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Between Manuscript and Memory: Persian-Tajik Literary Life in Aini's Bukhara

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Abstract

Through the autobiographical works of Sadriddin Aini (1878–1954), who is often seen as the creator of modern Tajik literature, this article examines the literary and cultural changes that occurred in Persian-Tajik society in Bukhara in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. The Sands of Oxus and Yaddoshtho (Memoirs) by Aini provide a detailed first-hand narrative of a civilization that was based on oral tradition and manuscript culture while negotiating the demands of early Soviet modernization, Russian colonization, and feudal rule.

This research, which draws on Persian and Tajik academic sources, investigates the transmission and preservation of literary knowledge in a pre-print setting when memory and handwritten texts were crucial educational and identity-forming resources. From hamlet maktabs to the madrasas of Bukhara, where he came into contact with the ancient Persian canon under constrained circumstances, the essay charts Aini's intellectual growth. It also explores his fight against the autocratic Emirate, his role in the Jadid reform movement, and his subsequent engagement in Soviet literary nation-building initiatives like Namuna-yi Adabiyat-i Tajik.

Through his methods of textual preservation, script reform, and national identity building, Aini's dual function as a devoted Soviet cultural icon and a protector of Persian literary history is examined. By fusing common idioms, traditional knowledge, and elite literary traditions, the memoirs are positioned not just as personal writings but also as archives of Tajik cultural memory.

This article contends that Aini's literary career serves as an example of the persistence of Persianate culture in Central Asia by highlighting the conflict between text and memory, tradition and modernity. Through community, continuity, and cultural resilience, his legacy continues to influence Tajikistan's national narrative and highlights the ability of literature to withstand systemic change.

Keywords

Sadriddin Aini, Persian-Tajik literature, Manuscript culture, Oral tradition, Bukhara cultural history

Introduction

It is well acknowledged that Sadriddin Aini (1878–1954) laid the groundwork for contemporary Tajik literature. From the strict feudalism of the Emirate of Bukhara to the wave of Russian colonialism and the profound ideological shifts of Soviet socialism, he lived through a time of great cultural and political upheaval. More than just personal memories, his memoirs—especially Yaddoshtho (Memoirs) and its English translation, *The Sands of Oxus*—serve as cultural witness, capturing the complex dynamics of Persian-Tajik literary life in a country on the edge of disintegration.[1] They demonstrate how memory and manuscripts became twin strategies for maintaining identity and legacy throughout times of breakdown and rebirth by fusing introspection with ethnographic detail.

There was little access to Persian literary works in Bukhara in the late 19th century. Books were jealously guarded, handwritten, and often inherited. Students relied on unofficial libraries, memorized poetry, and borrowed manuscripts since there were no printing presses.[2] This delicate universe is portrayed with striking clarity in Aini's autobiographical works. The classics—Hafez, Sa‘di, Bedil, and Jami—were more than simply books; they were live resources for teaching language, fostering poetic imitation, and reflecting on ethics. His writings show that cultural persistence depended on the very human abilities of memory, oral transmission, and shared literary enthusiasm rather than institutional continuity.[3]

Through the prism of Aini's memoirs, this study explores the literary culture of Bukhara in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, emphasizing the ways in which oral traditions, manuscript-based schooling, and unofficial poetry societies created a robust Persian-Tajik literary awareness. This essay examines the conflict between classical heritage and contemporary disruption, drawing on Aini's personal views as well as Tajik and Persian studies. It also shows how Aini's trip sheds light on a larger cultural past that is maintained “between manuscript and memory.”

Bukhara: Social Order and Literary Fragility

Bukhara was a very orthodox Islamic emirate that functioned as a protectorate under Tsarist Russia in the latter decades of the 19th century. Religious authority was absolute, social structure was rigorously hierarchical, and the clergy had strict control over education. Aini's memoirs provide a striking picture of

1. Aini, Sadriddin. *The Sands of Oxus: Boyhood Reminiscences of Sadriddin Aini*. Translated by John R. Perry and Rachel Lehr. Mazda Publishers, 1998.
2. Hamedani, Aziza. *Tarikh-e Ejtema’i-ye Bukhara bar Asās-e Yaddasht-hā-ye Sadriddin Aini*. Tehran: Neda-ye Tarikh, 2023.
3. Amonov, Ulugmurod. “About Sadriddin Ainiy’s Tazkirah *Namunayi Adabiyoti Tojik*.” *International Journal of Advance Scientific Research*, vol. 3, no. 06, 2023, pp. 196–199.

a culture characterized by pervasive tyranny and spiritual grandeur. He refers to Bukhara's system of governance as “outright feudalism,” in which the emir and his associates took advantage of the populace via arbitrary taxes and religious manipulation while forming an alliance with dishonest religious leaders.[4] Even though Bukhara was once a major hub for scholarship in the Persianate world, its educational institutions—madrasas and maktabs—had devolved into strongholds of dogmatism and rote learning. This social stagnation also permeated cultural life.

Nevertheless, Persian literature persisted despite this oppressive atmosphere. Persian literature was still highly regarded by the educated elite. Persian, also known as Farsi and then Tojiki, continued to be the most widely used language for academic and literary writing. The main source of access was manuscripts: pupils and professors shared handwritten copies of dictionaries, Sufi comments, ethical treatises, and divāns (poetry collections). According to Aini, a lot of young academics, including himself, obtained their literary knowledge by copying texts, borrowing books from neighbors, or attending poetry salons to hear recitations.[5]

At the heart of this transmission were the masterpieces of Persian poetry at addition to being literary classics, Hafez's ghazals were taught at schools, chanted at parties, and used for introspection. Sa‘di’s moral knowledge established ethical frameworks, while Bedil’s mystical intricacy provided intellectual challenge and comfort. Many people learned scriptures by memory, even those with minimal formal education.[6] Because the male schools were unable to meet his intellectual demands, Aini recounts in *The Sands of Oxus* how these works were crucial to a young boy's cultural development. He talks of reading passages of Bedil and Sa‘di in a ladies' maktab.[7]

Aini's Early Education: Manuscripts and Mentorship

Aini was born in the hamlet of Soktare in 1878. His father, a farmer who had a few priceless manuscripts and encouraged his son to study, had a significant impact on his early exposure to literature. When Aini's father became aware of the inadequate education he was getting, his schooling swiftly shifted to more unusual settings after starting in a local maktab. After being assigned to a girls' school, he first came across Bedil and Sa'ib's lyrics.[8] He left his hometown for Bukhara when he was twelve years old, motivated by an insatiable desire to learn about literature and religion.

4. Aini, *The Sands of Oxus*, pp. 35–43.
5. Ibid., pp. 59–62.
6. Hamedani, vol. 1, pp. 85–90.
7. Aini, *The Sands of Oxus*, pp. 44–49.
8. Ibid., pp. 50–55

Aini studied Arabic and Persian books for more than sixteen years in the Bukharan madrasas. Manuscript culture was ingrained in these schools, where pupils studied by copying books, committing lengthy portions to memory, and discussing ancient comments.[9] According to Aini, there was a thriving literary scene at the madrasas despite the strict orthodoxy of many of the professors. Students made their own replicas of books in the absence of printed materials, sharing and conserving information via group work. A single divān of Hafez or Rumi might change a person, and pupils would frequently spend weeks manually reproducing it.[10]

However, learning took place outside of the classroom as well. The social networks that spread literary knowledge are described in Aini's memoirs. These networks included house meetings, evening conversations, and poetry competitions like bait-bazi (poetic dueling), where contestants recited or wrote rhymes based on a predetermined rhyme.[11] These meetings promoted community, creativity, and a profound understanding of the canon of poetry. Despite his financial difficulties, Aini managed to become involved, sometimes doing menial work in return for food or books, and other times just listening and taking in the information.

Literary Salons and the Poetics of Resistance

The literary salons of Bukhara, which served as vital hubs of cultural continuity and subtly resisting forces, are vividly brought to life by Aini's memories. Away from the severe scrutiny of religious authorities, intellectual and creative interaction thrived at these unofficial meetings, which were often held in the private homes of intellectuals and poets. He describes gatherings at the homes of people like Ahmad Makhdum “Danish” and Sharifjon Makhdum, where traditional Persian poetry was reverently performed and discussions of philosophy, politics, and poetry took place.[12] In a world where political rigidity and later Russification were taking over, these places served as both poetry salons (majalis-e adabi) and places where the Persian language and its literary aesthetics might survive.

These salons were “islands of light in a sea of darkness,” according to Aini, where a new generation of literati could interact with literary traditions without completely giving in to the colonial or religious authorities.[13] These salons facilitated the dissemination of hikmat (knowledge), maktab-i klasiki (classical school) ethics, and adab (literary refinement) via interpretative discourse, improvisation, and poetry performance. The practice of poetic takhallus (pseudonyms), the reciting of Hafez's ghazals, and the

9. Aini, Sadriddin. *Yaddoshtho*, vol. 2. Dushanbe: 1951.
10. Hamedani, vol. 1, pp. 91–96.
11. Aini, *Yaddoshtho*, vol. 1, pp. 102–106.
12. Ibid., pp. 112–118.
13. Ibid., p. 120

discussion of Bedil's philosophical issues evolved into both artistic rituals and subtly critical commentary on the moral decline under feudal rule.

Crucially, oral traditions remained a significant part of these literary lives. Aini provides instances of hilarious metaphors, allegorical phrases, and proverbs that are utilized in poetry salons and everyday speech. Phrases such as *"a needle dropped in the crowd would not touch the ground"* (a metaphor for traffic) or *"the wolf as the shepherd's advisor"* (a metaphor for corruption) reveal a folk knowledge that was both practical, sarcastic, and deeply allegorical.[14] These proverbs anchored high literature in public sensibility by bridging the gap between elite literary discourse and ordinary speech.

In fact, Aini's descriptions reveal a hybrid literary culture that emphasizes memory and manuscript preservation while still honoring the classical canon and being rooted in the vernacular. His autobiographies emphasize how pragmatic cultural survival is. Memory served as a library in situations when printing was not an option. Living rooms became becoming academies when schools were dogmatic. Poetry and satire preserved voices while tyranny silenced them.

Between Tradition and Reform: Aini and the Jadid Movement

Tradition influenced Aini's early years, but the Jadid reform movement's spread across Central Asia paralleled his intellectual awakening. Based on a reinterpretation of Islamic and literary traditions, the Jadids promoted scientific knowledge, educational reform, and cultural rejuvenation. After meeting reformist intellectuals, Aini started to see literature as a vehicle for social change as well as a source of beauty.

Aini's reading of Ahmad Donish's *Navadir-ul-Vaqayi*', a satirical indictment of the Bukharan state and its clerics, was one pivotal moment. According to Aini, this book opened my eyes to its rot and broke my reverence for the social order of Bukhara.[15] His transition from a classical student to a reforming thinker began with this disillusioning experience.

Tahzib al-Sibyan, or "The Refinement of Boys," is a contemporary textbook for children written in Persian and published in 1909. The book emphasized universal knowledge, ethics, and logical thought—radical concepts at the time. The Emir's government reacted quickly. Aini was taken into custody, put in jail, and flogged in public. For the "crime" of writing a progressive textbook, he was given seventy-five lashes.[16]

14. Aini, *The Sands of Oxus*, pp. 85–90.

15. Aini, *Yaddoshtho*, vol. 2, pp. 144–148.
16. Ibid., pp. 150–152.

He lived his whole life with the memories of this pain. However, it also made him more determined to use writing to bring about change.

Aini was banished together with other reformers to Samarkand, which was directly governed by Russia. He started producing articles, poetry, and criticisms under pseudonyms for Persian-language periodicals. Despite being influenced by Persian prosody, these early revolutionary poems gained a fresh sense of thematic urgency as they criticized oppression, lamented the impoverished, and demanded enlightenment. Literature echoed traditional form while embracing contemporary purpose, becoming both a witness and a weapon. [17]

The Collapse of the Emirate and Cultural Rebirth

The Emir of Bukhara was overthrown by the Red Army in 1920. Aini was saved by Bolshevik troops after being imprisoned once again during the regime's last purge. He was transferred to a Russian hospital in New Bukhara and survived—scarred but now free. He later acknowledged that at first, he didn't know much about communism or Lenin, but that "they brought freedom from tyranny" to him.[18]

The Tajik people had a cultural renaissance in the 1920s. Now a renowned scholar, Aini started to influence the Tajiks' developing identity within the context of the Soviet Union. His 1926 collection of *Namuna-yi Adabiyat-i Tajik* (A Sample of Tajik Literature) is his most well-known work from this era. This enormous collection included a millennium of Central Asian Persian literature. Poetry and biographies of more than 300 writers, ranging from Rudaki to Aini's own peers, were included.[19]

Namuna had a national aim, not just a literary one. It was an attempt to demonstrate that the Tajiks had a millennium-old literary tradition despite not having a nation-state. Manuscripts that Aini had copied, borrowed, or committed to memory were a major source of inspiration for his meticulous curation. He essentially laid the groundwork for Tajik literary nationalism by canonizing Persianate writers from Bukhara, Samarkand, and the Zarafshan Valley as Tajik literary forebears.[20]

Language, Literature, and the Soviet Dilemma

After the revolution, Aini played a key role in the Soviet Union's attempts to standardize literature and language in the Tajik Autonomous Republic (1929) and thereafter the Tajik SSR (1930s). A difficult balance had to be struck between accepting the Soviet modernist goal and being true to Persianate literary traditions throughout this new stage of Aini's life. Script reform was one of the main battlegrounds. The Tajiks, like

17. Amonov, pp. 197–199.
18. Aini, *Yaddoshtho*, vol. 4, pp. 230–234.
19. Aini, Sadriddin. *Namūna-yi Adabiyāt-i Tojik*. Moscow, 1926
20. Hamedani, vol. 2, pp. 33–40.

other Persian-speaking peoples, have been writing in Arabic script for millennia. However, the Soviets wanted to break with Islamic culture and pan-Persian identity since they saw this as a theological relic. The late 1920s saw the introduction of a Tajik alphabet based on Latin, and in the 1930s, Cyrillic became required. Perceiving these changes as instruments for wider cultural and literacy advancement, Aini endorsed them.[21] But this had a price: Tajiks were more cut off from the rest of the Persianate world, especially Iran and Afghanistan, where Arabic script was still used.

Aini bemoaned this break later in life. He made the case that "language must not be orphaned from its ancestral roots" in one of his last works, citing the Persian classical heritage as the source of Tajik literary power.[22] Aini maintained to use Persian proverbs, idioms, and poetic forms in his Soviet-era works even after switching to new scripts. Despite having communist ideas, his book *Odina* (1924) largely references Persian tale narrative systems, and his characters often use poetry or references to classical poets.[23]

Much of Aini's mature work was characterized by the difficulty of balancing contemporary socialist objectives with Persian literary legacy. He was hailed by Soviet officials as a model writer who supported ideological objectives. However, Aini carefully kept past forms and ideas beneath her public persona. His *Yaddoshtho*, an epic in prose that provides in-depth depictions of pre-Soviet life, Sufi customs, literary gatherings, and manuscript culture, stands out as a subtly critical work. Despite being published during the Stalinist period, it lacks many of the structural characteristics of socialist realism. Rather, it is reminiscent of the Persian tazkira tradition, which combines elements of ethical reflection, cultural record, and autobiography.[24]

Memory as Archive: The Function of Yaddoshtho

Yaddoshtho (Memoirs), written in the 1940s and early 1950s, was Aini's last and most extensive work. It spans five volumes and tells the story of a generation's collective life as well as his own, and it has been rightly referred to as *"an encyclopedia of Persian-Tajik cultural memory."*[25] Aini frequently uses metaphors of fragility and preservation, describing manuscripts as "lamps in the dark" and village scholars as "trees rooted in forgotten soil." [26] Aini emphasizes the power of memory to outlast material decay in his portrayal of a blind old man retelling the *Shahnameh* or a poor farmer reciting Hafez by heart. He contends that oral transmission of knowledge is not inferior to the written—it is the essence of cultural continuity.[27]

21. Matini, Jalal. "Sadriddin Aini, the Persian Language and Tajikistan." *Parsiana*, 1987.
22. Aini, *Yaddoshtho*, vol. 5, pp. 201–203.
23. Braginsky, I. S. *Soviet Tajik Literature*. Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1975.
24. Hamedani, vol. 2, pp. 75–80.
25. Ibid., p. 77.
26. Aini, *Yaddoshtho*, vol. 5, p. 210.
27. Ibid., p. 215.

Proverbial knowledge is also emphasized in the memoir. Idioms and proverbs abound, demonstrating how literature permeates both speech and books. Aini illustrates how Persian literary principles permeated Tajik community life by integrating them into situations of daily living, such as a court case, a village disagreement, or a meal. He gives the example of *"zaban-i mardom qalam-i khudast"* (the voice of the people is the pen of God), which, in the Soviet setting, deftly combines socialist ideals with popular tradition while having its roots in classical mystical philosophy.[28]

Aini's Legacy: Post-Soviet Reflections and Enduring Influence

Sadriddin Aini was a national hero by the time he passed away in 1954. He was a Soviet hero, a "People's Writer," and the first president of the Tajik Academy of Sciences. Universities, organizations, and streets were named after him. However, underlying these honors lay a nuanced cultural heritage that has been reexamined in the post-Soviet era.

Aini's dual function as a preserver of Persianate culture and an agent of Sovietization was reexamined by several intellectuals and literary historians in the decades after Tajikistan gained its independence in 1991. Aini has come under fire from certain Iranian academics, like Jalal Matini, for helping to distance Tajiks from the Persian-speaking world.[29] They contend that Aini unintentionally contributed to the Tajiks' isolation from Iran and Afghanistan by endorsing Cyrillicization and adopting a Soviet Tajik identity. Persian literary critics bemoan the fact that script obstacles prevented masterpieces like *Yaddoshtho*, which are written in excellent Persian, from being read in Iran for many years.[30]

Tajik authors and academics have, however, vigorously supported Aini. They note that Tajik literature would not have survived the Soviet 20th century at all without him. Under the guise of "Tajik literature," Aini collected, annotated, and promoted ancient Persian texts, ensuring their institutional survival. "Yaddoshtho is not only a personal record; it is a social archive, a historical mirror, and a literary monument," notes Aziza Hamedani".[31]

His attempts to integrate memory and manuscript culture have been successful. As Tajikistan rediscovers its Persian heritage in the twenty-first century, Aini's writings have evolved into bridges rather than obstacles. Aini's writings are today regarded as works of cultural mediation after being reprinted in fresh editions, translated back into Arabic script, and taught in schools from Dushanbe to Tehran.[32] They serve

28. Aini, *The Sands of Oxus*, p. 182.
29. Matini, pp. 5–8.
30. Ibid.
31. Hamedani, vol. 2, p. 111.
32. Ibid., pp. 112–115.

as a reminder that Persianate identity endured via narrative, poetic tradition, and the drive to remember, and was never restricted to a particular location or script.

Conclusion

Through the lens of his memoirs, Sadriddin Aini's life and work provide a powerful example of literary survival in the face of historical upheaval. Aini brought with him a tradition based on memory, recitation, and moral imagination in addition to literature, from the dusty maktabs of rural Bukhara to the pages of Soviet publications. He opted to preserve the past while influencing the future since he lived at the intersection between modernism and tradition.

Under his leadership, the Persian-Tajik literary legacy was a dynamic continuity that could change to accommodate new languages, scripts, and political beliefs without losing its essence. It was neither a remnant nor a form of resistance. His Yaddoshtho attests to the idea that culture persists in households, discussions, and inherited phrases in addition to institutions.

Aini's legacy serves as an example of intellectual stewardship when we think about the function that literature plays in fostering cultural resilience and nation-building. He created a bridge that allowed a people to carry their history into the present without losing sight of who they were, bridging the gap between document and memory.

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