



Ahmad Makhdum Donish A Star in the Night

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Tajik writer, poet, painter, calligrapher, architect, judge, and polymath Ahmad Donish was born in April 1826 in the Emirate of Bukhara. His given name was Ahmad, while his literary and scientific pen name was Donish. Due to his rather large head (*kalla*), he was also known as Ahmad Kalla. Some referred to him as Ahmad Makhdum, indicating his association with the court.

Donish's father, Nasir, was a poor mullah, and his mother was a well-educated and virtuous schoolteacher. Before attending *mektep* (a religious school), Donish was taught calligraphy by his mother. Upon entering *mektep*,

he struggled with the Arabic language due to a speech impediment. The rote memorization of Qur'anic verses he did not understand also proved difficult. Moreover, the mechanical memorization of incomprehensible texts bored him. However, he found subjects like mathematics, astronomy, geography, history, philosophy, and literature deeply engaging. As a result, in his early life, he devoted considerable time to studying the works of ancient sages such as Aristotle, as well as medieval Perso-Tajik scholars like Avicenna and al-Farabi. Studying Aristotle's logic and metaphysics gave him a solid foundation; al-Farabi's synthesis of Greek and Islamic thought shaped his intellectual worldview, while Avicenna's medical writings rounded out his education in the natural sciences.

In addition to his skill in calligraphy, Donish demonstrated exceptional talent in drawing and painting. In his youth, he used these skills both as a source of income and as a means of gaining recognition. A recommendation from his art teacher¹ earned him entry to the court of Amir Nasrullah (who reigned from 1826 to 1860). In 1850, he was employed there as a court architect and painter. However, according to Donish himself, his actual duties were limited to copying manuscripts and handling court correspondence.² Taking this opportunity, he added astronomy to his accomplishments. The addition impressed his friends as well as the Amir.

¹ Epifanova L. M., *Rukopisnye istochniki Instituta Vostokovedeniya Akademii Nauk Uzbekskoi SSR*, Institute of Oriental Studies, Akademiya Nauk of the Uzbek S.S.R., Tashkent, 1965, pp. 9-10.

² Hodizoda, R. "Donish, Ahmad Makhdum ibn Nasir," *Encyclopediai Adabiyot va San'ati Tojik*, vol. 1, 1988, p. 412.



Ahmad Donish (3rd from left)
Amir Muzaffar's delegation to St. Petersburg (1869-1870)

Donish made three trips to St. Petersburg, Russia, all as secretary to Bukharan embassies—in November 1857, October 1869, and January 1874.³ On his first trip, Amir Nasrullah personally appointed him *mirzo* (scribe) to the delegation. The experience introduced Donish to life in St. Petersburg and significantly broadened his horizons. While there, he participated in diplomatic negotiations and visited various scientific and educational institutions, as well as art and craft centers.

Upon his return to Bukhara in mid-1858, Donish brought with him extensive firsthand knowledge of Russian society and culture, along with high hopes that this information might help improve life in Bukhara. He shared his observations on Russia's economic, political, educational, and cultural systems with the Amir, hoping these would inspire reform. Unfortunately, the Amir only accepted those proposals that served his personal interests or benefited the military and the Emirate's economy. He also showed some willingness to strengthen political ties with Russia. However, he rejected the broader societal reforms Donish proposed. Consequently, Donish's aspirations for improving Bukharan society were largely thwarted.

In 1860, Amir Muzaffar (ruled 1860–1885), a self-centered leader with little regard for intellectuals, ascended the throne. He systematically alienated

³ For details see, *Puteshestvie iz Bukhary v Peterburg*, Stalinabad, 1960; *Risola-ye muhtasare az torikhi saltanati khonadoni mangitiya*, ed. A. Mirzoev, Stalinabad, 1960; and *Nodir Vokealar*, Tashkent, 1964.

scholars, even those who had loyally served his father. Donish, too, was marginalized. His official rank was diminished, and he was removed from state affairs. He was instead appointed court astrologer, a position in which he authored a treatise on astronomy titled *Manozir al-Kavokib* (The Position of the Planets, 1865).

In 1868, encouraged by the misguided Bukharan clergy, Amir Muzaffar initiated a second war against Russia, aiming to reclaim previously lost territories. Once again, he was defeated and forced to sign a Treaty of Friendship, ceding additional territory and even the Emirate's sovereignty.⁴ As part of efforts to formalize the new relationship, a delegation was sent to St. Petersburg, with Donish serving as advisor due to his familiarity with Russian society. This trip, from June 1869 to March 1870, involved high-level diplomacy that significantly elevated Donish's status. His prestige stemmed from his deep understanding of Russia's economic, political, and governmental systems, as well as its history and international relations.

Upon returning, Donish was offered the prestigious title of *Uroq* and a high-ranking government position.⁵ These honors represented the highest recognition within the Emirate. Nonetheless, he declined both. In his view, working for a government indifferent to the welfare of its citizens was futile. Instead, he dedicated himself to writing a treatise advocating reform, titled *Risola dar Nazmi Tamaddun va Ta'avun* (Essay on the Organization of Civilization and Cooperation, 1870–1873). In it, he proposed two models for reform: one, a parliamentary government based on justice and education, where representatives would vote on state matters; the other, the creation of a prime ministerial office with legislative powers. Both models required the Amir's consent to become operational. However, the Amir saw these suggestions as threats to his authority and rejected them.

In addition to advocating for structural reform, Donish also focused on educational change. He proposed new schools where secular subjects and foreign languages—especially Russian—would be taught. He emphasized prioritizing the sciences and arts over exclusively religious education. As with

⁴ Bashiri, Iraj. *History of the Civil War in Tajikistan*, Academic Studies Press, 2020, pp. 65-66.

⁵ Hodizoda, R. "Donish, Ahmad Makhdum ibn Nasir," *Encyclopediai Adabiyot va San'ati Tojik*, vol. 1, 1988, p. 412.

his political ideas, these educational proposals were rejected for allegedly undermining the ruler's absolute power.

This was not the end of Donish's public service. After returning from his third trip to St. Petersburg (1883–1884), he was appointed *qadi* (judge) of the remote districts of Ghuzor and Nahrpai, likely to distance him from central government affairs. He remained in that post until the end of Amir Muzaffar's reign.

With the inauguration of Amir Abdulahad's rule (1885–1910), Donish reemerged—not as the prominent figure he deserved to be—but as the director of one of Bukhara's *madrasahs*. While in this position, he wrote a volume that exposed the many ills the *amirs* had long endeavored to keep hidden from the public. More importantly, he examined these societal issues through the lens of his experiences abroad. In doing so, he highlighted both the *amirs*' poverty and the decadence of their approach to governance, particularly in the realm of education. This volume, titled *Navodir al-Vaqoye* ' (Singular Events, 1885), became one of his most influential works.

Upon completing *Navodir al-Vaqoye* ' , Donish personally copied and circulated it among his friends and supporters. In his *Yaddashtha* (Reminiscences, 1949-54), Sadriddin 'Aini ⁶ reviews key themes from the volume. Although his commentary is brief, it offers a vivid account of how, at the house of Sharifjon Makhdum,⁷ 'Aini became acquainted with *Navodir al-Vaqoye* ' . There, he, along with Mirzo Abdul Vahed Munzim ⁸ and the poet Muhammadsiddiq Hairat,⁹ helped copy Donish's work for their host. This event took place three or four years after Donish's death.

⁶ Bashiri, Iraj. "Aini, Sadriddin." *Encyclopedia of World Literature in the 20th Century*, 1999, p. 27.

⁷ Sharifjon Makhdum (Sadr-i Ziyo) (1865-1931) was one of the judges of Bukhara. He was a poet, a lover of literature, a literary expert, and a supporter of reforms. He has left a number of notes and a book entitled *Tazkar al-Ashar*, a versified work, written in 1910.

⁸ Mirza Abdul Vahed Munzim (1877-1934) was an educator, poet, and a revolutionary. He was the founder of the first new fundamentalist school in Bukhara and one of the founders of the clandestine "Children's Education Society." He participated in the Bukhara Revolution, served as supervisor of health and well-being. He was one of Aini's friends and associates.

⁹ Muhammadsiddiq Hairat, (1878-1902) was one of the most talented of the Tajik poets of the 20th century. He was Sadriddin Aini's peer and friend.

‘Aini admits that, upon first encountering Donish’s writings, he struggled to comprehend many of the topics—particularly those relating to astronomy, philosophy, and mysticism—which were unfamiliar to him at the time. Nevertheless, other subjects resonated deeply. These ideas, ‘Aini explains, had a profound effect on his worldview and later served as a roadmap for his intellectual development.¹⁰

Describing his personal transformation, ‘Aini explains that before encountering *Navodir al-Vaqoye*, he believed all affairs of the world were predetermined by Allah’s will, leaving individuals powerless to shape their own destinies or affect the lives of others. However, after reading Donish’s work, he realized that human agency mattered. He came to believe that one could influence personal outcomes and even help bring about change in the lives of others.

In *Navodir al-Vaqoye*, Donish offers a detailed analysis of Bukharan society. As ‘Aini notes, “Donish described things in a way that I could relate to.” Furthermore, Donish proposed practical solutions to problems in various sectors of society. For example, he addressed family conflicts by examining the subtle dynamics between members of the household—such as a mother, son, and daughter-in-law—detailing each individual’s thoughts, emotions, and motivations. Through this informal yet incisive approach, Donish demonstrated how Bukharans could resolve social issues through dialogue and mutual understanding.¹¹

Donish’s ideas on governance similarly inspired ‘Aini to reflect on the political structure of the Emirate of Bukhara. Comparing Donish’s reports on Russian society with the conditions in Bukhara, ‘Aini recognized the stark contrast between the two systems and concluded that meaningful reform was both necessary and possible. He resolved to continue the work his predecessor had begun.¹²

Among Donish’s many observations, those concerning the upper classes of St. Petersburg particularly struck ‘Aini. Donish wrote:

¹⁰ ‘Aini, Sadriddin. *Yoddoshtho* (reminiscences; ed., Sa’idi Sirjani), Vols. 1-4, Tehran: Agah Publications, 1983, pp. 659-661.

¹¹ ‘Aini, Sadriddin. *Yoddoshtho* (reminiscences; ed., Sa’idi Sirjani), Vols. 1-4, Tehran: Agah Publications, 1983, pp. 661-666.

¹² ‘Aini, Sadriddin. *Yoddoshtho* (reminiscences; ed., Sa’idi Sirjani), Vols. 1-4, Tehran: Agah Publications, 1983, pp. 667-668.

Some people imagine that the Russian upper classes are extremely content, that nothing makes them sad or gloomy, and that they live in a state of continuous prosperity and bliss. In reality, however, this is far from true. I discovered this during my first trip there, simply by keeping my eyes and ears open. The amount of sadness and despair I observed among the Russian elite was immeasurable. Each envied someone above him and aspired to emulate him. At the same time, each boasted of his status to those beneath him... In short, I did not see a single person who was not gripped by sadness and gloom... I observed the same condition on the streets and in the theaters of St. Petersburg.¹³

Navodir al-Vaqoye was highly influential in awakening Bukhara's intellectual class. However, it also attracted severe backlash. The work was condemned by the Amir, the court, and the *ulema*, who denounced it as anti-Islamic. Donish himself was labeled irreligious and unprincipled. Rumors circulated that he lacked even a basic understanding of Islam and Sharia law. In response, Donish published *Mi'yor al-Tadayun* (The Touchstone of Religion, 1894), in which he demonstrated his mastery of Islamic *fiqh* (jurisprudence) and exposed the superficial understanding of his critics.

Later in life, Donish became convinced that government reforms alone would not suffice to bring lasting progress to Bukhara. He turned his attention to writing a historical critique of the Emirate, titled *Risolai Ta'rikhi* (Historical Essay, 1897). In it, he condemned the century-long rule of the Manghit dynasty—particularly the reign of Amir Muzaffar—and predicted that either internal strife or the will of the people would ultimately bring about their downfall.

Ahmad Donish was a singular figure who taught himself science and technology through the study of classical works. He undertook three arduous journeys to Russia and absorbed all the knowledge available to him with the aim of transforming life in the Emirate. He persistently sought to reform the feudal system and usher in a European-style model of governance. Yet he met resistance at every turn. The *amirs* refused even to consider his proposals. Nevertheless, despite opposition from both the *amirs* and the *ulema*, Donish

¹³ 'Aini, Sadridin. *Yoddoshtho* (reminiscences; ed., Sa'idi Sirjani), Vols. 1-4, Tehran: Agah Publications, 1983, pp. 673-674.

championed the rights of the marginalized and worked to improve the lives of his contemporaries.

In literature, he introduced realism by expanding the use of vernacular language to express contemporary concerns. His writings influenced a generation of Tajik authors, including Sadriddin ‘Aini, Muhammadsiddiq Hairat, Mirzosiroj,¹⁴ and others. He exposed the exploitative nature of Bukhara’s ruling and religious elites by contrasting their actions with those he had observed in Russia. As a scholar, he pioneered the *risola* format—a flexible genre suitable for presenting historical, scientific, and philosophical insights. His efforts in educational reform revealed the stagnation and self-interest of the traditional *ulema*, and he advocated for schools where foreign languages could serve as gateways to innovation in science and the arts.¹⁵

Ahmad Donish died in Bukhara in 1897.

Selected Works

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¹⁴ Mirzozod, Kh. “Mirzosiroj,” *Ensiklopediai Sovetii Tojik*. Vo. 4, 1983, p. 413.

¹⁵ Hodizoda, R. “Donish, Ahmad Makhdum ibn Nasir,” *Encyclopediai Adabiyot va San’ati Tojik*, vol. 1, 1988, p. 414.