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Cultural Anxiety and Gendered Trauma: A Psychological-Literary Reading of Abdulla Qodiriy's O'tkan kunlar

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Abstract: Abdulla Qodiriy's O'tkan kunlar (1922–1926), widely recognised as the first Uzbek novel, has traditionally been read through the lenses of national historiography and literary stylistics. This article proposes a complementary, interdisciplinary reading that brings psychological trauma theory to bear on the text. Drawing on Judith Herman's stage model of trauma and recovery, Cathy Caruth's concept of belated and unclaimed experience, and postcolonial revisions of trauma theory by Irene Visser and Stef Craps, the study conducts a qualitative thematic analysis of the novel's political and domestic plotlines. Findings suggest that O'tkan kunlar encodes two interlocking registers of suffering — a collective, political trauma tied to the disintegration of the Kokand Khanate on the eve of Russian conquest, and a chronic, gendered trauma rooted in the institution of polygamy and the seclusion of women. The novel's characteristic narrative devices, particularly its didactic narrator and its deliberate withholding of information, are shown to produce effects that parallel what Western trauma theory calls belatedness and unspeakability, suggesting that such structures can arise independently within a Central Asian oral-narrative tradition rather than being exclusively Euro-American literary inventions. The article argues for the value of trauma theory as an interpretive tool for early twentieth-century Uzbek prose while cautioning against uncritical transplantation of a Western clinical vocabulary onto a colonial-era Central Asian text.

Keywords: Abdulla Qodiriy; O'tkan kunlar; cultural anxiety, trauma theory; psychological literary criticism; Uzbek literature; gendered trauma.

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1. Introduction

Abdulla Qodiriy (1894–1938) occupies a foundational place in Uzbek letters as the author of O'tkan kunlar ("Bygone Days"), first serialised in the journal Inqilob between 1922 and 1925 and published as a book in 1926. The novel is conventionally described as the first full-length novel written in the Uzbek language, and it narrates the love of Otabek and Kumush against the backdrop of the internecine wars among the Kokand, Tashkent and Margilan khanates in the mid-nineteenth century, in the years immediately preceding the Russian imperial conquest of Turkestan. Qodiriy himself was later arrested during the Stalinist purges and executed in 1938, a biographical fact that has encouraged generations of readers to treat the novel, and its author's fate, as inseparable from a larger history of political violence in the region.[1]

Scholarship on O'tkan kunlar produced within Uzbekistan and the wider Turkic-speaking world has tended to concentrate on two registers: the novel's role in constructing a national historical consciousness, and its stylistic innovations in adapting oral-narrative

and Perso-Arabic literary conventions to the emerging genre of the novel. Literary-historical accounts emphasise the work's celebration of love, loyalty and patriotism through the figures of Otabek and Kumush, while stylistic studies have analysed Qodiriy's use of suspense, direct authorial address and proverb-like commentary as devices inherited from Chagatay and oral storytelling traditions rather than from the European novel.[2]

What remains comparatively underexplored is a systematic reading of the novel through the lens of psychological trauma theory — an interdisciplinary field that has, since the 1990s, examined how extreme and often unspeakable experience is represented, remembered and narrated in literary texts. Because *O'tkan kunlar* is saturated with scenes of siege, imprisonment, betrayal, forced marriage and death, and because it was written by an author whose own life ended in political violence, it offers unusually rich material for such a reading. At the same time, trauma theory itself has been criticised by postcolonial scholars for having developed largely out of Euro-American and Holocaust-related case material, raising the question of whether its concepts travel adequately to a Central Asian text produced outside that context.[3]

This article therefore pursues three interrelated research questions. First, what forms of trauma — collective/political and interpersonal/domestic — are represented in *O'tkan kunlar*, and how do they interact across the novel's dual plotlines? Second, to what extent does the novel's narrative structure, particularly its delayed disclosures and its intrusive narrator, produce literary effects comparable to what trauma theory describes as belatedness and unspeakability? Third, what does a text such as *O'tkan kunlar* contribute to ongoing debates about the cross-cultural applicability of trauma theory outside its originating Euro-American contexts[4]

2. Materials and Methods

This study adopts a qualitative, interpretive research design combining close reading with thematic content analysis, a methodology well established in literary-psychological criticism where the object of analysis is meaning rather than frequency. Rather than quantifying isolated lexical items, the analysis proceeds through iterative, theory-informed coding of narrative units (scenes, chapters and character arcs), a procedure consistent with qualitative content analysis as practised in interdisciplinary humanities research.[5]

The primary text is Qodiriy's *O'tkan kunlar* in its standard Uzbek edition, consulted alongside Mark Reese's 2018 English translation, *Bygone Days*, and cross-checked against published chapter-by-chapter synopses and prior scholarly commentary on the novel's composition and content. Because a full computational analysis of the entire fifty-seven-chapter original text was outside the practical scope of this study, the analysis relies on a purposive sample of narrative units identified — via the novel's own chapter titles and via existing synopses — as loci of acute or chronic distress. These include: the siege and factional violence in and around Tashkent (chapters titled, in translation, "Bloody Clouds over Tashkent," "Imprisonment," and "Judgment"); Otabek's imprisonment and narrow escape; the courtship, forced rivalry and eventual poisoning of Kumush by Zaynab; and the novel's closing chapters, culminating in Otabek's death. This purposive sampling strategy is a limitation acknowledged explicitly in Section 4.3, and the resulting themes should be read as an interpretive mapping rather than an exhaustive corpus statistic.[6]

Three complementary strands of trauma theory structured the coding process. The first is Judith Herman's tripartite model of recovery from trauma, comprising the re-establishment of safety, the process of remembrance and mourning, and eventual reconnection with ordinary life, a model originally developed from clinical work with survivors of domestic and political violence. The second is Cathy Caruth's account of trauma as an experience that is not fully assimilated at the moment of its occurrence and

therefore returns belatedly, in intrusive or displaced form, later in a narrative. The third is the postcolonial critique of trauma theory associated with Irene Visser and Stef Craps, who argue that trauma's canonical Western models must be pluralised to accommodate non-Western temporalities of suffering, collective rather than purely individual subjects of trauma, and narrative traditions that encode extreme experience through culturally specific devices rather than through the fragmented, aporetic style associated with Euro-American modernist trauma fiction.[7]

Coding proceeded in two passes. In the first, descriptive pass, all sampled narrative units were annotated for the presence of violence, loss, confinement, betrayal or death. In the second, interpretive pass, these descriptive annotations were mapped onto the theoretical categories outlined above — for example, coding a scene as illustrating "unfinished mourning" if a character's grief is narratively interrupted by renewed political obligation before Herman's remembrance stage can be completed. Codes were then grouped inductively into broader themes, which are presented in Section 3. To support the trustworthiness of the interpretation, findings were triangulated against the original-language chapter structure, the English translation, and previously published literary-historical commentary on the novel.[8]

3. Results

The novel's political plotline — the rivalry among the khanates, the siege of Tashkent, and Otabek's repeated imprisonment — consistently stages trauma as a collective and anticipatory phenomenon rather than a single bounded incident. Characters experience the khanates' internal wars as chronic instability rather than as an event with a clear beginning and end, a pattern consistent with what trauma theory identifies as complex or continuous trauma.[9] Because contemporary readers know that this internal fragmentation preceded, and arguably facilitated, the Russian imperial conquest of Turkestan later in the nineteenth century, the narrative carries an implicit dramatic irony: the political violence the characters experience as immediate crisis is legible to the reader as a prelude to a larger historical catastrophe that has, in Caruth's terms, already happened by the time of narration. The trauma of colonisation is thus present in the text belatedly and by implication, inscribed into a story that is ostensibly only about pre-colonial dynastic conflict.[10]

A second and structurally parallel register of trauma runs through the novel's domestic plot. Kumush and Zaynab, the two wives forced into rivalry by the institution of polygamy, experience trauma not as an isolated violent event but as a prolonged condition of interpersonal domination, confinement and enforced competition for status within the household — the classic profile of what Herman terms complex trauma, typically arising from sustained subjection to another's control. Kumush's eventual poisoning functions narratively as the acute culmination of this chronic condition rather than as its origin.[11] The novel's sympathetic narration of both women's suffering, and its explicit framing of "cruel traditions, including polygamy," as the source of their "deadly feud," positions the domestic institution itself, rather than either woman's individual character, as the traumatising structure — an interpretation that aligns with feminist extensions of trauma theory emphasising structural and institutional, rather than only interpersonal, sources of harm.[12]

Otabek's arc across the novel's final chapters illustrates what may be read as interrupted or unfinished mourning in Herman's sense. Each time personal loss might permit Otabek to move toward remembrance and integration, renewed political duty — a summons to defend Tashkent, a further imprisonment, a fresh outbreak of factional violence — intervenes before mourning can be completed.[13] The novel's ending, in which Otabek dies defending his homeland shortly after Kumush's death, forecloses the reconnection stage of Herman's model altogether: neither individual mourning nor a stable

postwar order is narratively achieved. This structural refusal of resolution can be read as the text's own formal acknowledgment that, under conditions of continuing political violence, private trauma and public trauma cannot be neatly separated or sequentially resolved.[14]

Stylistic scholarship on O'tkan kunlar has already identified Qodiriy's reliance on suspense, delayed disclosure and direct authorial address to the reader as inheritances from oral and Chagatay literary tradition, deployed to heighten curiosity and to teach the reader through commentary. Read through a trauma-theoretical lens, these same devices acquire a further significance: the systematic withholding of crucial information until late in the narrative, and the narrator's periodic interruptions to address the reader directly, produce a textual rhythm of delay and belated revelation that closely resembles what Caruth describes as trauma's structural belatedness — the sense that the full significance of an event can only be grasped after, and often long after, its occurrence. Because these devices originate in an indigenous storytelling tradition rather than in the fragmented modernist aesthetics from which Western trauma theory largely derives its literary examples, their presence in O'tkan kunlar supports Visser's and Craps's contention that culturally specific narrative forms can independently generate trauma-like textual structures.

4. Discussion

Taken together, the four themes identified in Section 3 suggest that O'tkan kunlar organises suffering along two interlocking registers: a collective-political register tied to dynastic collapse and, by implication, colonial subjugation, and a chronic-domestic register tied to the gendered institution of polygamy. The novel repeatedly stages moments where these two registers intersect — most clearly in Otabek's inability to complete private mourning because of recurring public emergency — suggesting that the text itself resists any strict separation between political and domestic, or collective and individual, trauma. This dual-register reading complicates existing national-historiographical accounts of the novel, which have tended to read its political and romantic plots as thematically unified around patriotism and love, by foregrounding the costs and structural harms that this unifying narrative otherwise leaves unexamined, particularly for its female characters.

The finding that Qodiriy's indigenous narrative devices produce effects analogous to Caruth's belatedness, without demonstrable reliance on Euro-American literary models, offers modest support for the broader postcolonial argument that trauma's textual signatures are not the exclusive property of the traditions in which trauma theory was first formulated. This is consistent with calls by Visser and by Craps to pluralise trauma theory so that it can accommodate non-Western narrative traditions, collective as well as individual subjects of suffering, and historical contexts — such as Central Asia under Russian and Soviet rule — that differ substantially from the Holocaust-centred case material out of which the field originally developed. At the same time, this study does not claim that Qodiriy consciously engaged with trauma as a psychological category; the resemblance identified here is a textual and structural one, and any claim of intentional psychological representation on Qodiriy's part would exceed what the evidence supports.

Future work could extend this analysis in at least three directions. A comparative study might juxtapose O'tkan kunlar with other early twentieth-century Central Asian novels dealing with gendered confinement and colonial anxiety, such as Cho'lpon's *Kecha va kunduz* ("Night and Day"), to test whether the dual-register trauma structure identified here is idiosyncratic to Qodiriy or more broadly characteristic of Jadid-era Uzbek prose. A digital-humanities extension could apply corpus-based emotion-lexicon analysis to the complete original-language text to quantify the distribution of trauma-related vocabulary across chapters, addressing the sampling limitation noted above. Finally, reader-response

or reception-historical research could examine how Uzbek readers across different political periods — late Tsarist, Soviet and post-independence — have interpreted the novel's scenes of violence and loss, offering an empirical complement to the text-internal analysis presented here.[15]

5. Conclusion

This article has argued that Abdulla Qodiriy's *O'tkan kunlar*, long read primarily as a foundational text of Uzbek national literature and as a landmark of stylistic innovation, rewards an additional reading informed by psychological trauma theory. Such a reading reveals a novel organised around two interlocking registers of suffering — political and domestic — whose resolution is persistently deferred, and whose narrative techniques of delay and direct address produce textual effects that parallel, while not directly derive from, Western theorisations of trauma's belatedness. Rather than treating trauma theory as a ready-made template to be applied to any text featuring violence, this study has treated the encounter between an Uzbek historical novel and a largely Euro-American critical vocabulary as itself a site of productive friction, one that illuminates both the novel's distinctive narrative achievement and the limits of trauma theory's own claims to universality. Interdisciplinary approaches of this kind, bridging literary criticism and psychology, offer a promising avenue for renewing scholarly engagement with canonical texts of Uzbek literature.

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