



“A City with two Lifetimes”: Urban Poetics of Early Soviet Stalinobod

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Abstract. At the beginning of the 20th century, Dušanbe was only a small rural settlement in ruins. However, in 1924, it was designated as the capital of the Tajikistan Autonomous Soviet Socialist Republic, which was part of the Uzbek Soviet Socialist Republic until 1929, when it became independent. The city then became the Soviet capital known as Stalinobod from 1929 to 1961 and underwent rapid urban expansion, becoming a political and intellectual hub in Central Asia, the Persian-speaking world, and the Soviet Union. This paper explores how the rapid and deep urbanization of early Soviet Dušanbe profoundly influenced the literary production of the time, and how the textualization of the city was coeval with the city's birth. By analysing a selection of poems where the transformation of the once mud-walled village into a capital city is depicted, in particular *Kučai Lenin* (“Lenin Avenue”) by Boqi Rahimzoda, the odes by Muhammadjon Rahimi, *Dušanbe* (“Dušanbe”) and *Dar borai Dušanbe* (“About Dušanbe”), and Sarvar's *Rubojjot* (“Quatrains”), this study examines the interplay between literary texts and the urbanization of Stalinobod/Dušanbe, underlining how literature serves as a mean to read the urban history of a city in transformation, and as a vehicle to express modern ideas in the framework of a deeply changing Tajikistan.

Keywords: Tajik literature, Persian literature, Stalinobod, Dušanbe, urban history.

Šahri mo ham xudamon barin javoni navras bud.
 “The city was as young and fresh as we were”.
 Mirsaid Miršakar

Introduction: Harmonizing Container and Contents

“The Soviet architects (...) quickly understood that the revolution was in danger of being ineffective if container and contents were not in profound harmony” (Kopp 1971, x).¹ These words used by Ionel Schein to introduce the book *Town and Revolution: Soviet Architecture and City Planning 1917-1935* by Anatole Kopp show a dynamic relationship between space and the society that inhabits it, as thought by the architects who oversaw designing the concept of a new Soviet architecture. The interplay between new strategies of planning cities in the Soviet era and the political and cultural contents of the Revolution is particularly relevant in the case of Dušanbe, known as Stalinobod from 1929 to 1961.² When the place was designated as the capital of the newly established Soviet Republic of Tajikistan, it was a small rural settlement and later experienced a rapid urban development which made it the political and intellectual centre of Tajikistan and a proper Soviet capital city.³ The recent foundation and the following growth of Dušanbe is what makes it a unique case. While other cities in Central Asia, such as Samarkand, Bukhara, and Tashkent,⁴ had to cope with the heritage of the past and integrate it with Soviet city-planning policies. Dušanbe was brand new, completely built in the twentieth century, as we will see later in the following pages, describing its transition from village to capital city. Together with a fast urbanization, Stalinobod experienced the formation of an intellectual sphere and became the centre of a new literature characterized by the juxtaposition of Persian literary tradition and Soviet themes and forms. While the development of modern Tajik literature, even if too often marginalized in the literary framework of the Soviet era and within the Persian canon, has been explored relatively in depth,⁵ less attention has been given to how the urban development in Tajikistan deeply influenced the literary production. This paper will shed light on how the textualization of Stalinobod began with the foundation of the city itself, giving rise to an urban narrative aimed at legitimizing the new capital both within the Soviet Union and the

¹ An overview on this relationship on the research of a new architecture in the Soviet era and the ideals of the Revolution in 1920s and 1930s can be found in Khan-Magomedov 1987, and El Lissitzky 1970.

² In 1924 Dušanbe was designated as the capital of the Tajikistan Autonomous Soviet Socialist Republic, which was a part of the Uzbekistan Soviet Socialist Republic until 1929, when it became independent. The city was known as Stalinobod from 1929 to 1961, when, after the process of destalinization, it was renamed Dušanbe. A summary of the history of Dušanbe can be found in Atkin 1996. The architecture of the city has been widely explored, together with the history of architecture in Soviet Tajikistan, in the text Veselovsky et al. 1987.

³ Stalinobod served as the principal centre and the primary site for the development and spread of the Tajik press and literature. Subsequently, other cities emerged as intellectual hubs, including Penjikent, Kulob, Qurghonteppa, Khorogh, and, in particular, Khujand, known at the time as Leninobod (Grassi 2017a, 114). The city was incorporated into the Uzbek SSR during the first territorial delimitation in 1924, but in 1929 it was reassigned to Tajikistan. Regarding the reasons for this change, Evelin Grassi writes: “It is not clear, however, whether this occurred as a partial compensation for the loss of Samarkand and Bukhara or what remains more likely, to enable Tajikistan to reach a population of one million inhabitants, the number required to qualify for the status of a Soviet republic” (Grassi 2017a, 98). On the political role of Leninobod in Soviet Tajikistan, see Roberts 2016.

⁴ The relationship between heritage, the historical configuration of urban structure, and the policies of Soviet city planning in other Central Asian cities has been widely explored. For instance, Mounira Azzout discusses heritage in Bukhara and how it was reinterpreted and preserved during the Soviet era (Azzout 1999), while the case of Samarkand, with particular emphasis on the 1960s–1980s, has been examined by Jonas van der Straeten and Mariya Petrova (van der Straeten & Petrova 2022). Particularly significant is the case of Tashkent, examined in Paul Stronski’s work, as its “Sovietization” served as a model for urban planning across Central Asia (Stronski 2010, 3).

⁵ For exhaustive studies on the development of modern Tajik literature, see Bečka 1968, and Grassi 2017a.

Persianate world.⁶ After a brief overview of the construction of Stalinobod in early Soviet times, the analysis will focus on the literary narratives that contrasts the underdevelopment of “old” Dušanbe with the splendour of the newly established capital. Through an examination of selected texts in Tajik language that compare the past and present of Soviet Dušanbe,⁷ specifically, the poem *Kučai Lenin* (“Lenin Avenue”) by Boqi Rahimzoda, two odes by Muhammadjon Rahimi, *Dušanbe* and *Dar borai Dušanbe* (“About Dušanbe”), both published in 1929 to celebrate the new capital, as well as Sarvar’s *Rubojjot*, published in 1935, this analysis will illuminate the literary history of the place. Indeed, by portraying the city as “a city with two lifetimes”, in Rahimi’s words, this paper ultimately explores how the literary representation of Dušanbe serves as a lens to examine the city’s urbanization and as a mean to express modern ideas.

Building a New City: From Mud-Walled Village to Soviet Capital

In his account *Soviet Tajikistan*, Soviet intellectual Pavel Luknitskij devotes an entire chapter to Stalinobod, and describes the capital of the Republic as a “luxuriant socialist garden city” named after Stalin and built with a deeply through-out plan and characterized by magnificent architecture:

The city is rightly called Stalinabad, because only Bolsheviks could dare to build the capital amidst the flying bullets of the Basmachi at a time when the nearest railway was two hundred and fifty kilometres away; and also because, built according to a deeply thought-out plan, it has become a real socialist garden city, and with every year of new construction is becoming a single, magnificent architectural ensemble moulded by the whole of the surrounding landscape (Luknitskij 1954, 150).

However, what Luknitskij saw during his trip to Tajikistan in 1954 was the result of a rapid and recent urbanization process. The accounts, indeed, portray Dušanbe in the 1920s as a small, rural, mud-walled village, far from being the Soviet capital that Luknitskij described, as Iranian poet Abulqosim Lohuti (1887-1957) recalls in his memoirs:

⁶ My notion of “urban poetics” is elaborated from Gaston Bachelard’s theories on the poetics of space (Bachelard 1964) and from Henri Lefebvre’s theories on the production of space and the connection between the representation of space and its ways of being represented, lived, and perceived. As Lefebvre writes: “The object of knowledge is, precisely, the fragmented and uncertain connection between elaborated representations of space on the one hand and representational spaces (along with their underpinnings) on the other; and this “object” implies (and explains) a subject — that subject in whom lived, perceived and conceived (known) come together within a spatial practice” (Lefebvre 1974, 230). Building on these concepts, I understand the notion of “urban poetics” as the connection between the representation of space and how the represented space functioned as a site of cultural production and textual practice. As far as the Persianate world is concerned, the relationship between space and its representation has been explored in the work of Farshid Emami, who focuses on the case of Safavid Isfahan (see Emami 2018).

⁷ As far as I know, based on the material I collected, in early Soviet Tajikistan, the main language of the literary production was Tajik, which underwent a long process of reform and language planning, changing scripts three times in a few years, from Arabic-Persian to Latin, and then to Cyrillic (see Grassi 2017a). Russian was also present, but at this stage it seems it appeared mainly in secondary sources (for instance, see Braginskij et al. 1961). At the time, the most important literary magazines published in Stalinobod, such as *Baroi Adabijjoti Sotsialisti*, were predominantly in Tajik Persian. There was a clear interest in Russian literature and its authors in these publications, but these were more often translated into Tajik than published in the original Russian. As support for this thesis, statistics on the journals published in Stalinobod indicate that, in 1940, 130 thousand copies were published in the Tajik language, while only one thousand were published in Russian (see *Matbuoti RSS Tojikiston 1928 – 1958. Materialhoi Statistiki*).

It is a joy to look upon the charming city of Stalinabad today, when one remembers the mud-walled village of Dušanbe which stood there some thirty years ago when I arrived (Lahuti 1954, 142).

When the Tajikistan Autonomous Soviet Socialist Republic in 1924 was created within the wider Uzbek SSR, and Bukhara and Samarkand – the two historical Persian-speaking capital cities of Central Asia - were left out from this project and included in Uzbekistan, Dušanbe was appointed as the capital city of Tajikistan.⁸ At that time, Dušanbe absorbed two nearby small settlements, and its expansion started, albeit slowly in the early years. The first steps of the construction of the newly established city of Dušanbe are mentioned by Atkin:

In 1924 the Tajikistan Autonomous Soviet Socialist Republic was created as part of the Uzbekistan Soviet Socialist Republic, and Dušanbe became its capital; the government began functioning there formally in March 1925. As part of this process, Dušanbe was officially redefined as a city, and two nearby villages, Sari Osiyo (Pers. Sar-e Āsiyā) and Shohmansur (Šāh Manšūr), were incorporated into it (Atkin 1996).

After the government settled in the city in 1925, architects and engineers from Moscow, Leningrad, Kiev, Kharkhiv and Odessa and other cities of the Soviet Union arrived in Dušanbe, and in 1930 a first city planning project was published.⁹ Unlike many other cities in Central Asia and the broader Soviet world, Dušanbe was conceived from the outset as an entirely new urban project. Its development did not require the accommodation or integration of any significant pre-existing architectural heritage, allowing planners to implement modernist principles with relatively few constraints. As Stronski underlines:

Even the neighboring Tajik capital of Dušanbe (Stalinabad) had an easier time because it was transformed from a small village settlement into a capital city and, therefore, lacked the historical baggage of being a large city with residents of long standing and an enormous maze of winding streets (Stronski 2010, 229).

⁸ There is an ongoing debate about why Samarkand and Bukhara were excluded from the project of the newly established Tajikistan Autonomous Soviet Socialist Republic. In an unsigned article entitled *Ĉerā markaz dar Dušanbe ast?* (“Why is the centre in Dušanbe?”), published in issue n. 14 of the newspaper *Āvāz-e Tājik* in Samarkand in October 1924, we read that: “Why didn’t Samarkand become the centre of Tajikistan, and why did Dušanbe take its place instead? The first reason Dušanbe became the centre is that Eastern Bukhara has been significantly underdeveloped in terms of education, the economy, and political affairs. It is clear that the population there reaches nearly one and a half million, and they have all been deprived of education and the essential activities needed for their lives. The second reason is that, according to some news, there have been almost two thousand Basmachi and even today some of the Emir’s supporters hold power and govern. The poor population is unaware of their own interests and is still oppressed by the violence and pressure of these despots”. According to this article, Dušanbe was designated as the centre in order to develop the peripheral population of former Eastern Bukhara and to ultimately defeat the Basmachi movement and the remnants of the Emirate. However, the debate surrounding Samarkand, Bukhara, and Dušanbe, as well as the territorial delimitation, has deeper roots, including the creation of a distinct Tajik identity among Persian speakers and Uzbeks in Central Asia. For a comprehensive overview of the various perspectives in this debate, see Khalid 2015. After Dušanbe was appointed as the capital city of the Tajikistan Autonomous SSR, the intellectuals and politicians demanded the “lost cities” back, without success (see Bergne 2007).

⁹ For a comprehensive history of the architectural projects of Dušanbe since 1925 and a wider perspective on the development of Tajik architecture in the Soviet era, see Veselovsky et al. 1987.

Alongside urban development, the intellectual milieu of Dušanbe flourished. In this period, the city saw the formation of an intense and active intellectual network. The first writers' organizations were founded together with the first movements of urban expansion which affected the city: in 1930, under the direction of the Communist Party, the Association of Proletarian Writers of Tajikistan was established, and in 1933 the Union of Tajik Writers was founded (Hitchins 2018).¹⁰ In parallel, a literary representation of the newly built city starts to develop. The writing of Dušanbe goes hand in hand with the urbanization of the city itself, and both mirror each other within the framework of a rapidly growing urban environment.

The common trait of these representations lies in their depiction of Dušanbe's past. Indeed, in the construction of a literary narrative about Dušanbe, the poets underline the conditions of backwardness, ignorance, and oppression experienced by the Tajiks in the previous eras, referring in particular to the period under the Emirate of Bukhara (1785-1920).¹¹ The idea of the liberation of Tajikistan after the October Revolution, therefore, is a prominent theme in Tajik Soviet literary production, and the fil rouge that connects different literary genres and forms. This motif influences the poetic depictions of early Dušanbe, portraying the city as created from the mud and from the conflicts of the previous eras. An example of this rhetoric is given by poet Boqi Rahimzoda (1910-1980),¹² who described the foundation of the main road in Dušanbe in his poem *Kūčai Lenin* ("Lenin Street").

Bayni tufoni dudu otašu tir¹³
 Tarhi šahri kašida šud, ěron,
 Joi Dušanbei nazarnogir
 Šahri nav, poytaxti Tojikon.

Mex kūbidavu tanob zadand:
 -Kūčai markazii šahr ast in!
 Dast dar kor bošitob zadand,
 Kūča šud, kučai ba nomi Lenin.

Guft šaxse ba ě'tirozi tamom:
 In qamišzoru loju teppaju jar
 Nabovad heč loiqi in nom,
 Fikri xudro digar kuned, digar!

¹⁰ For a complete account of the history of writers' association in Tajikistan in the Soviet era, see Nabiev, 2004.

¹¹ The cruelty experienced by the Tajiks under the Emirate of Bukhara is a theme in several literary works in early Soviet Tajik literature. And while attention is given to the conditions of Tajikistan in that period, some authors focus on the depiction of life in pre-revolutionary Bukhara, such as Sadriddin Ayni (1878-1954), Payrav Sulaymoni (1899-1933), and Jalol Ikromi (1909-1993). Indeed, a significant part of the intelligentsia that settled in Dušanbe was from Bukhara and spent their formative years in the city, where they got acquainted with revolutionary ideas (see Bečka 1968, and Grassi 2014). Therefore, the narratives of Dušanbe and Bukhara are closely connected. Indeed, the cities of Samarkand and Bukhara, remained a prominent theme in Tajik literature, and their textualization coexists with the literary depictions of Dušanbe/Stalinobod. See, for instance, Grassi 2017b.

¹² Boqi Rahimzoda (1910-1980) was born in Sorbogh and educated by his father, himself an amateur poet and teacher. After his death, the young poet worked in a cotton mill and later moved to Samarkand to complete his studies. He devoted himself to teaching and poetry, portraying in his writing everyday life, socialist progress, and the friendship among Soviet peoples (Bashiri 2011, 263).

¹³ This text and Rahimi's odes were taken from editions published in Cyrillic script and transliterated by the author according to the system mentioned in Lago 2024.

(Kirom 1970)

Amidst the storm of smoke, fire, and bullets,
The plan of a city was drawn, comrades,
Dušanbe, a place without attractions
It is a new city, the capital of the Tajiks.

They planted stakes, stretched ropes
-This will be the city's main street!
They got to work immediately,
and it became a road, Lenin Street.

Someone in complete disagreement said:
"This is a reedbed, it's mud, it's a hill, it's a ravine,
it can never be worthy of its name.
Change your mind, change it!"

In Boqi Rahimzoda's poem, the once small village of Dušanbe is described as a place that was once insignificant and devastated by the "storm of smoke, fire, and bullets" of the civil war that followed the October Revolution, when the Emir of Bukhara fled to the site as a last attempt to defeat the Red Army.¹⁴ But then, a "new city" (*šahri nav*) was created to be the capital city of the Tajiks, and the main street was built in a location that used to be "mud". As Tajikistan is represented as one of most recent republics of the Soviet world, or, in Lohuti words, "the fresh flower of the garden of Leninism" (Lohuti 1979, 158), the concept of Dušanbe as "new" (*nav*), "fresh" (*toza*), and "young" (*javon, navras*) resonates throughout Tajik literary production.

Moreover, this poem by Boqi Rahimzoda, devoted to Lenin Street (now Rudaki Street), is an illustrative example of how the theme of construction occupies a central place in early Tajik literary production. Rahimzoda, like many poets of his generation, depicts Dušanbe/Stalinobod as no longer being peripheral, beginning from a physical and geographical perspective: Lenin Street, the first main artery built in Stalinobod, becomes both a symbol of the arrival of the effects of the October Revolution in Dušanbe and the concrete means through which this transformation took place. Indeed, Tajik poets of the Soviet era devoted odes to the construction of streets and railways that connected Tajikistan to other parts of the world, creating a poetics of infrastructure meant to celebrate the country's urbanization.

Celebrating the New Capital: Rahimi's 1929 Odes

The rapid urbanization of the city led to the practice of writing panegyrics devoted to Dušanbe, aimed at legitimizing the city within the wider framework of the Soviet Union. A clear example of these odes are two poems by Muhammadjon Rahimi (1901-1968),¹⁵ written in 1929, as soon as

¹⁴ See note 16.

¹⁵ Muhammadjon Rahimi (1901-1968) was born in the Emirate of Bukhara and settled in Dušanbe in the 1920s. He started his career as a lyrical poet, deeply inspired by the forms and themes of the Persian literary canon, and later moved to revolutionary poetry, even though he never completely left classical forms and motifs (Bashiri 2002, 257 and Grassi 2008).

Tajikistan became an independent Republic. In the first panegyric, entitled *Dar Borai Dušanbe* (“About Dušanbe”), offers a vivid depiction of the condition of the village before the Revolution:

Rohi kanori handaqi vayronai qadim,
 Dar bayni kūhhoi balandu garontan,
 Xolī ču rūhi mumsiku ur”ēn čun jatim,
 Kajju kilebu pešgahaš tiravu tuman.

(...)

To andarun šavī du ba du, toqa-toqa, juft
 Istoda xonahoi sijah zi dud.
 Inak haqiqatest, ki natvon baro nuhuft,
 In son xarobahoi vatani tojikon bud.

The road along the moat of ancient ruins,
 Among tall mountains, made of granite,
 Empty like the soul of a miserly, naked like an orphan,
 Winding and bent, and its throne dark.

(...)

If you entered in there,
 Two by two, in pairs, in lines,
 You would see ruined houses made black by the smoke.
 This is the true, that cannot be hidden,
 These ruins were once the homeland of the Tajiks.

In the first part of the poem, Dušanbe is shown as an extremely ruined place: the village, indeed, saw extensive damages in the civil war that followed the Russian Revolution. Moreover, in the description of Dušanbe’s conditions, the poet personifies the village, since it became the stronghold of the last Emir of Bukhara who fled there in 1920 to escape the Red Army, and who used Dušanbe as his base to organize his resistance against the Bolshevik forces. The village, then, became the symbol of the last, surviving power of the Emirs, and later, of the Basmachi, who sieged and occupied the city in 1921-22.¹⁶ In the same way, after the conquest by the Red Army and the creation of a Soviet Republic in Tajikistan, Dušanbe also became a symbol of the defeat of the Emirs and the Basmachi. The poet then describes the conditions in the new Dušanbe, portraying its new era of

¹⁶ The phases of the conquest of Dušanbe by the Red Army are clearly explained by Atkin: “The civil war that followed the Russian Revolution caused extensive damage in Dušanbe. The last amir of Bukhara, Sayyed ‘Ālem Khan, fled to Dušanbe at the end of August 1920 to escape advancing Red Army forces from Tashkent. For the next half-year, he used Dušanbe as a base for directing his fight against the communists. The Red Army took Dušanbe on 21 February 1921; the amir fled farther east and eventually reached Afghanistan. Basmachi forces besieged the communist garrison in Dušanbe twice in the fall and winter of 1921-22 (...). The second siege, commanded by Enver Pasha, was successful, and Dušanbe fell in February 1922. The village remained in Basmachi hands until July of that year, when the Red Army retook it (...). As a result of the turmoil the population of the town declined from 3,140 in 1920 to 283 in 1924. Most of its buildings had been destroyed during the civil war; only about forty houses were still standing in 1924” (Atkin 1996).

knowledge and prosperity, which transformed it from a “village” (*deha*) into a “city” (*šahr*), a contrast that shaped the narrative between the old and the new Dušanbe:

Šahri du umr dida, Dušanbeš nomi ūst
 Ravšantarin muxiti xaēt astu soxtomon.
 Purmavj dar sadoi zamon ětiriomi ūst,
 Dar bayni xalqhoi jahoni sovetiěn.

Vay deha nest, šahri navobodu xurram ast,
 Vay sad hazor odami davri navoinist,
 Ĕraš qarib to ba dusad miljon odam ast,
 Bayroqdori pešvari fathi leninist.
 (Rahimi 1978, 51)

A city that saw two lifetimes, its name is Dušanbe,
 The brightest environment of life and buildings.
 Its honour resonates in the voice of time,
 Among the populations of the Soviet world.

This is not a village, this is a flourishing and prosperous city,
 It has a hundred thousand of the new era.
 Its comrades are almost two hundred million people
 Who hold the flag the progress of Lenin’s victory.

In this passage, Dušanbe is depicted as a “city that saw two lifetimes” (*šahri du umr dida*), with its dark and ruined past contrasted against a poetics of luminosity and light that symbolizes the Soviet present. This “brightest environment of life and buildings” (*ravšantarin muxiti xaēt astu soxtomon*). according to Rahimi’s portrayal, is now a newbuilt capital city within a broader context, and it claims its own place in history and in the Soviet Union. The poet refers to the city’s “comrades” (*ěr*) across the Soviet world, giving the ode an internationalist tone. One of the central themes in shaping Dušanbe as a capital is its role as Soviet Dušanbe, a city no longer seen as peripheral but as an integral part of a larger federation. Rahimi’s odes – and, more generally, the urban narratives of Soviet Dušanbe – are imbued with this concept. The poet describes how all the other populations contributed to the construction of the new city:

Inak zi sangi marmari guldori az metall
 Har jo saroju qasri tamadduni ū baland,
 Tahsil mekunand dar ū bistu du milal
 Bahri binoi kommunism naqša mekašand

Šod SSSR, ki Tojikistonaš xuš olam ast,
 Ham ūst ěvari hamai mulk dar jahon,
 Nomaš ba komi xalq beh az šahdu foram ast,
 Ū davlatist a”zamu ozodu jovidon.
 (Rahimi 1978, 52)

Here from the marble stones adorned with flowers of metal,
 Everywhere the palace of civilization is high,
 There twenty-two countries study.
 They project plans to building of communism.

Might the SSSR be satisfied, because Tajikistan is a beautiful land
 And it helps every other country in the world
 Its name is sweet as honey to every good population
 It is a great, free, eternal country.

In the opening verses of this passage, the poet describes the architectural development and embellishment of Stalinobod, depicting the city as “marble stones adorned with flowers of metal” (*sangi marmari guldori az metall*), showing its transformation into a luxuriant, beautifully decorated, modernist city. The physical construction of the new buildings is paralleled with the city’s alignment to the ideals of the October Revolution, as diverse populations take part in “drawing the plan for the building of communism” (*bahri binoi kommunism naqša mekašand*). This collective effort, in which different peoples participate in the construction of communism, also reflects the simultaneous process of the Tajik nation’s formation. The building of internationalism went hand in hand with the shaping of a Tajik national identity,¹⁷ conceived as cohesive and modern but also as a vital part of a wider Soviet and international network. As in the previous excerpts, here the newborn Republic of Tajikistan is represented as a part of the Soviet Union, and not merely a land at the periphery. The same themes of internationalism and renovation are present in the second poem on the new capital city, written in 1929 by Rahimi, entitled *Dušanbe* (“Dušanbe”). The future of the city is indeed portrayed as becoming a “new Leningrad”.

De Dušanbe kūhna bud, imrūz
 Šud ba čašmi jahonēn firūz
 Gūšai jahli odat-oin bud
 Saxt ta’siri ūst monda hanūz.
 To biēbad najot az in mūhlak,
 Sarfī ta’miri ūst har šabu rūz
 Kunun, ēy faqiru asiri dirūza,
 Šam’i doniš dar in Vatan afrūz!
 Šavad obod čun namuna ba Šarq –
 In zamin, in xarobai dirūz
 Joi fathi ziēd xohad šud,
 Hamču Leningrod xohad šud!
 (Rahimi 1978, 45)

¹⁷ In this paper, I have focused on texts in which a definition of a new country is always in the background, showing how literature in early Soviet Tajikistan served as a platform for developing and debating a discourse on Tajik national identity, in this case through portraits of a new capital city. The formation of a Tajik national identity has been widely explored by Sergej Abašin (Abašin 2007). While some scholars consider national identity as “secondary” to the primary regional identity (Kasymov 2013, 2), I argue that the construction of a national identity is fundamental in the political and literary discourse of early Soviet Tajikistan, and I interpret it as existing in tension with the country’s regional fragmentation rather than as a secondary element.

The village of Dušanbe was old, today
 It became victorious to the eyes of the people of the world
 It was a corner of habitual ignorance
 A trace of it hardly remains.
 To find salvation from this destruction,
 Nights and days are spent in its reconstruction.
 Come and see it, learn science!
 You, the poor and prisoner of yesterday,
 Come and light the candle of knowledge in this country.
 It will become prosperous and an example to the East –
 This land, this ruins of yesterday
 Will become a place of great victory,
 It will be just as Leningrad!

Once again, as in the other abovementioned texts, the poem depicts the past of the miserly, old, ruined village of Dušanbe, which is now a place of knowledge and science. According to Rahimi, the new construction completely cancelled this unfortunate past, and in the verse “nights and days are spent in its reconstruction” (*sarfi ta’miri ūst har šabu rūz*) the fast urbanization of the new capital is clearly mentioned. Moreover, a part of the composition is devoted to the population of Dušanbe, once oppressed (*mazlum*) by the Emirs of Bukhara and the Basmachi, and now free:

Tojikistoni peš az in mahkum
 V-az huquqi taraqqiaš mahrum,
 Bud pomoli sinfi badxohon,
 Gašt aknun ču mohi nav ma”lum.
 Fuqarojaš asiri ġorat bud,
 Notavon, bebizoatu mazlum.

(...)

Gašt imrūz ranjbar sohib –
 Sohibi davlatu savodu ulum.
 (Rahimi 1978, 46)

Tajikistan before this was subjected
 And deprived of its right of progress
 It was crushed under the feet of the class of the evil people
 Now it became visible as a new moon.
 Its poor were prisoners of plunder
 Helpless, impoverished, oppressed.

(...)

Today the workers became owners –

Owners of the country, of literacy, of science.

The poetics of the workers form the core of Tajik Soviet poetry and, more broadly, of Persian poetry with communist and socialist themes.¹⁸ In this context, the workers are portrayed as oppressed and deprived of their rights under the Emirate of Bukhara, their harsh conditions described in detail until, as the poet asserts, the USSR liberated them. The final verses then depict the flourishing present of Dušanbe under the new government.

Oqibat in xaroba šud obod,
 Ĕft unvonu obrūi ziēd;
 Markazaš šud az ilmu iste'dod
 Markazi navbino, muborak bod!
 In zamin, in xarobai dirūz
 Joi fathi ziēd xohad šud,
 Hamču Leningrod xohad šud!
 (Rahimi 1978, 46)

In the end these ruins flourished
 It found a name and a reputation
 Its center is full of science and knowledge
 Long live this center newly built!
 This land, this ruins of yesterday
 Will become a place of great victory,
 It will be just as Leningrad!

Dušanbe, a new Leningrad, is portrayed as a place of science and knowledge, and as a newly built (*navbino*) centre (*markaz*). According to the poet, the urbanization and the construction of the city are closely linked with its intellectual development, highlighting its transformation into a modern capital and cultural hub.

Yesterday's Dušanbe, Today's Stalinobod: Sarvar's *Ruboiijot*.

The discourse on Dušanbe/Stalinobod deeply affected the intellectual milieu literary production for the following years, and the debated permeated in the press as well.¹⁹ The literature which aimed to celebrate the new capital appeared on magazines and newspapers, which became the principal vehicle through which these urban narratives found expression. In the renowned literary

¹⁸ The poetics of the workers, portrayed as martyrs under the oppression of tyrants, constitutes the main theme of socialist and communist poetry in the Persianate world. Among the pioneers who mastered this theme is the Iranian poet Abulqosim Lohuti, who was exiled in the USSR and is considered one of the fathers of Tajik literature, having played a key role in the literary development of Dušanbe (see 'Ābedi 2002, and Holt 2005). This theme was not limited to Tajik poetry but also found expression in contemporary Iranian poetry, as seen, for instance, in the works of Mirzāde 'Ešqi. See Karimi-Hakkak 1998.

¹⁹ Since the beginning of the century, when the main Persian-speaking publications were edited in Samarkand and Bukhara and later relocated to Dušanbe, the press has significantly contributed to the development of Tajik literature, serving as the primary platform for literary debate. On this topic, and on the *Rahbar-e Dāneš*, one of the main magazines of the era, see Loy 2022.

magazine of the early Soviet era, *Baroi Adabijjoti Sotsialisti* (“For a socialist literature”), the main forum for debates on new literature and the construction of a Soviet Tajik canon in the 1930s, poet Sarvar (1883-1935) chose a classical genre, the quatrain, to celebrate Stalinobod, and published his *Ruboiijot*.²⁰ *Dušanbei dirūza va Stalinobodi imrūza* (“Quatrains. Yesterday’s Dušanbe and today’s Stalinobod) in 1935. As in the previous poems analysed in this paper, the opening of Sarvar’s quatrains described the past of oppression of the old village of Dušanbe. The text is reported in its original Latin script, as published in *Baroji Adabijjoti Sotsialisti*:

In šahri azimi mo ki nav obod ast,
Az quvvaji ranču pañçaji fūlod ast.
In çoj hamon Dušanbeji kūhna buvad,
Imrūz bubin ki Stalinobod ast.

In šahr dar ajjomi amironi Buxor,
Mebyd fasodxonaji miri Hisor,
Az rahbariji partijaji bolševikon,
Gardid zi ilmi leninī pur-anvor.

In šahri buzurg, bud peş az dah sol,
Jak sahnaji vajroni pur az gurgu šaqol.
Az pañçaji purobilaji korgaron,
Imrūz şudast manbai istehsol.

In šahri buzurg, ba asri podşohiju amir
Bud mahbasi deqonu muzduru faqir.
Har rūz ba obxonaji çallodon,
Memurd zi şatta cand muzduri asir.

In šahr ki hast holo obod,
Bud çoji çafovu çavru zulmu bedod.
Har rūz ba dasti hokimu miri qazab
Candin zi faqiri begunah çon medod.

In manzilu ma”voji amaldoron bud,
Boşişgahi zolimonu xunxoron bud.
Zonho hama rançbar şuda istismor,
Az kambaqalī didaaşon girjion bud.
(Sarvar 1935)

This honourable city that is flourishing today
Comes from the power of work and the hand of steel.
This place was once old Dušanbe

²⁰ Sarvar (1883-1935) was the nom de plume, or *takhallos*, of Mir-Hajdarov, who worked as an editor for various Tajik publications. First sceptical with the new government, he later started producing revolutionary poetry (Bečka 1968, 567).

Now look, it is Stalinobod.

This city at the times of the Emirs of Bukhara
Was the house of corruption of the prince of Hissor
Because of the work of the Bolsheviks Party
In was enlightened with the knowledge of Lenin.

This big city, ten years ago was
A ruined landscape full of wolves and jackals.
Thanks to the calloused hands of the workers
Today it became a source of production.

This city at the times of the Emirs and princes
Was the prison of the farmers, the workers, the poor.
Every day in the executers' ābxana²¹
Some imprisoned workers died under of the whip.

This city that is flourishing now
Was once the place of oppression, tyranny, injustice.
Every day for the hand of the ruler and for the butcher prince
Took the lives of some innocent poor.

This was the rulers' house and burrow
The bloodthirsty oppressors' residence
All the workers were exploited by them
Their eyes wept because of poverty.

The contrast between the situation of the past and the present day is described in the opening quatrains of the poem, and in the first stanza this difference is underlined with mentioning the change of name: yesterday, the city was the old Dušanbe, while today it is Stalinobod, a city, according to the narratives of the time, worth of Stalin's name. According to Sarvar's representation, the new capital has been built by the efforts (*ranj*) of the workers themselves, once poor and oppressed by the Emirs of Bukhara, and now free to use their own resources, once exploited by the rich. In the following verses, the liberation of Tajikistan is indeed represented as the freedom of the workers to use the natural resources of the country:

In çoji nakūvu sarzamini zebo,
Vin sarvatu konu kūhu daštu darjo,
Dar ahdi amirī naşdandaş taslim,
Gaştand mutei partijavu şuro.

In xoki pur az ma'danu koni tillo
Vin mazrai serhosilu rūhafzo,

²¹ The prison of the Emirs of Bukhara.

dar davri hukumatu šahu, šahnavu boj,
 Jak umr nadid joriye qajri čafo.
 (Sarvar 1935)

This good place, this wonderful land
 And these richness and wealth, these mountains, plains and lakes,
 Once subdued at the times of the Emirs
 Serve now the Party and the Soviet Union.

This land, full of minerals and gold mines,
 and this wonderful and fertile soil,
 under the rule of kings, governors, and taxes,
 knew nothing but oppression.

In this passage, Sarvar describes the abundant natural resources of the country, once exploited and oppressed under the rule of former governors, but now liberated and directed toward serving the Soviet Union for the collective wealth²². The poet strongly emphasizes the anti-colonial and, above all, anti-imperialist meaning of the October Revolution for Tajikistan, which had once been exploited by the Tsarist Empire and the Emirate of Bukhara but was now free to use its own resources. The theme of the liberation of the Tajik people from the constraints of colonial and imperial oppression is crucial and runs through all Soviet Tajik literary production. This idea culminates in the final part of the poem, where the poet turns to one of the issues that most characterizes the political and intellectual debate in Soviet Tajikistan: the condition of women before the Soviet era and their subsequent emancipation. As illustrated in the following verses, Sarvar celebrates the liberation of women from traditional constraints, portraying their newfound freedom in Soviet Tajikistan as a significant achievement of the socialist era:

Dar davri hukumati šahī, čumla zanon
 Budand ba zeri ranču andūh nihon
 Har duxtari mazluma ba pul bud garav
 Savdo šuda cun matou molu hajvon.

Budand hameša duxtaroni točik
 Az donišu ilm duru dar qam nazdik
 Jak umr ba qussa zindagī mekardand
 Dar tahti asoratu hajoti torik.

Az davlati šuravī hama šod šudand
 Sohib ba huquqi xešu ozod šudand
 Dar maktabu kūrshoji nav mexonand

²² The relationship between nature, its exploitation, and the construction of infrastructures in Tajikistan is a common topic in the Tajik poetry of the Soviet era. An example of this is the compositions written around the constructions on the river Vakhš, such as the poem by Lohuti on the building of the first bridge that crossed the river, published in *Baroi Adabijjoti Sotsialisti*, or the long poem *Čang Odamu Ob* (“The battle between man and water”) by Sadridin Ajni published in 1937. On the last one, see Bečka 1968.

Mohir ba çamei koru ustod şudand.
(Sarvar 1935)

In the era of the king, all the women
Lived under pain and suffering,
Every girl, oppressed and tied to money
Was sold like objects and properties.

Tajik girls have always been
Far from knowledge and science, close to pain
They used to live in suffering,
In imprisonment, in a life of darkness.

In the Soviet country everyone found happiness,
They became free and in possession of their rights
They study new courses in school,
They became skilled in every work and became professors.

Sarvar depicts the terrible condition of women before the Soviet Union, highlighting their suffering under deeply rooted traditions that objectified them and treated them as goods to be sold. According to the poet, women were later liberated by the Soviet Union, gaining access to education and the opportunity to work. The theme of women's freedom and their role in society deeply influenced the intellectual and cultural debate of the time. Early Soviet publications and literary works often addressed this topic as a symbol of progress and modernity²³.

Conclusions: Literature, Modernity, and the Many Lifetimes of Dušanbe

In 2019, on the anniversary of the independence of the Republic of Tajikistan, a collection of poetry by the late poet Boqi Rahimzoda was published and devoted to the city of Dušanbe. In one of the stanzas of the opening poem, the poet writes:

Barohat dar kanorat menišinam,
Zi joji "Rohat"-at rohat bubinam.

(...)

Ajab šahri diloroi, Dušanbe,
Xaëlam, zebi duniëi, Dušanbe.
(Rahimzoda 2019, 11)

²³ The topic of women's rights frequently appears in early Soviet press and the literature published in these magazines. In 1932 the first periodical devoted to women, *Zanoni Soveti Tojikiston* ("Women of Soviet Tajikistan"), was launched. It continued publication until the World War II, when it was suspended, and later resumed 1951 under the new title *Zanoni Tojikiston* ("Women of Tajikistan") (Direnberger 2016). There are not many recent studies on the role of women in Soviet Tajikistan. Most available sources were mainly published in Tajik during the Soviet era, such as Ghafforova 1978 and Kamolova 1984.

I seat next to you, in peace
And look for peace at your “Rohat”

(...)

What a wonderful city you are, Dušanbe,
My dream, beauty of the world, Dušanbe.

In his intimate ode to the city of Dušanbe, the poet mentions the Rohat Teahouse, founded in 1958. However, the building, one of the symbols of old Stalinobod, was torn down in 2025. Indeed, the transformation of the city, which has been in constant, rapid evolution since the beginning of the last century, has not stopped, making Dušanbe a place that has lived many lifetimes. Through the study of the urban poetics and the textualization of Dušanbe in the different phases of its development, it is possible to trace the lines of the rapidly changing urban history of the city since its recent origins, showing, through the use of a poetic lens, the deep and fast transformation of the capital of Tajikistan over the last century, its relationship with the intellectual milieu of the city, and its effects on the literary production.

Moreover, the study of poetic depictions of Dušanbe sheds light on how in these texts the reflection on the urban development of the city carries with it a discourse on modernity, a topic which characterized the intellectual and literary debate of Soviet Tajikistan, and which was written in a rapidly transforming language that changed three alphabets in thirty years, and in a still forming literature that sought a balance between tradition and modern experimentations. The analysis of the creation of a literary Dušanbe/Stalinobod and how it conveys ideas of modernity, indeed, reveals the autonomous vitality of Tajik literature within both the Soviet literary framework and the Persian canon, and constitutes a valuable lens through which to read the urban, political, and social changes against the background of a quickly transforming Tajikistan.

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