



## LANGUAGE AND NATION ISSUES IN THE WORKS OF MAHMUDKHOJA BEHBUDI

**Xulkaroy Abdusalomova Kodirjon qizi**

3rd-year student, Philology and Language Teaching (Arabic Language Track),  
International Islamic Academy of Uzbekistan, Tashkent, Uzbekistan

**Muminova Dilshoda**

Scientific supervisor: Associate Professor of the  
Department of Uzbek and Foreign Languages  
abdusalomovaxulkaroy5@gmail.com  
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### Abstract

This article examines the conceptual intersection of linguistic reform and national identity in the literary and journalistic corpus of Mahmudkhoja Behbudi (1875–1919), a foundational figure of the Jadidist movement in Central Asia. By analyzing his seminal drama *Padarkush* (The Patricide), his pedagogical textbooks, and numerous articles published in *Oyna* and *Samarqand*, this study elucidates Behbudi's vision of "nationhood" as a construct inextricably linked to literacy, linguistic polyphony, and educational modernization. Behbudi argued that the survival of the Turkestanian people in the face of colonial encroachment and internal stagnation depended on the synthesis of traditional Islamic values with modern European administrative and scientific knowledge. Central to this was his "four languages" doctrine, which positioned linguistic proficiency as both a defensive mechanism against cultural erosion and a tool for socio-political liberation. The article employs a socio-historical and philological analysis to argue that Behbudi used language not merely as a medium of communication, but as a primary site for the construction of a modern, enlightened national consciousness.

**Keywords:** Mahmudkhoja Behbudi, Jadidism, National Identity, Linguistic Reform, Turkestan, Enlightenment, *Padarkush*.

### Introduction

At the dawn of the 20th century, Central Asia stood at a precarious crossroads between the waning influence of traditional feudal structures and the mounting pressures of Russian imperial hegemony. In this volatile atmosphere, the Jadidist movement emerged as a transformative force, seeking to reform society through "Usul-i Jadid" (the New Method) of education. Among the luminaries of this movement, Mahmudkhoja Behbudi remains the most influential ideologue. For Behbudi, the concept of the "nation" (*millat*) was not a static ethnic





category but a dynamic project that required active cultivation through enlightenment (*ma'rifat*).

Behbudi's intellectual project was fundamentally linguistic. He recognized that the linguistic fragmentation and widespread illiteracy of the Turkestanian population were the primary obstacles to progress. This article explores how Behbudi framed language as the bedrock of national sovereignty, analyzing his strategies for educational reform and his pioneering use of drama to awaken the collective consciousness of his compatriots.

Scholarly interest in Behbudi has evolved significantly since the late 20th century. Edward Allworth [1] highlights Behbudi's role in establishing the first modern Uzbek drama, viewing *Padarkush* as a manifesto for social change. Adeb Khalid [2] provides a comprehensive historical context, arguing that Jadidism was a response to the "crisis of the old" and that Behbudi was a visionary who bridged the gap between the ulema and the modern intelligentsia. Uzbek scholars such as Begali Qosimov [3] and Sirojiddin Ahmad [4] have focused on the philological nuances of Behbudi's writings, emphasizing his contribution to the development of the modern Uzbek literary language. However, there remains a need for a deeper synthesis of how his linguistic theories directly informed his nation-building efforts, particularly in the context of the "language of instruction" debates that dominated the early 1900s.

This study utilizes a qualitative, hermeneutic approach to analyze Behbudi's primary texts. The primary sources include:

**1. Dramatic Works:** *Padarkush* (1911).

**2. Journalism:** Articles from *Oyna* (The Mirror) and *Samarqand*.

**3. Educational Manuals:** *Kitabat ul-atfol* and *Muntakhabi jug'rofiyayi umumiy*.

The analysis focuses on recurring themes of linguistic competence, the definition of the "patriot," and the critique of traditionalist stagnation. By situating these texts within the socio-political landscape of early 20th-century Turkestan, the research identifies the causal link Behbudi established between language acquisition and national survival.

### 1. The Linguistic Manifest: "Two Languages are Not Enough"

Behbudi's most radical contribution to the discourse on nationhood was his pragmatism regarding language. In his famous article, "Ikki emas, to'rt til lozim" (Not Two, but Four Languages are Necessary), published in *Oyna*, he argued that the modern Turkestanian must be polyglot to navigate the complexities of the era.

He wrote:





"To progress, we must know the language of the religion (Arabic), the language of the state (Russian), the language of our ancestors (Turki/Uzbek), and the language of literature and history (Persian)" [5; 12].

This was not merely a call for multi-lingualism; it was a strategic map for national empowerment. Behbudi understood that if the local population remained ignorant of Russian, they would be forever excluded from the administrative and legal systems governing them, leading to total dispossession. Conversely, losing Arabic or Turki would result in the loss of spiritual and cultural identity. Thus, the "nation" for Behbudi was a multi-dimensional entity that stood at the intersection of these four linguistic spheres.

## 2. *Padarkush* and the Tragedy of Ignorance

In his 1911 drama *Padarkush* (The Patricide), Behbudi uses the theater as a "school for adults" to illustrate the devastating consequences of linguistic and educational neglect. The plot, centered on a son who murders his father due to a lack of moral and secular education, serves as a metaphor for the self-destruction of a nation that refuses to modernize.

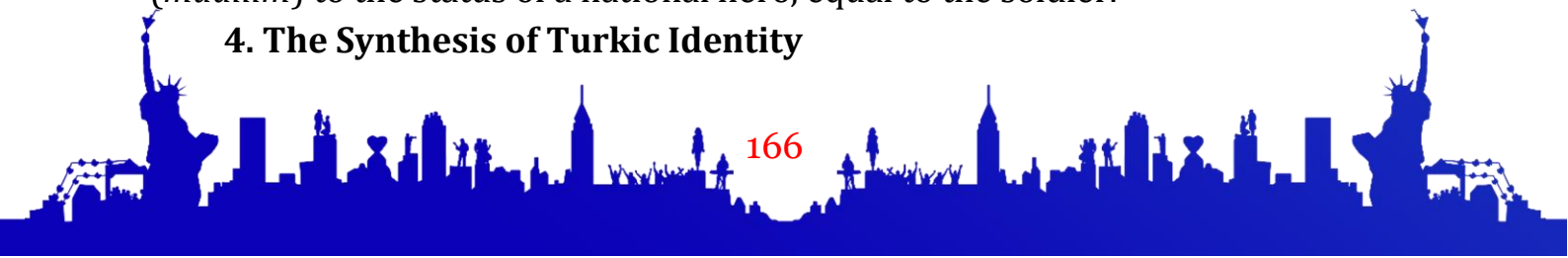
Behbudi contrasts the "ignorant" wealthy class with the "enlightened" youth. Through the character of the Zig-zag-patterned intellectual, Behbudi voices his critique: "A nation without schools and without a press is a nation without a future" [6; 24]. The linguistic register of the play is significant; Behbudi deliberately used a more accessible, vernacular-inflected Turki to ensure the message reached the masses, moving away from the ornate, Persianized style of the courtly elite. This shift marked a critical step in the "democratization" of the national language.

## 3. Education as National Defense

Behbudi's pedagogical works, such as *Kitabat ul-atfol* (Children's Writing), were designed to standardize the language and provide a curriculum that integrated modern geography and history with traditional ethics. He argued that the definition of a "nation" is directly tied to its "homeland" (*vatan*), and one cannot love a homeland they do not understand geographically or historically.

In his articles, Behbudi frequently lamented the state of the *maktabs* and *madradas*. He asserted that the traditional system produced "reciters" rather than "thinkers." He wrote, "The progress of the world is measured by the pen, not the sword. We must arm our children with the languages of science" [7; 88]. By framing education as a form of "national defense," Behbudi elevated the teacher (*muallim*) to the status of a national hero, equal to the soldier.

## 4. The Synthesis of Turkic Identity





While Behbudi was a proud son of Samarkand and wrote fluently in Persian and Turki, he was a staunch advocate for a broader Turkic unity. He saw the "Turki" language as the unifying thread for the disparate tribes of Central Asia. However, his "Turkism" was inclusive and regional rather than exclusionary. He viewed the development of a standardized literary Uzbek language as essential for creating a cohesive national public sphere where political and social issues could be debated.

### Conclusion

Mahmudkhoja Behbudi's life and work represent the intellectual awakening of Turkestan. For him, the "nation" was an edifice built on the pillars of linguistic proficiency and modern education. He successfully argued that language is the primary tool for social reform; it is the means by which a people transitions from being a "population" to becoming a "nation."

Behbudi's legacy lies in his courageous insistence that the preservation of identity does not require the rejection of modernity. On the contrary, he showed that only through the mastery of modern tools—including the languages of the colonizer and the global community—could a nation hope to reclaim its agency. His tragic death in 1919 silenced a great voice, but his linguistic and nationalistic blueprints provided the foundation upon which the modern Central Asian states were eventually built.

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