



## THE UZBEK MODERNIST, ABDULLAH QODIRIY. A WRITER AND HIS NOVEL

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**Annotation:** This article discusses the life and works of Abdulla Qodiriy

**Keywords:** Jadid, Bygone Days, Modernist, *The Scorpion from the Mihrab*

Abdulla Qodiriy was born on April 11, 1894 and died in Tashkent in October of 1938 as a victim of Joseph Stalin's purge. Qodiriy represented one of the troika of great Central Asian reformers— along with Abdulrauf Fitrat and Cholpan— largely responsible for the efflorescence of cultural activity after the Bolshevik Revolution of 1917. During this period, Central Asia witnessed a deluge of intellectual pursuits that produced a standardized Uzbek prose, a canon of Uzbek literature to include novels, poems, short stories and plays that brought attention to the need for Central Asian society to modernize in order to gain self-rule— a phenomenon, at times as a pejorative, referred to as the Jadid movement. The Jadids beginning in the mid to late nineteenth century sued for reform of common customs and practices along modern lines in order to achieve a society on the same level of development as the Ottoman and Russian Empires, and later modern Turkey and Soviet Russia. With the fall of autocratic rule, the Jadids initially saw the Bolshevik revolution as an opportunity to advance their agenda.





Qodiriy is arguably the most beloved among those who perished in 1938. His two main novels, *O'tgan Kunlar* and *Mehrobdan Choyon*, or *The Scorpion from the Mihrab*, standardized Uzbek prose and provided the benchmark for aspiring Uzbek authors. His plays, such as “The Pederast”, depicted the moral degradation of Central Asian society, in this case through the trials and tribulations of a Bacha, or dancing boy, and the effects this predatory practice has on the life of a young man. Jadid plays were especially important as they represented an oral tradition recognizable to a largely illiterate society. A salient point to all of Qodiriy’s work is that he drew upon the struggles of the common man, or woman, in Central Asia rendering them into a language evocative, humorous, and often dripping with sarcasm.

Abdulla Qodiriy was very much his own man. He came from a family of simple means and through his own force of intellect managed to achieve both a Madrassah and modern education, most notably through the Russian model. Comfortable in Turkic, Persian, Arabic, and Russian, Qodiriy began his career as a scribe for a Tashkent merchant but found his way to the Briusov Institute to study journalism in Moscow by 1924.

After the publication of *O'tgan Kunlar* in 1926 Qodiriy found himself in jail perhaps for using his characteristic wit against the First Secretary of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of Uzbekistan in the journal *Mushtum* (The Fist), where he served as Editor. Post arrest Abdulla Qodiriy refrained from working in the press, but engaged in work as a translator. He is well known for having translated Gogol’s *Marriage* and Anton Chekhov’s *the Cherry Orchard*. Throughout the 1930s he continued to write and eventually became a delegate to the Uzbekistan Writer’s Union. In keeping with his practice of drawing upon the tableau of life presented by the common man, Qodiriy traveled to the collective farms of the UzCCP in order to write *Obid Ketman*, 1932-1934 in serial form. His work was eventually vilified as nationalistic and antagonistic to Soviet rule and he was arrested in 1937. Between October 4th and 5th 1938 Abdulla Qodiriy died alongside many of his fellow compatriots in a mass execution of Uzbek intellectuals– mostly under the accusation of nationalism.

Such is the emotional dissonance of Abdulla Qodiriy’s work and life he was the first of those murdered in 1938 to be rehabilitated in 1956. Almost every Uzbek of that generation can remember the time they were allowed to own a copy of *O'tgan Kunlar*. After Uzbek independence the Jadids received wide acceptance as the progenitors of artistic expression and martyrs for the fierce convictions they attempted to champion.



Perhaps no other literary work captures the soul of the Central Asian people than the magisterial work by the Jadid reformer Abdulla Qodiriy, *O'tgan Kunlar*. Largely accepted as the first novel in the Uzbek language, Qodiriy speaks to the heart of the Uzbek people through a classic tale in the Turko-Persian-Arab tradition, framed within a 19th century historical milieu. Written between 1920 and 1926, Qodiriy attempted to both preserve a cultural heritage under threat and shape an emerging social identity during a time of contending national narratives.

Initially the novel was published in serial form beginning in 1926 and met with critical acclaim. Tragically Abdulla Qodiriy fell victim to Stalin's purges in 1938 with a heavily redacted version of the novel published in 1939. After a brief shelf life the novel was banned throughout the Soviet Union until after Stalin's death. Abdulla Qodiriy was the first Uzbek Jadid from his period to be rehabilitated in 1956 and in 1958 *O'tgan Kunlar* was republished with a print run of 80-90,000 copies. Anecdotally, the late Abdullaziz Muhammadkarimov as a young man was present during the release of the 1958 printing of the banned novel and stated that Uzbeks waited for days in lines at Tashkent bookstores hoping to purchase a copy of the book. The version currently under review is the reprint issued in 1996 after the Independence of Uzbekistan and represents the 1926 publication in its entirety.

The story's narration revolves around two star-crossed lovers attempting to navigate the seismic historical changes wracking nineteenth century Khanate of Kokand. The author in effect deconstructs his own society's collective memory of the internal conditions that led to Russian conquest through the travails of Otabek and Qumush. In turn the reformist delivers an invective to his own generation imploring them to act to save a heritage imperiled by Bolshevik social reform.

Qodiriy's modernist Muslim agenda persists throughout the novel. Muslim modernists from the mid 19th to the early 20th century drew largely upon the Ottoman Empire, the nations of Europe and the Russian Empire as models for modernization— yet insisting that their imagined polity remain within a Muslim framework of their own creation. The character of Otabek clearly represents Qodiriy's own world-view. Our hero witnesses internecine fighting and corruption within the Kokand Khanate, the local population's obsession with superstition and their complete lack of understanding of the basic tenets of Islam, and the tragic consequences of what Otabek deems social conventions in need of reform.

Qodiriy through his renowned wit and sarcasm captures the zeitgeist of mid-nineteenth century Turkistani society. Venal leadership wracked with corruption, inter-ethnic infighting between sedentary and nomadic peoples, social practices from



the simple man on the street to the court of Khudayar Khan all provide the backdrop to a tragic love story symbolic of Central Asia's own loss of purity. Effectively delivering to his readership an inward-looking instructive outlining the historical, cultural and spiritual reasons for Turkistan's inevitable loss of sovereignty to the Russian conquest of Central Asia.

The novel has great value as a cultural artifact for those interested in learning about a little known area of the world. Many westerners are only exposed to the economic and political aspects of Uzbekistan with little attention paid to the history, the culture, the language and the literature of a region that enjoys a vast ecumenical heritage breathtaking in its scope. The publication of *O'tgan Kunlar* allows for the entrance of Uzbek letters into the canon of world literature and informs western societies of a deeper understanding of a people who have contributed great advances to humankind— as Qodiriy hoped for in his own audience.

Still today the legacy of the Jadids is felt primarily among the educated elite of Uzbekistan. Every student in both middle school and university is required to read at least a few passages of *O'tgan Kunlar*. The descendants of the Jadids hold various positions of importance ranging from members of academia to public servants. We see especially the continuation of Uzbek theater, music and literature through those who wish to see the ideas of their forefathers kept alive for future generations.

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