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The role of Jadid theater in the development of youth spirituality

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Abstract

Purpose: This study aims to analyze the role of Jadid theater in nurturing the spirituality and moral awareness of youth in late 19th to early 20th century Central Asia. Employing a qualitative historical approach, the research is grounded in document and literature analysis of primary and secondary sources such as archival records, published plays, newspapers, and intellectual correspondences from the era.

Research methodology: This study employs a qualitative historical approach through document and literature analysis, utilizing primary and secondary sources such as historical records, plays, newspapers, and writings from late 19th to early 20th-century Jadid intellectuals. It applies descriptive analysis to interpret the content, structure, and ideological elements of theatrical works by figures like Behbudi, Niyozzi, and Fitrat within their historical and socio-cultural context.

Results: The development of modern theater in Central Asia during the Jadid period was marked by the transformation of traditional storytelling into a structured platform for education, national awakening, and moral instruction. Through works by figures like Behbudi, Niyozzi, Avloniy, and Fitrat, theater served as a vehicle to address social issues, promote literacy, and inspire youth spirituality. Despite censorship and limited resources, amateur and later professional troupes sustained the theatrical movement, which eventually included female participation and left a lasting cultural legacy.

Limitations: This study is limited to a historical and document-based analysis of Jadid theater, primarily focusing on the period between the late 19th and early 20th centuries. It does not include empirical data such as interviews with theater practitioners or audience reception studies that could offer additional perspectives on the contemporary legacy of Jadid dramaturgy.

Contribution: This study contributes to understanding how Jadid theater served as a strategic platform for youth spiritual development and national awakening in Central Asia.

Keywords: *Central Asia, Jadidism, Spirituality, Theater*

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1. Introduction

Mahmudkhoja Behbudi once said, “The theater is a school of morality”. Indeed, theater plays an important role in elevating human thought, especially in encouraging young people toward kindness, instilling love for the homeland, appreciation for parents, family, and friendship, and fostering a sense of dedication to their profession (Raxmanova et al., 2024; Sabridin & Bobomuratovna, 2022). That is, it provides people with important life lessons. Therefore, serious attention is being paid to attracting more young people to theaters, creating more performances that depict contemporary heroes, and conveying the tragic consequences of law violations and crime to the future generation through theatrical productions (Gilbert, Baker, Bain, Flood, & Wolbers, 2023). Because not all young people

may fully grasp the essence of certain illegal actions simply by reading or hearing about legal norms. However, the ideas conveyed in plays based on real-life events reach deep into the hearts not only of the youth but also of adults (Kaldybekovich, Hazret, & Raikhan, 2013; Peters, 2017).

The Jadid movement, emerging in late 19th–early 20th century Central Asia, was a powerful catalyst for educational, cultural, and spiritual renewal across the region (Kaldybekovich et al., 2013; Kholbutaevich & Shamsiyevich, 2024). Jadid intellectuals viewed theater not merely as an art form, but as a means to awaken moral consciousness and elevate the spiritual life of youth (Alijonova, 2019). Through dramatic performances, they addressed social shortcomings and planted seeds of personal and national transformation (Sobirovich, 2023). Pioneers like Mahmud Khoja Behbudi, Hamza Hakimzoda Niyoz, Abdulla Avloniy, and Abdurauf Fitrat authored plays tackling issues such as ignorance, superstition, illiteracy, and social injustice (Kizi, 2025b). Their dramaturgy emphasized collective archetypes rather than individual heroes, fostering reflection and empathy in youthful audiences. In doing so, Jadid theater became a conduit for spiritual and ethical formation (Abdullaeva, Gafurova, & Khandamian, 2022).

The strategy of Jadid theater was deeply intertwined with their broader reformist agenda, including the establishment of new-method schools and the founding of newspapers (Badan, 2016). They believed that textbooks alone could not affect the soul; rather, the emotional resonance of drama could instill higher values, national pride, and social awareness among young citizens (Muzaffarovna, 2020; Popov & Karásek, 2021). This study aims to analyze the role of Jadid theater in nurturing the spirituality and moral awareness of youth in late 19th to early 20th century Central Asia. Employing a qualitative historical approach, the research is grounded in document and literature analysis of primary and secondary sources such as archival records, published plays, newspapers, and intellectual correspondences from the era. Descriptive analysis will interpret how theatrical works by Behbudi, Niyoz, Fitrat, and others functioned as vehicles for moral instruction and national awakening. The study will examine narrative structures, ideological frameworks, and performative elements that shaped the spiritual formation of young audiences. Ultimately, this research seeks to elucidate the mechanisms by which Jadid theater catalyzed individual and societal transformation.

2. Literature Review

The Jadids primarily placed great importance on the field of education and upbringing (Kizi, 2025a). They sought to turn the education system into the most crucial link in the development of society. The Jadids attributed the backwardness of development in Central Asia to the misinterpretation of Islam (Nurmatov, Abdrassilov, & Soon, 2022). Therefore, they believed it was necessary to reform the madrasa education system. In 1883, Ismail Gasprinski launched the newspaper “Tarjimon” in the Turkic language and began promoting Jadidist ideas through it. When it was first published, the newspaper came out once a week; from 1903, it was issued twice a week, and starting in 1912, it became a daily publication. Although “Tarjimon” was widely read in Turkestan, it did not become a part of the population’s daily routine.

The reform movements in Istanbul, Paris, and Egypt had a significant influence on the Jadids (Rakhmankulova, Choriev, Yusupova, & Muminov, 2020). After traveling to Istanbul and meeting with individuals who supported cultural reform there, prominent Jadids such as Ismail Gasprinski, Cho‘banzoda, Fitrat, and Mahmud Khoja Behbudi experienced a shift in their views. Throughout history, theater has gone through many stages of development. It is an art form that emerged as a result of religious, magical, and spiritual influences. While the word “theater” initially referred to the place where performances were held, it later came to be used to mean a staged production (Zayniddinova, 2022). Since ancient times, many nations – such as the Greeks, French, and Italians – have contributed to the development of theater.

3. Methodology

This study uses a qualitative historical approach based on document and literature analysis. The research relies on primary and secondary sources such as historical accounts, published plays, newspapers, and

other written records of Jadid intellectual activities between the late 19th and early 20th centuries. Descriptive analysis is applied to examine how the Jadid movement utilized theater as a tool for education, social reform, and national awakening. The approach emphasizes interpreting the content, structure, and ideological elements of theatrical works by Mahmud Khoja Behbudi, Hamza Hakimzoda Niyoz, Abdurauf Fitrat, and others in their historical and socio-cultural context.

4. Result and Discussion

Although the history of theater in Central Asia dates back to ancient times, it developed mainly through the staging of legends and epics passed down from ancestors. Modern forms of theater in the region emerged in the last quarter of the 19th century under the influence of the Jadids (Yusufjonova, 2025). The Jadid movement, which began with educational and upbringing activities, later expanded into the fields of press, theater, and literature. Journalism and magazine publishing developed, numerous printing houses were established, and many books were published. According to Behbudi, a school alone is not sufficient for enlightenment. A nation needs a mirror in which it can see both its flaws and virtues. This truth inspired him to establish theaters and create plays for them. As a result, one of the first works of Uzbek drama, “Padarkush” (“The Parricide”), was created.

In 1911, Behbudi wrote his novel “Padarkush”. “Padarkush” consists of three acts and four scenes and is written in simple language. The story of “Padarkush” takes place among three characters: Boy, a fifty-year-old who believes that everything revolves around money and earning wealth; Domla, who has a modern worldview and tries to explain to Boy that this belief is wrong; and Ziyoli, an educated intellectual who studied at a Russian school. Behbudi expresses his ideas about education and upbringing through the words of the characters Domla and Ziyoli. Despite numerous advice, Boy refuses to send his son to school. As a result, his ignorant son Toshmurod joins street hooligans, kills his own father, and is subsequently exiled to Siberia.

The purpose of staging the play “Padarkush” was to unite all intellectuals in the cause of national interests and to emphasize the importance of educating and nurturing children. The staging of the “Padarkush” drama became a foundation for the development of Uzbek literature. This also increased interest in the theater genre. The drama “Padarkush” was performed in Tashkent in 1913, in Samarkand in 1914, and by the “Turon” theater troupe in Fergana between 1914 and 1916. The play was also staged during revolutionary periods. After “Padarkush”, many amateur theater troupes were established [3.225].

Theater groups were established in the cities of Tashkent, Samarkand, and Kokand, and theater writers and art specialists such as Avloni and Hamza were trained. Between 1911 and 1917, the number of Uzbek stage works written – whose titles are known to specialists – exceeded forty. The Jadids placed great importance on theater. They staged performances in theaters across many cities. The main idea promoted in these performances was to lead the people out of darkness and ignorance. For the Jadids, theater was an unlimited opportunity to convey their ideas to the entire society.

Theater provided the Jadids with an opportunity to create an environment for discussion. In the dramatic works written by Jadid authors, greater emphasis was placed not on the individual personalities of the characters, but on their representation as social types. Overall, socially themed performances featured both positive and negative characters. Each performance had an ideological purpose it aimed to convey to the audience. As a result, the intended goal was achieved, and by the end of the play, the audience would understand the idea presented. At the conclusion of each performance, one of the characters would summarize the main message of the show.

Since there were no professional actors in the theater, the staged works were performed by amateurs. When plays were staged with madrasa students, it was very difficult to find female actors, so in the early days, male actors played female roles. Until 1914, occasionally Armenian or Georgian girls also performed on stage [1.177]. Hamza Hakimzoda Niyoz was one of the Jadids who held an important place in Uzbek literature due to his activities in the field of theater and his contributions to Uzbek

theater. For this reason, the large theater building in Tashkent and many places in Uzbekistan are named after him. His first success in this field was the work “Zaharli hayot yoxud ishq qurbonlari” (“Poisonous life or victims of love”). This work depicts the pure love between two young people and their deaths caused by an ignorant environment.

In Kokand, Hamza Hakimzoda Niyozı wrote the work “Boy ıla Xızmatchı” (“The rich man and the servant”), emphasizing the importance of literacy. In addition, his works titled “Kim to‘g‘ri?” (“Who is right?”), “Tuhmatchilar jazosi” (“The punishment of slanderers”), and “Maysaraning ishi” (“Maysara’s affair”) are among the earliest examples of comedy. His work “Paranji sirlaridan bir lavha yoki yallachilar ishi” (“A scene from the secrets of the veil or the work of the yalla singers”) is a psychological drama. One of the active representatives of the Jadid movement in Tashkent, Abdulla Avloniy, wrote the plays “Pinak”, “Biz va Siz” (“We and You”), “Portugaliya inqilobi” (“The Portuguese revolution”), “Advokatlik osonmi?” (“Is being a lawyer easy?”), and “Ikki muhabbat” (“Two Loves”). In his works, Avloniy revealed the stagnant state of traditional life and addressed harmful habits such as gambling, drawing attention to preventing the lack of education and upbringing. Abdurauf Fitrat had a great influence on the development of theater in Bukhara. On one hand, Fitrat was involved in opening new Jadid schools, and on the other, he was engaged in organizing theaters. Fitrat gained his true fame through his theatrical works. In his theatrical works, Fitrat focused on historical themes and aimed to enlighten the public. He wrote plays such as “O‘g‘uzxon”, “Chingizxon”, and “Temur sag‘anasi”. The main theme of “Chin sevish” and “Hind inqilobchilari” was the independence of India. The play “Hind Inqilobchilari” (“The Indian Revolutionaries”) depicts the struggle against the British in all its difficulties and details. In the play, the theme of love is used as a means to convey the main message.

Fitrat participated in the staging of theatrical works. Another of Fitrat’s theatrical works, “Shaytonning Tangriga isyoni” (“The Devil’s rebellion against God”), was a dramatic short epic. This work explains that the devil did not obey God’s commands. It narrates the story of how the devil, created from fire, was expelled from paradise for refusing to bow to Adam, who was created from clay. The work titled “Abulfayzxon” is the first historical drama in Uzbek literature. In this play, Abulfayzxon’s attempts to ascend the throne and his oppression of the people are depicted critically, and ultimately, his assassination is mentioned. The author emphasized the need to fight against tyranny through the character of Ibrahim.

Due to unfavorable conditions and factors such as censorship, staging theater performances was not easy. The first theatrical performances were organized in private homes and continued for a long time. During the Jadid period, the foundation of theatrical art was firmly established and, despite many Jadids being massacred, it was successfully continued by writers who followed in their footsteps. Mahmud Khoja Behbudi’s novel “Padarkush” demonstrated how powerful the influence of theater can be. Besides Behbudi, many intellectuals such as Abdulla Qori, Abdulhamid Cholpan, Hamza Hakimzoda Niyozı, Abdulla Avloniy, Abdurauf Fitrat, and Munavvar Qori created literary works. Despite pressures and obstacles, theater continued to develop. There were attempts to stage works even if done secretly. Initially performed by amateur groups, these works were later presented to audiences by professional troupes. As society progressed, women also began to take their place in theater and started to demonstrate their significant influence within society through the stage. Theater became an important cornerstone in enlightening the people.

5. Conclusion

In conclusion, it is important to emphasize that Uzbek theater was born as the fruit of the Jadid movement in the form of an enlightening theater. The main goals of the theater, as stated in the “Nizom” of the “Turon” troupe – the first Uzbek creative ensemble – were: a) to develop a serious attitude towards stage performances and philanthropy among the population, and b) to present performances to the people and provide them with wholesome entertainment... [4.3]. Overall, an important feature of Jadid theater and dramaturgy was its ability to portray family life in a way that touched the human heart, educating it intellectually, and thereby celebrating the ideas of national awakening that were gaining momentum in

society. The torch lit by the Jadid enlighteners continued to illuminate the paths of art, introducing new ideas and aspirations into theater and dramaturgy until around the 1930s.

5.1 Limitations and Future Study

This study is limited to a historical and document-based analysis of Jadid theater, primarily focusing on the period between the late 19th and early 20th centuries. It does not include empirical data such as interviews with theater practitioners or audience reception studies that could offer additional perspectives on the contemporary legacy of Jadid dramaturgy. Future research may consider a comparative approach by examining how similar educational theater movements evolved in other Islamic or post-colonial societies. Additionally, further exploration of gender roles in early Jadid theater and the gradual inclusion of women on stage would provide valuable insights into the social dynamics of reform-era performance culture.

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