modern times, this prerogative has become more democratic. Probably, all the splendor of the “Iskander Name” series lies in the fact that it shows the writer’s attitude to the modernity in which he lives and creates. At the same time, one can see that the modernity of the writer on the same topic sets different goals for the writer. The greatness of writers and poets is probably that the most perspicacious of them overcome the prejudices of their time.

In this regard, with all the courage it can be argued that Abai was able to overcome the prejudices and beliefs of his time. The considered poem can be safely called nazira, because of a number of the following circumstances:

Firstly, on the topic chosen by Abai, a lot of work, storylines, which were not always preserved in strict sequence were written. It is not difficult to notice that even within the framework of classical Eastern literature, with all its conventions, different writers have different attitudes to the canonical image of Iskander. Even the names of the work are different from each other. Let us say, in Firodowski, this is one of the chapters of the “Shahnameh” (شاهنامه - Shahname), and is called “Iskander (The reign of Iskander lasted fourteen years)”. For Nizami, this is his significant work, in his “Khamsa”, “Iskander Name”. In Navoi, it is also in “Khamsa” and “The Wall of Iskander” (سد اسکندری - Iskandariy Saddi). For Abai it is the poem Iskander (اسکندر - Eskendr). In Akyt’s works, this is also a poem, and it is called Iskander Zulkarnayn (اسکندر ذو القرنین - Eskendr Zulkharnain). If in

“Shahnameh” by Firdowsi, Iskander is one of the next rulers of Persia, then in Nizami this image acts as the most just and wise ruler, pursuing the most good goals of unification of the whole world. This creation is also the most significant work in his “Khamasa”. Navoi is more different in this respect from his predecessors, the image of Iskander turned out to be more realistic, he is an ordinary mortal who does not seek eternal life and glory. The author introduced an edifying character into the work, with digressions in the plot to different elegy and parables. In Abai’s work, Iskander is the historical king Alexander the Great. Here you can see a completely different approach of the author to the topic, he really knows who his real historical character was, but at the same time, for this poem he deliberately chooses an original instructive plot, focusing on the depravity of the life path made by the famous commander.

Secondly, the principle of Nazira did not consist in a strict imitation of the canonical theme, but in the creative, ideological and artistic rethinking of this topic. In this regard, Abai’s poem, not only in form, content, plot, motives, is completely different from the work of predecessors, but also is a single manifesto of rejection of the manifestation of violence generated by greedy self-interest. Abai categorically does not accept any kind of war of conquest, seeing in them a real threat to humanity, its peaceful coexistence. A conqueror-commander cannot be a virtue for people all the more an example to follow. This is the answer that Abai gives to all his predecessors in Eastern literature, about the real image of Iskander the conqueror, not as a half-prophet king, a just and wise ruler. Wisdom and conquest

cannot be combined in one person, and this is a more realistic approach to the image of the hero. The poet's appeal to this topic is of a deliberate nature, to the disclosure of which he approached with a purely artistically very meticulous manner. The plot of the poem is mythologized, capacious, but at the same time diverse. Abai combines several cultural and historical layers in the poem, starting from the Talmud, passing through all European literature, eastern and modern for him. If we talk about the canonical text of the poem, then neither in the Talmud, nor in the verse of V. Zhukovsky there are those details and the character that Abai brought to them, and these details have something in common with the Eastern authors, and not Khizri acts as a wise mentor and adviser, and not Israfil, but the historical Aristotle. The poem is limited by the number of acting heroes, there are only three of them: this is Iskander himself, the guard from the wall and Aristotle. The desert is chosen as the place where the events take place, and this is also no coincidence. This element is closer to the nomad, and any source of water for him, whether in the desert or the steppe, is a source of life at the same time. Water is sacred to a nomad. They treated it as life-giving moisture, giving life. Owning water resources was vital in the nomadic economy. Namely, at the reservoirs, life arose, villages were built, and civilizations arose. Sometimes, the nomads treated the big cities as the center of the hectic life of people, as the center, which was the heart of knowledge and earthly goods. But at the same time, the city is a category that is not fully understood by them.

Iskander initially sees in his search for a source of water, another goal to conquer, but the city he has not conquered is already nonsense, since all previous authors spoke of him as the conqueror of the whole world, and here he is broken so that this city is inaccessible to his army. The city is a paradise abode, which is inaccessible to such bloodthirsty and greedy conquerors as he was. Here comes the main idea of his understanding of the image, that the main war of man should be directed against his irrepressible pride, curbing which is much more difficult than conquering cities. In the verse of V. Zhukovsky, Alexander does not extract anything from the sign received and continues his campaigns of conquest. That is, the canonical text turned out to be less edifying and simply narrating a certain myth or parable that does not go deep into the final idea of the work. In Abai's work, the sign received was explained by Aristotle, which radically changed the appearance with which Iskander was perceived before him. The main character is aware of the futility of his life's path, repents by abandoning further aggressive campaigns and returns to his homeland. That is, the pride and greed inherent in Iskander is overcome by him, and after such an act he should be perceived as a positive character, stumbled, but after having understood and accepted the sign from above.

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