HUMANITIES INSTITUTE
Shaira Narmatova, PhD

Scorpion From the Altar / *Mehrobdan chayon* (1929)

Abdullah Qodiriy (1894-1938)

OVERVIEW

Author The literary career of writer Abdullah Qodiriy unfolded during one of Uzbekistan's most turbulent periods. Amid the collapse of the Russian Empire, World War I, and a wave of national awakening, he became a key voice in cultural and political reform. A supporter of the Jadid movement – a socio-political and educational reform initiative that emerged in Central Asia – Qodiriy envisioned an enlightened Turkestan, an ideal that often clashed with both imperial and Soviet rule. In *Scorpion from the Altar*, he criticizes the tyranny of the *Khan* of Kokand, social injustice, and the objectification of women. Although Soviet critics identified elements of "class consciousness" in his work – partly a result of pressure to conform to state ideology – Qodiriy remained committed to depicting life with historical truth and nuance.

Novel As in his first novel, *Bygone Days* (1925), in *Scorpion from the Altar*, Abdullah Qodiriy turns to the mid-19th century to trace the origins of Russian rule and its lasting influence, using fiction to explore the historical forces that shaped his homeland. Set in the khanate of Kokand during the late reign of Khudayar Khan – a period following the events of *Bygone Days* – *Scorpion from the Altar* tells a poignant and gripping story centered on two lovers: Anvar, the khan's scribe, and Rano, a young girl whom the *khan* seeks to take as a concubine. Their resistance to the khan's will symbolizes a broader struggle against tyranny. In this narrative, Qodiriy addresses pressing social and political issues, including oppression, injustice, and the quest for personal freedom.

Background *Scorpion from the Altar* was written shortly after Abdullah Qodiriy's first historical novel, *Bygone Days*, in 1928 and published in 1929. To prepare for the novel, Qodiriy traveled to Kokand, studied sources from the reign of Khudayar Khan, and gathered firsthand information about the *harem* (in former times, a part of a Muslim household for wives, concubines, and female servants) – reportedly even meeting the khan's favorite wife, who was still alive at the time. The novel also draws on events from Qodiriy's own life, including his arrest in 1926. Like the protagonist in his novel, Qodiriy endured lies and deception at the hands of his colleagues. Celebrated for his literary talent, he initially believed in the Bolsheviks' promise of "freedom of speech" and used that space to criticize social injustice and incompetent officials. Although he was released thanks to the support of honest allies, a second arrest in 1937 ultimately led to his execution.

MAJOR CHARACTERS

Anvar	A handsome young man, chief clerk to Khudayar Khan
Rano	daughter of Solih Makhdum and Anvar's lover
Khudayar Khan	Ruler of Kokand
Solih Makhdum	Owner of a local private school, and Rano's father
Sultonali Mirzo	Anvar's friend and fellow clerk
Abdurahmon	imam of a local mosque

SYNOPSIS

The novel is set in the mid-19th century in Kokand, the capital of the Kokand Khanate, a Central Asian polity in the Fergana Valley in Central Asia. It opens with young Rano playing with her brothers. She is the daughter of Solih Makhdum, a respected educator who, after losing his father, founded a school through hard work. Solih adopts Anvar, an orphan with exceptional intellect. Anvar becomes a scribe at the *khan's* court and supports Solih's family. Recognizing his potential, Solih arranges Anvar's engagement to Rano, with whom he is in love. Rano reciprocates his feelings, and their wedding is planned for spring.

Their happiness is short-lived. Envious clerks and the local imam, Abdurahmon, resent Anvar's rise and plot against him. Knowing the *khan*'s weakness for beautiful women, they inform him about Rano. The *khan* sends matchmakers to Solih, who, flattered by the proposal, agrees to give Rano to the *khan.* Anvar is heartbroken and leaves the family. Rano secretly writes him, and they meet. She proposes they flee together. That night, Rano disguises herself as a man, and with help from their friends Safar and Sultonali, they plan an escape to Tashkent. The *khan*, enraged, arrests Sultonali and threatens his life unless Anvar returns. Unable to abandon his friend, Anvar surrenders and is sentenced to death. As he is led to execution, three mysterious men intervene and rescue him – they are Anvar's long-lost brother Kobil and his companions from Samarkand. Kobil, separated from Anvar in childhood, has returned just in time. The novel ends with Anvar and Rano fleeing Kokand under cover of night, seeking freedom in Tashkent.

SCENES

Rano's Man The novel opens in Kokand with Solih Makhdum returning home to find his daughter Rano playing with her brothers. He gently scolds her, reminding her she's of marriageable age. Her mother teases that she'll soon be given to "her man." Rano blushes, shyly smiling – she already knows who he is.

Solih's Relationship with His Family Solih, shaped by a difficult youth, became a miser despite financial stability. He wore old clothes, saved on food, and hated spending. His gentle wife, Nigorkhonim, patiently accepted his frugality. Their 17-year-old daughter, Rano, is intelligent, poetic, and well-educated, yet still childlike. She often criticizes her father's stinginess – though only when he isn't around.

Man from Urda A man dressed as an *Urda* (*khan*s palace) official visits Solih Makhdum, introducing himself as Sultonali Mirzo, a colleague of Anvar. He explains that Anvar has been nominated as chief clerk but hesitates due to inexperience. Sultonali asks Solih to persuade him. Impressed, Solih agrees to support Anvar's appointment.

Under Pressure Solih Makhdum is pleased, seeing financial advantage in Anvar's potential promotion. Anvar has long supported him with generous monthly contributions. Rumors of Anvar's rise spread, and wealthy neighbors begin flattering Solih. That evening, tax collector Shahidbek dines with them. He and Solih pressure Anvar to accept the post. Anvar hesitates but agrees to consider it.

A Poor Family from the Bahmalbof District This scene reflects Anvar's complex background. Born into poverty in the Bahmalbof district, he was the son of a thread dyer and one of five children. Anvar's birth was met with indifference, and no one named him until his older sister, Nodira, lovingly gave him the name "Anvar." Shortly after, his father passed away, followed by the deaths of two brothers. To support the family, his mother worked as a maid, and marrying off her eldest daughter eased the burden slightly. However, his mother soon died of a heart attack.

Do You Know This Little Girl? After their mother's death, Nodira cares for Anvar while her two older brothers are adopted by other families. She sends Anvar to Solih Makhdum's school, but her husband insists that Anvar work instead. Desperate, Nodira turns to Solih Makhdum's family for help. Solih's mother reassures her, then calls for little Rano. She asks Anvar if he knows Rano, and when he confirms that he does, they hug. As they embrace, she jokingly promises that Anvar will marry Rano and be adopted into her family.

A True Friend At school, Anvar befriends Nasim, a boy from a wealthy family. Despite their class differences, they become close. Anvar frequently visits Nasim's home, where Nasim's father, Muhammad Rajabbek, the *khan*'s Chief Clerk, becomes fond of him. Unfortunately, Nasim dies of smallpox, leaving Anvar devastated. Muhammad Rajabbek, moved by Anvar's grief, recognizes his potential and hires a tutor to prepare him for service in the *khan*'s palace. Solih Makhdoom is overjoyed by the news.

Solih's Happiness Anvar excels in his studies and, upon Muhammad Rajabbek's recommendation, becomes a skilled clerk in the Palace of Khudayar Khan, earning 7 gold coins. He proudly gives his salary to Solih Makhdum, who is pleased but concerned about the loss. Solih offers Rano's hand in marriage, while Nigor Oyim advises Anvar to keep some for himself. Anvar spends wisely, leaving 2 gold coins for Solih, who reluctantly accepts.

The Khan's Favor Anvar, working in the Palace of Khudayar Khan, stands out for his elegant and

clear writing. The *khan* praises his work, sparking envy among the other scribes. After Chief Clerk Muhammad Rajabbek's sudden death, Anvar is temporarily assigned his duties. Given his performance, the likelihood of Anvar being appointed head of the scribes is now very high.

Anvar's Dilemma After the guest leaves, Rano approaches Anvar. He confesses to her that he does not want to take the position in the Palace of Khudayar Khan*,* as it would require him to turn a blind eye to the dishonesty and injustice that prevail there. He admits to Rano that the only reason he might accept the position is because Solih Makhdum demands it. If he refuses, he fears he might lose her

A Quarrel in the Mosque Courtyard In the mosque courtyard, Imam Abdurakhmon, his servant Shukur, and gossip Samad discuss Anvar's possible rise in the Palace of Khudayar Khan. Weaver Safar praises Anvar, recalling how he helped him during an injustice. Abdurakhmon criticizes Anvar's lack of madrasa education. Safar replies that, despite his own education, Abdurakhmon is only a district imam. Enraged, Abdurakhmon throws him out.

A Dark Past Abdurakhmon recalls his past with sorrow. After losing his father, his wealthy uncles in Bukhara took him in. One uncle, a madrasa teacher, oversaw his education but feared the city's corrupting influences – especially male prostitution among students. To protect him, the uncle made Abdurakhmon live under his watchful eye at home and school.

The Descent of Abdurakhmon But despite his uncle's precautions, it is all in vain. Abdurakhmon is seduced. One night, he secretly slips out of the house, dressed as a girl, and attends the secret gatherings of the madrasah boys. When his uncle discovers what has happened, he expels Abdurakhmon from his home. The boy settles in the madrasah and soon turns to prostitution. This continues until he matures from a teenager into a man, his face eventually concealed by a thick beard.

Personal Transformation and Ambition Sobering up, Abdurakhmon sinks into depression. One day, however, he pulls himself together and begins to study. After five years of intense effort, he finally graduates at the age of 28. He returns to Kokand, hoping to secure a high position.

Unmet Expectations and Struggles Abdurakhmon secures a modest post as acting imam, but only if he marries. He sends matchmakers for Rano, Solih's beautiful daughter, whom he once knew as a child. Rejected – she's promised to Anvar – his jealousy grows. He marries another and tries to win favor at court but fails to join the Palace of Khudayar Khan*.*

Appointment Ceremony By morning, Anvar's appointment as Chief Clerk is certain. Palace servants offer quiet congratulations, while rivals Shahodat Mufti and Kalonshoh fume, openly displeased. Anvar feels uneasy but is soon summoned to the *khan* for the official ceremony. Upon returning, even his former critics greet him with deference and newfound respect.

A Marriage Proposal and Rising Within 15 days of Anvar's appointment, Solih Makhdum's living room becomes a hub for those seeking advice. Solih enjoys helping wealthy clients, while Anvar finds fulfillment in assisting the poor. Concerned about losing him, Solih decides to arrange Anvar's marriage to Rano, knowing many families would want their daughters to marry him. He asks Sultonali Mirzo to approach Anvar for his consent.

Candle of Life Anvar feels great joy – this moment has been a long-awaited dream. Staying at Solih Makhdoom's house, he often imagines a future with Rano. Anvar wants her full consent. They meet in the garden as a strong wind blows, and he gently brings up their parents' wish for them to marry. Rano, smiling playfully, says it doesn't matter – they're just happy to be friends. Anvar kisses her and asks for her consent. Confused but happy, Rano agrees, suggesting a spring wedding.

Under the Iron Whip In 1864-1865, Khudayr Khan ascends to the throne for the third time, establishing a strict regime. He launches extensive construction projects, building shopping arcades, a caravanserai, Aksaray Palace, a park, and a madrasa, while renovating old structures. To celebrate his son's circumcision, he drains the treasury with a lavish feast. Khudayr also starts the Khonariq Canal to irrigate the steppe and assert his power.

Harem In autumn 1870, a woman in a burqa enters the Palace of Khudayar Khan. The guards let her

pass, but a young guard at the harem gate stops her. She lifts her veil slightly, and he smiles before allowing her through. The woman, Gulshan, about 35 and strikingly beautiful, was once a concubine of the *khan*. When Khudayar Khan is forced to abdicate, Mulla Khan distributes the harem women, including Gulshan, to his soldiers. After Khudayar regains the throne, Gulshan returns, eager to serve him again. The *khan* asks her to find beautiful concubines for him – a task she willingly accepts.

Ogacha Oyim On her way to meet the *khan*, Gulshan is stopped by a servant who tells her that Queen Ogacha Oyim is calling. Ogacha, the *khan*'s trusted 35-year-old Uyghur wife, runs the harem. She advises Gulshan to stop bringing in new women, citing the burden on the harem. Gulshan defends her actions, saying it is the *khan*'s wish, but Ogacha offers her financial assistance and a gift.

The Khan's Favorite Gulshan enters the courtyard and encounters Roziya Oyim, a beautiful woman in fine clothes. Once married and now divorced, Roziya became the khan's favorite after rumors of her beauty reached him. Gulshan bows respectfully. Roziya nods and asks, "How are you?" Without waiting for an answer, she heads toward the khan's room. As Roziya walks away, Gulshan is playfully dragged by two concubines toward the yard.

Forty Girls The *khan*'s concubines, sent from various provinces, are all exceptionally beautiful. He spends a night with each before sending them to the Forty Girls, where they are trained by renowned musicians and singers. The girls entertain him whenever he seeks amusement. The girls play ball, and Gulshan also becomes involved in their activities. After dinner, Gulshan stays the night with the girls in their quarters. Cut off from the outside world, they joke about men, teasing Gulshan about her husband. Mischievous, some undress and admire themselves in the candlelight. Gulshan laughs, urging calm. Finally, one girl silences the others with a loud cry, eager to speak.

Nozik (**The Encounter)** Nozik tells the story of how she meets a stranger and falls in love. One day, the girls are being taken to the bathhouse. As they approach the gates of the khan's palace, a handsome young man follows them. Nozik deliberately lags behind and drops her scarf. The young man picks it up and hands it to her, asking, "Is this yours?" After this meeting, Nozik can't stop thinking about him, wondering if he is an angel. Gulshan laughs and reveals that he is Anvar, the new chief clerk. Nozik asks if he is married, but Gulshan brushes off her concern, saying he will never marry her. Heartbroken, Nozik agrees, and the room falls silent, broken only by her occasional sobs.

The Khan's Moment of Merriment The *khan* invites his retinue to an evening of entertainment in the palace's garden. Dressed in a silk turban and luxurious *chapan* (a long, loose robe), the *khan* arrives, followed by a young prince in a red velvet robe. Zokir Gov, the *khan*'s favorite jester, jokes about his ability to execute anyone, subtly referencing the *khan*, causing everyone, including the *khan*, to laugh. Three other jesters join him, using allegory to criticize those around the *khan*. One mimics the Shaykh al-Islām, embarrassing him and making the crowd laugh.

Unlikely Alliances Imam Abdurahmon asks Solih Makhdum to talk to Anvar about helping him get a job as a clerk in the *khan*'s office. Solih convinces Anvar to hire him. Now working in Palace of Khudayar Khan, Abdurahmon joins Anvar's rivals, Shahodat Mufti and Kalonshoh. Although Anvar helped him get the job, Abdurahmon doubts his competence. The rivals ridicule Anvar's simple and clear Turkish writing. Although Anvar is aware of their hostility, he remains calm. Only his friend, Sultonali, notices the ridicule and warns him.

Be Vigilant On a cold winter day, Anvar enters the tent of the bridge guard, Toyir, to warm up and finds Sultonali there as well. As they enjoy tea by the fire, Anvar reminisces about his childhood, finding comfort in the simple, poetic warmth. Sultonali warns him about his enemies, including Abdurahmon, who is spreading rumors about his dismissal. He advises removing Abdurahmon from his post and returning him to his previous position, citing Safar's confirmation. Though hesitant at first, Anvar eventually agrees under Sultonali's insistence.

It's Easy to Fool a Child Safar is pleased that Abdurahmon has been removed and restored to his former position, believing it's due to his influence. However, his satisfaction fades when Abdurahmon's accomplices – two of Anvar's enemies – meet with him. Safar bribes the imam's errand boy to eavesdrop and learns they plan to disrupt Anvar's wedding by informing the *khan* of Rano's beauty.

The Warning Safar arrives to inform Anvar about Abdurakhmon's plan but finds him absent. He meets Anvar's friend, Sultonali, who listens to the news with concern. Sultonali reveals that the woman involved is Gulshan, a pimp who supplies girls to the *khan*. Determined to stop her, he sets off to find her. After their conversation, Gulshan expresses regret but says it is too late – she has already informed the *khan* and cannot undo it.

Fatiha is the Stamp of God Two *bek*s (high-ranking officials) from Palace of Khudayar Khan visit Solih Makhdum, asking for his daughter Rano's hand in marriage to the *khan*. Shocked and conflicted over his promise to Anavar, he hesitates. The beys insist that Anavar will be pleased. Reassured, Solih Makhdum reluctantly agrees, and they proceed with the *fatiha*, formalizing the engagement.

Boy! Sultonali tells Anavar about Rano's engagement to the *khan.* Although shocked, Anavar remains calm. At home, he finds Rano in tears. He consoles her, saying they cannot be separated spiritually. They share a tender moment before Solih Makhdum interrupts. Rano rages. Anavar calls for calm. The next day, heartbroken, he quietly leaves Solih Makhdum's house forever.

The Eve of the Wedding On the eve of the wedding, the *khan*'s matchmakers return and set the date. Solih Makhdum is gifted 300 gold coins and a high title, nearly forgetting Anvar in his amazement. Rano is heartbroken. Sultonali's wife brings Anvar's letter requesting his book and poems. Rano replies and entrusts her response to the woman.

Brave Girl Sultonali's wife delivers a letter from Rano to Anvar. Rano reproaches him for leaving and begs for a final farewell. That night, Anvar sneaks in. Rano suggests they elope. Anvar is moved but considers the consequences. Driven by his duty to protect her, he agrees. Disguised as a boy, Rano escapes with him, and they take refuge in Sultonali's house.

"Miracle" of Friendship Sultonali informs the *khan* of Anvar and Rano's escape, explaining that he hid them out of friendship but remained loyal to His Majesty. (In reality, it was a pretext devised by Anvar to help his friend avoid impending punishment.) The furious *khan* sends guards, but the pair have vanished. The next day, to reward Sultonali's "loyalty," the *khan* appoints him chief clerk, replacing the disgraced and fugitive Anvar.

The Scorpion Reveals Itself Shahodat Mufti, Kalonshoh, and Abdurahmon meet to discuss recent events. Displeased with Sultonali's new position, Abdurahmon refuses to believe Anvar's betrayal, calling it a ruse. He suggests sending an anonymous letter to the *khan*, hoping it will lead to Sultonali's removal. Shahodat Mufti and Kalonshoh agree.

Double Loyalty On a rainy day, a man knocks on the door of a small house. He enters, introducing himself as Safar. Anvar and Rano are hiding in this house, which belongs to a relative. Safar brings a letter from Sultonali, informing them of the arrival of Anvar's brother, who was adopted by relatives in Samarkand as a child.

Hostage Sharif, Rahim, and Kobil, young men from Samarkand, wake up and discuss their problems, particularly financial ones. Kobil tells them that the day before, he met his brother Anvar, who sent him a gold coin as a gift. The friends are delighted and praise him for his generosity. Suddenly, they hear a herald announce Sultonali's imprisonment for aiding Anvar. Herald warns Anvar must surrender to save Sultonali. All three vow to help Anvar at any cost.

Goodbye, Rano Safar and Kobil arrive to inform Anvar of Sultonali's arrest. Anvar is deeply concerned but declines Kobil's offer to rescue him, explaining that the dungeon is heavily guarded. He decides to surrender to the *khan* and asks Safar to take Rano away for a while, without revealing his plans. Anvar bids Rano farewell, kissing her tenderly and telling her they must hide separately for now.

Unprecedented Courage Late in the evening, Anvar arrives at the *khan*'s palace, surprising everyone. He goes straight to the *khan*, who harshly scolds him and accuses him of lacking goodwill. Anvar denies nothing, stating that he has come to save Sultonali. Enraged, he accuses the *khan* of dishonor. Furious, the *khan* orders Anvar's beheading but grants Sultonali's release.

Liberation Anvar is brought to the place of execution, and the crowd is in an uproar. According to custom,

the condemned is allowed to pray. After completing his prayer, Anvar lies down, and the executioner leans in with a knife to his head. Just then, someone's hand pushes the executioner away from Anvar. Kobil and his friends manage to save him from the executioners and disappear into the crowd.

Escape Two days later. Night falls... Anvar and Rano, with the help of Safar and Sultonali, descend by rope from the walls of the Kokand fortress. Kobil and his friends are waiting below on horseback. They help Rano and Anvar into a cart, and the group sets off toward Tashkent.

CHARACTER ANALYSIS

ANVAR Anvar is a young, handsome man adopted by Solih Makhdum. He possesses many admirable qualities that make him a compelling and appealing character. In portraying Anvar, the author follows his distinctive style of sharply contrasting positive and negative characters. As the clear representative of the positive type, Anvar embodies the virtues the author most values – honesty, integrity, and a strong sense of conscience.

Honesty An orphan from a poor family, Anvar earned his position, reputation, and stability through honesty, intelligence, and hard work. Though raised by the cunning Solih Makhdoom, he never exploited others for gain. His integrity is unwavering; he uses his talents to help the poor and fight injustice, always choosing justice and truth over convenience or reward.

Brave At first glance, Anvar appears to be a gentle, quiet man who avoids conflict and harm. However, when confronted with injustice, he displays remarkable bravery. Though he endures personal suffering in silence, he does not hesitate to act when a moral boundary is crossed. In a bold confrontation with the *khan*, Anvar openly challenges the ruler's authority, declaring his commitment to truth and justice.

Resourceful Anvar consistently demonstrates a sharp, adaptive mind, finding practical solutions in challenging situations. He doesn't act impulsively but carefully assesses risks and plans ahead. When Rano reveals she saved the wedding money, Anvar recognizes an opportunity and agrees to the plan, understanding that success depends on preparation. Even when offered refuge by Sultonali, Anvar remains strategic, anticipating risks and protecting those around him. In every challenge, he shows a keen ability to adapt and think ahead.

Open-hearted Anvar is sincere and trusting, believing kindness will be reciprocated. His idealism leads him to help others, such as supporting Abdurahmon's job and promotion, and treating colleagues like Kalonshoh and Shahodat Mufti with warmth, despite their growing resentment toward his position as head of the clerks. Unfortunately, his trusting nature blinds him to their scheming.

RANO Rano is a beautiful young girl, depicted by the writer with great affection. Through the character of Rano, the author presents an idealized Uzbek girl – an unconventional image for a time when Uzbek women were typically portrayed as obedient, timid, and humble. Rano, the main female character in Abdullah Qodiriy's work, stands out for her rebelliousness and defiance. Yet the author also grounds her in realism, endowing her with the spirit of a romantic heroine from the tradition of folk literature – willing to take bold risks for the sake of love. This blend of idealism and realism makes Rano's character both vivid and believable.

Insightful Rano is an insightful young girl with a clear understanding of people and situations. She has a strong sense of justice and quickly discerns right from wrong. She is not blind to her father's greed and often feels ashamed of his selfish behavior. Her emotional intelligence allows her to see beyond appearances; when the *khan* proposes, she instinctively senses the hollowness behind his offer and the life of confinement it would bring. Guided by this inner clarity, Rano rejects him, trusting her judgment over superficial promises.

Daring Despite her fragile appearance, Rano displays remarkable courage. She openly criticizes her father's greed and defies the expectations placed on a traditional Uzbek girl. When her father tries to marry her off to the khan, she vehemently refuses, declaring, "I will not lie on the *khan*'s dirty bed." She boldly offers Anvar a way to escape, defying convention and driving events forward.

Impulsiveness Rano is bold and thoughtful, but her emotions sometimes lead to impulsive decisions.

While helping her mother teach, she abruptly quits out of frustration when students struggle. During her escape with Anvar, she is overcome with homesickness and insists on visiting her mother – an emotional, risky idea that shows how quickly feelings can cloud her judgment.

SOLIH MAKHDUM Solih Makhdum's character exhibits many negative traits, but he cannot be called the embodiment of evil. Critics have had mixed reactions to his character. Some viewed him as a vivid representation of a *domullah*, a religious teacher who embodied all the negative qualities of the hypocritical clergy, while others tried to justify him by highlighting his positive traits. Although the author was influenced by the dominant ideology that opposed religion, he could not fully abandon his commitment to realism. As a result, he created a vivid portrait of a religious teacher, marked by natural human weaknesses.

Stingy Solih Makhdum's extreme frugality borders on stinginess, shaped by a youth marked by hardship and poverty. Forced to earn a living early through teaching, he became overly cautious with money. Yet even after gaining financial stability and respect, he remained stingy – a habit so ingrained it often led to comical situations, revealing how deeply it defined him.

Self-serving Solih Makhdum consistently puts personal gain above loyalty or integrity. When Anvar, his adopted son, becomes successful, Solih plans to marry his daughter to him to secure the benefits. Yet when the *khan* expresses interest in Rano, he quickly abandons this plan, prioritizing status over promises. Even Anvar's departure is accepted without regret.

Indulgent Although Solih Makhdum is tough on his students financially, particularly regarding tuition, he is generally a forgiving teacher. He does not use corporal punishment, unlike many of his contemporaries. In contrast to many Muslim fathers of his time, he raised his daughter relatively freely, even teaching her himself. When Rano's actions displeased him, he typically responded with light, humorous reproach rather than harsh punishment. It is from this more lenient upbringing that Rano's rebellious traits likely stem.

ABDURAHMON There are many dark aspects of Abdurakhmon's life that have left an indelible mark on his character. In contrast to his positive protagonist, the writer deliberately endows Abdurakhmon with traits he clearly despises, while also revealing their deep roots – making the character more realistic and psychologically complex.

Envious Envy defines Abdurakhmon's personality – a trait he neither hides nor feels ashamed of, considering it entirely normal. Lacking intelligence, talent, and a solid education, he still craves high status and success. When these ambitions go unfulfilled, his resentment deepens. He especially despises Anvar, whose natural abilities, charm, and integrity allow him to achieve everything Abdurakhmon desires but cannot attain.

Manipulative Unable to achieve his goals through honest means – and unwilling to acknowledge his own shortcomings – Abdurakhmon becomes manipulative. He uses cunning tactics to undermine stronger opponents and eliminate threats, especially Anvar. Acting below the belt, he schemes in the shadows and ultimately becomes the instigator of the troubles that befall Anvar.

KHAN Abdullah Qodiriy emphasizes that society, its atmosphere, and prevailing conditions have a profound influence on human behavior. He argues that when society is sick, its illness affects all layers and classes of the population. Khudayar Khan, as a *khan*, embodies this societal sickness – he possesses many negative traits that cannot be justified by either Sharia law or the principles of humanity. Yet, despite his flaws, he is not entirely devoid of innate human qualities, which make his character more nuanced and lifelike.

Biased Khudayar Khan strives to be a just ruler but is blinded by confirmation bias. When three honest clerks expose widespread provincial corruption, he turns to his courtiers, who deny the problem. Wanting to preserve his idealized image of his rule, he rejects the truth and punishes the clerks – choosing flattery and denial over inconvenient facts.

Licentious Khudayar Khan's unchecked desire for women defines his rule. With over a hundred wives, his pursuit of sexual pleasure becomes obsessive. He abuses his power to silence objections and satisfy his urges – taking Roziya Oyim from her husband without shame and discarding the Forty Girls after a single night. Even knowing that Rano is engaged, he continues to pursue her, disregarding both moral and

social boundaries.

Oppressive Khudayar Khan ruled through fear and brutality. Under the guise of progress, he forced people into harsh labor on construction and irrigation projects. Routinely visiting canal sites, he used overseers' reports to accuse workers of disobedience or laziness, publicly executing one or two to set an example. Exhausted and starving, laborers continued working, knowing that refusal could mean death.

Benevolent Though Khudayar Khan rules as a despot, he occasionally demonstrates tolerance and fairness. He appoints Anvar as chief clerk based on merit, recognizing his honesty and competence. When jesters mock his harshness, he laughs instead of punishing them. Even when Anvar challenges him to release Sultonali, Khudayar controls his anger and grants the request – revealing glimpses of justice beneath his authoritarian exterior.

THEMES

SOCIETY

Class In the novel, the differences between social classes are clear, with the working class depicted as kind, virtuous, and hardworking. Anvar, the protagonist, hails from this class, as do those who help him. These characters are sincere and friendly, reflecting the values of the dominant ideology. However, the author does not entirely vilify the wealthy. He distinguishes between good and bad wealthy individuals, such as Muhammad Rajabbek, a noble who aids Anvar's career. Even when the *khan* orders Anvar's execution, upper-class official Muhammad Niyaz pleads for mercy, though his request is denied, showcasing complexity within the elite.

Illustrative Moment: The religious leader, Abdurakhmon, criticizes Anvar's appointment as chief clerk during a conversation with Samad and Shukur. When Safar enters and praises Anvar for helping him by writing the application free of charge, Abdurakhmon reacts with disdain. Despite Safar's sincere gratitude, Abdurakhmon continues to speak ill of Anvar. Upset by this, Safar declares he will no longer pray behind such an imam, prompting Abdurakhmon to insult him. Safar storms out of the mosque, his disgust reflecting the deep divide between them.

Gender The author's Preface introduces one of the novel's central themes: Khudayar Khan's exploitation of the women in his country. He manipulates them at will, and anyone who dares to protest faces severe punishment. Women are primarily seen as objects to satisfy men's desires, especially those in power. Roziya Oyim, the *khan*'s wife, and the Forty Girls in his harem are given to him without consent. Working-class women are consumed by domestic duties, while Solih Makhdum's wife, an educated teacher, gives all her earnings to him, reflecting the belief that women can't manage money. Abdurahmon, aware of the *khan*'s obsession, uses Rano's beauty to seek revenge on Anvar. Rano's protest against the *khan* is a rare challenge to societal norms.

Illustrative Moment: The *Forty Girls* are having a party. Gulshan is there, and the courtyard is filled with other maids from the harem, who have come to watch the entertainment. Since they are all skilled in playing musical instruments, singing, and dancing, the celebration unfolds wonderfully. One of the girls begins to sing a song, the lyrics of which were composed by Nazmi. The song is deeply sorrowful. The writer then tells Nazmi's story: Nazmi came from a poor family in a village near Kokand. She was in love with her cousin, and he with her. They were engaged. However, her father could not pay the taxes owed to Khudayar Khan. The tax collectors demanded payment, beat him, and, finding nothing of value to seize, took his beautiful daughter as compensation. The *khan*, captivated by Nazmi's beauty, sent her to the bathhouse, slept with her several times, and then added her to the Forty Girls. Nazmi sang, cried, and wrote poetry for two years before dying of consumption. The girls remember her, sing her songs, and long for her.

Religion In the Preface to the novel, Abdullah Qodiriy stated that one of his aims was to expose the true nature of certain religious figures. Many of the clergy depicted in the novel possess negative traits such as greed, envy, and dishonesty, and they are shown to be willing to engage in deceitful acts for personal gain. However, this does not suggest that Qodiriy was opposed to religion itself. His criticism was not directed at faith or God, but at hypocritical religious figures who exploited religion to serve their own immoral purposes. It is noteworthy that Bolshevik critics condemned him not for attacking religion too harshly, but for not going far enough – criticizing corrupt religious figures without denouncing religion itself, as their atheistic ideology

demanded.

Illustrative Moment: Abdurakhmon sent matchmakers to propose to Rano, but her parents refused, citing her engagement to Anvar. Angered by this, he remembered Anvar as an orphan from a lower class and was further irritated to learn Anvar worked as a clerk with a good salary. “How could such a boy from a poor family occupy such a high position while I, a Bukhara *madrasah* (a college for Islamic instruction) graduate, am just an *imam*?” Frustrated, Abdurakhmon began delivering sermons to attract wealthy patrons, praising the *khan* and the *bek*s to impress them. Yet, his hypocrisy was clear as he sought power through connections rather than true faith.

POLITICS

Russian Colonialism Set between 1864 and 1865; the novel captures the tense atmosphere surrounding the Russian advance toward Tashkent. The Khan of Kokand desperately attempts to resist the advancing Russian forces, but his efforts fail. In the face of mounting danger, Anvar flees with Rano to Tashkent, which has already fallen to the Russians. However, as noted in the Epilogue, Anvar does not find refuge. Instead, his life deteriorates – he faces financial ruin and, after three years, returns to Kokand. His fate remains uncertain, with rumors suggesting he was either executed by the *khan* or forgiven and died naturally. While the author refrains from overt political commentary, Anvar’s decline subtly reflects the harsh realities and social upheaval experienced under Russian colonial rule.

Illustrative Moment: Upon ascending the throne, the Khan of Kokand faced an empty treasury drained by civil wars. Yet, fearing Russian expansion – after the fall of Tashkent – he launched a bold canal project to showcase the strength of his country. With no money, he ordered every family to send one man with a hoe, and the elite to provide a laborer and a cart. Under brutal supervision, the people toiled in the scorching sun, digging through the hard earth. The waters of the Syr Darya finally flowed through the canal, greening the steppe. The *khan*, defeated three times but now restored, hoped this would convince the advancing Russians that Kokand was not a backward land, but a cultured and resilient country.

RELATIONSHIP

Marriage Like Qodiriy’s earlier novel *Bygone Days*, *Scorpion from the Altar* also addresses child-rearing within the framework of traditional societal norms. These norms compel children to submit to their parents’ will, particularly in matters of marriage, where decisions are made by the parents. Sons are expected to comply, while daughters have little to no say. At the beginning of the novel, Anvar and Rano are content because their desire to marry aligns with their parents’ wishes. However, when the *khan* expresses his intention to marry Rano, Solih Makhdum quickly breaks his promise. Although Solih is not a despotic father, he follows tradition in marrying off his daughter. A girl is forbidden from expressing her feelings about marriage; fathers never discuss it with their daughters but merely inform them of their choice. His characteristic passion for money also plays a decisive role, as the wealthier the son-in-law, the more he benefits from the marriage.

Illustrative moment: Two respectable *bek*s come to Solih Makhdum to ask for his daughter’s hand in marriage, from the *khan* himself. Makhdum is stunned – he never expected such a proposal. Although flattered, he gently explains that there is one complication: his daughter is already promised to Anvar. The *bek*s, however, quickly convince him, insisting that this does not matter – that Anvar, once he hears the news, should be honored by such a turn of events. With little choice left, Makhdum agrees. The *bek*s announce the *fotiha* (engagement) and depart. Makhdum feels slightly awkward in front of Anvar. A twinge of guilt passes through him, but then a thought crosses his mind: Who told you to postpone the wedding until spring? You were too slow. Reflecting on the outcome – becoming the father-in-law of the *khan*, receiving a bag of gold, securing a position, and perhaps even becoming the grandfather of a future *khan* – his heart fills with joy.

Polygamy The novel also explores the theme of polygamy, particularly through the extreme case of Khudayar Khan, whose harem includes more than 100 wives. In this context, neither parental approval nor the consent of the women is considered important. While the practice of a *khan* having many wives and concubines was traditionally accepted, Qodiriy portrays it as deeply immoral and subjects it to strong criticism.

Illustrative Moment: In the harem, Gulshan meets a strikingly beautiful woman in expensive clothes who enters the room where Khudayar Khan usually rests, eats, and meets with women. This is Roziya Oyim, the *khan*'s favorite. She first married a wealthy man from Kokand but was soon widowed after giving birth to a child. Later, she married a respected religious figure. When rumors of her beauty reached the *khan*, he sent a carriage to invite her to palace. Her husband did not dare to object. Roziya stayed in the *harem* for one night and returned home the next day. He then gave her a *talaq* (divorce) and sent her back to the *khan* with seven carts of expensive gifts. Whether he acted out of fear or anger is unclear. Despite the arrival of many new concubines, Roziya remains the *khan*'s favorite wife.

Love In the novel, love is portrayed as a powerful and luminous emotion that anchors the story. The relationship between Anvar and Rano reflects traditional Central Asian ideals of love as a spiritual bond, rather than mere physical desire. Their connection is pure and selfless – both are willing to sacrifice material comfort for one another. Yet, as a realist, the author places their romance in 19th-century Kokand, where love must contend with real obstacles. Both the *khan* and society impose hardships on them for defying the traditions and laws of the time.

Illustrative Moment: Anvar hears about Rano's engagement to the *khan*. He comes home and sees her; she looks at him and bursts into bitter tears. Anvar gently comforts her – he smooths her hair, kisses her face, and urges her to smile. Through her tears, she does, but despair quickly returns. Anvar says, "They've separated us – but not only the *khan*. He's an insatiable beast. And smaller beasts – like Abdurahmon – use him to get what they can't reach themselves. They may part us physically but never in spirit. True love is not about closeness – it is in separation that love is elevated."

He asks, "What kind of love do you choose?"

Rano answers, "The second one. But I will never lie in the *khan*'s filthy bed!"
Deeply moved, Anvar replies, "And I will never give you to the *khan*."

Friendship The novel presents friendship as one of the noblest human qualities, especially among its positive characters. Anvar, from a humble background, shares a sincere childhood bond with Nasim, a wealthy boy who dies young. His later friendships with Sulton Ali Mirzo and Safar also reflect selfless affection built on trust and loyalty. These relationships show friends willing to risk their safety for one another. Throughout the novel, several characters endanger themselves to help or save friends in trouble, particularly those condemned or threatened. Such acts of bravery and devotion underscore the deep value the author places on true friendship.

Illustrative Moment: Anvar learns that Sultonali has been taken hostage. Unless Anvar, now a condemned man, surrenders, Sultonali will be executed within the hour. Anvar arrives, stunning the servants with his bravery. He is brought before the *khan*, who bitterly berates him, accusing him of ingratitude. Sarcastically, the *khan* mocks Anvar's appearance as a display of false piety. Anvar replies, "Is it a Muslim custom to take a girl promised to a poor man?" Enraged, the *khan* orders his execution. But Anvar insists that Sultonali be released before his eyes: "Until he is freed, you cannot take me." He cries, "Have you any conscience, Your Highness?" His words strike a chord. The *khan* relents and releases Sultonali. As Anvar is led away, Sultonali watches, eyes filled with tears.

Sexuality*: Desire* Sexual desire in the novel is not directly tied to the main characters, but it is central to many of the conflicts. The *khan* uses his power and position to indulge his desires, maintaining relationships with over 100 women and constantly seeking new forms of entertainment. The overly ambitious Abdurahmon desires the beautiful Rano, and one of the reasons for his jealousy of Anvar is that Rano was intended for him. When he fails to win Rano for himself, he exploits *khan*'s penchant for women and devises a plan to offer Rano to him. The young girls in the harem, given over to *khan* for one-day entertainment, are deeply unhappy, disconnected from the male world, yearning for a man and dreaming of love. Even in the internecine conflicts between *khanates,* quarrels sometimes arise from sexual motives. This reveals how deeply sexuality is intertwined with power and control in the novel, with personal desires often driving broader political and social events. Sexuality in the story crosses traditional gender boundaries. The *khan*'s relationships with numerous women reflect not only his insatiable sexual appetite but also his role in a system where women's bodies are commodified for male pleasure. Yet this system is

not limited to women alone. The novel also hints at male prostitution – particularly in Abdurahmon's sordid past – suggesting a world where even men's bodies are bought and sold. This way of life is not strongly condemned, pointing to a society where sexual exploitation is normalized for both genders. In such a world, the boundary between desire and duty becomes blurred, and sexuality emerges as yet another means of navigating power and survival.

Illustrative Moment: Former ruler of Kokand Madali Khan, young and newly crowned after the death of Umar Khan, becomes infatuated with his father's former concubine. Although they were never married, under Sharia law she is considered his "mother," and the clergy forbids the union. Defying this, Madali Khan removes the dissenting religious scholars and appoints more compliant ones – including Solih Makhdum's father – who approve the marriage. Emir Nasrullah of Bukhara, having heard of the concubine's beauty, seizes the opportunity to denounce the marriage as incestuous and uses it as a pretext to invade Kokand. After taking the city, he executes Madali Khan, claims the concubine for himself, and punishes those who supported the union. Solih Makhdum's father is flogged and dies shortly afterward, leaving his family in poverty.

This episode, based on historical events, highlights the unchecked sexual desires of rulers. While some historians have argued that Nasrullah's true motives extended beyond the pursuit of a concubine, the author explores how deeply concealed personal desires – when masked and executed through political power – can lead to profound and destructive consequences.

ETHICS

Bureaucratic corruption Abdullah Qodiriy considered the *khanate's* rule to be the darkest and dirtiest period in the country's history. The entire system was outdated, urgently needing reform, including the government itself. Corruption, deceit, and slander were common tools among the *khan*'s servants. Anvar, the chief clerk, becomes a target of envy as other clerks vie for his position. Honest officials who expose corrupt figures are slandered by the *khan*'s cronies, who the *khan* readily believes, punishing the truth-tellers. This portrayal of governance is not just about individual moral failings; it critiques the broader labor conditions within the decaying political system of 19th-century Central Asia.

Illustrative Moment: At Salih Makhdum's request, Abdurahman is hired by Anvar as a clerk in the *khan*'s residence. Initially, Anvar's jealous colleagues – Shahodat Mufti and Kalonshoh – are unsure how to treat him, fearing his closeness to Anvar. However, it soon becomes clear that Abdurahman shares their disdain for Anvar. When he copies a simple text written by Anvar in plain Turkish, he sarcastically remarks that it's "like pilaf without salt," and the three share a laugh. This mockery forms the basis of their bond. Soon, they regularly gossip and scheme, undermining Anvar. His request for help to write a document is seen as weakness. Abdurahman, Shahodat Mufti, and Kalonshoh mock him, relishing the opportunity. They stay behind after work, gossiping and scheming to undermine Anvar and remove him from his position.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:

1. What do you think of Solih Makhdum? How would you describe his character?
2. What do you think of Khudayar Khan's reign? How did he attempt to resist the impending Russian invasion, and do you think his efforts were effective?
3. How is Rano different from the Muslim girls of her time? Why did she choose a difficult and uncertain future, full of dangers, instead of a luxurious life in the *khan*'s palace?
4. How does the author express his views on class?
5. There is a scene in the novel with the *khan*'s jesters, who occasionally hint at the ruler's harsh regime. However, Khudayar responds with laughter. What does the author aim to convey through this scene?