



Section 7. World literature

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"MOLLA" AND "MÖVLANA" AS HONORIFIC TITLES FOR MUHAMMAD FUZULI: A STUDY OF MEDIEVAL TAZKIRAS

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Abstract

In medieval Turkic biographical compilations (tazkiras), the prominent poet Muhammad Fuzuli (1494–1556) is frequently introduced with the titles "molla" and "mövlana" (or "mevlana"). This article examines the usage of these titles in tazkiras from the 16th to the 19th century, including works by Ahdi Baghdadi, Sam Mirza Safavi, Latifi, Gelibolulu Ali, Sadiqi, Mutribi Samarqandi, Seyid Azim Shirvani, and Firudin bey Kocharli. The study reveals that "molla" and "mövlana" were not merely religious designations but rather markers of profound scholarly erudition, philosophical depth, and moral perfection. The analysis demonstrates that Fuzuli's high religious education, mastery of Arabic and Persian, and his Sufi-mystical creativity justified the use of these honorifics. The article concludes that these titles reflect the intellectual and spiritual authority attributed to Fuzuli within the classical Ottoman–Azerbaijani literary tradition.

Keywords: *Fuzuli, tazkira, Ottoman poetry, molla, mevlana, medieval Turkic literature*

Introduction

Muhammad Fuzuli (1494–1556) is widely regarded as one of the most powerful masters of classical Eastern poetry. He wrote in three languages – Azerbaijani Turkish, Persian, and Arabic – and his works have profoundly influenced the literary traditions of the entire Turkic-Islamic world. In various medieval biographical compilations known as *tazkiras*, Fuzuli's name is often preceded by the titles "molla" or "mövlana" (also spelled "mevlana"). Other sources mention

only his pen name (takhallus), "Fuzuli". This variation raises an important question: what did these titles signify, and why were they attached specifically to Fuzuli?

The word "molla" before the poet's name carries not only a religious-scholarly status indicator but also the connotation of an address to a person of wisdom and learning. Representatives of classical Eastern poetry were expected to be familiar with religious-philosophical knowledge, Arabic grammar, the subtleties of the prosody system (*'aruz*),

and often Sufi mysticism. It can be assumed that persons possessing these qualities – including many literary figures – were presented as “molla”. This article investigates for the first time the title “molla” as a distinct research subject in relation to Fuzuli, systematically analyzing how different tazkira writers from the 16th to the 19th century referred to the poet.

Tazkiras as Sources of Honorifics

The 16th-century Ottoman tazkira writer Ahdi Baghdadi, in his work *Gülşen-i Şü'ara* (The Rose Garden of Poets), refers to Fuzuli as “Mevlana Fuzuli Baghdadi”. He describes the poet as “perfect in the knowledge of virtues, eloquent in speech, and a master of wisdom”. Ahdi emphasizes that Fuzuli was a humble and virtuous person who did not covet worldly possessions despite being a great poet and scholar. This description suggests that the title “mevlana” was used not only for religious authorities but also for those who combined literary genius with moral excellence.

Similarly, Sam Mirza Safavi, a 16th-century Safavid prince and tazkira writer, in his work *Tohfeyi-Sami* (Sam's Gift), calls Fuzuli “Mevlana Fuzuli”. By using this title, the author emphasizes the poet's high religious and philosophical worldview. Sam Mirza's inclusion of Fuzuli in a Persian-language tazkira also demonstrates that the poet's fame transcended linguistic and political boundaries – he was respected in both Ottoman and Safavid territories.

Latifi, another 16th-century Ottoman tazkira writer, in his *Tezkiretü'sh-Şu'ara ve Tabsiratün-Nuzam* (Biography of Poets and Explanation of Versification), mentions Fuzuli simply as “Baghdadi”, noting his origin without using any honorific title. This indicates that the use of “molla” or “mevlana” was not mandatory but reflected the individual tazkira writer's judgment of the poet's status.

Gelibolulu Ali, in his work *Künhü'l-ahbar* (The Essence of News), written between 1591 and 1598, uses both titles. He first introduces Fuzuli as “Mevlana Fuzuli – from Baghdad by birth”, but later in the same text refers to him as “Molla Fuzuli”. This dual usage can be explained by the poet's multifaceted scholarly activity and his comprehensive person-

ality. Ali likely considered Fuzuli worthy of both titles: “mevlana” for his philosophical depth and spiritual insight, and “molla” for his mastery of religious sciences. The tazkira writer also notes that Fuzuli's work *Hadiqat al-su'ada* (The Garden of the Blessed) is superior to the Persian work *Rawdat al-shuhada* by Husayn Vaiz Kashifi, further justifying the title “molla”.

The Meaning of “Mevlana” in Ottoman Literary Milieu

In the Ottoman literary environment, the word “mevlana” did not simply express religious affiliation. It carried more comprehensive semantic meanings – as a symbol of philosophical depth, moral perfection, and spiritual authority. The term gained widespread fame through Jalal al-Din Rumi (1207–1273), who lived in 13th-century Anatolia and became known to posterity simply as “Mevlana”. After Rumi, “mevlana” became associated with the highest level of spiritual and intellectual achievement.

In Sufi thought, “Mevlevism” expresses the servant's connection with God through the path of divine love. The Mevlevi path is also the way of art, literature, teaching, and learning. The core principles of Mevlevism are the cultivation and teaching of good manners, tranquility, humanistic approach, and love. Therefore, when Ahdi Baghdadi refers to Fuzuli as “Mevlana”, he presents the poet not merely as a madrasa-educated scholar but as a guide who calls people to become perfect by combining religious, philosophical, and literary knowledge with spiritual depth.

This interpretation is supported by Fuzuli's own writings. In the preface to his Turkish divan, Fuzuli describes his educational journey: “The coach of spiritual perfection turned the reins of my horse of fortune towards the acquisition of good manners, and the sun of wisdom illuminated the essence of my nature with the effect of education. My mine of jewels that achieved perfection was a school resembling paradise.” Fuzuli portrays his teachers as luminous beings and the school as a paradise on earth. This self-presentation as a seeker of knowledge and spiritual perfection aligns perfectly with the connotations of “mevlana”.

Later Tazkiras and the Continuity of the Tradition

The Uzbek tazkira writer Mutribi Samarqandi (17th century), in his work *Tazkirat üş-şü'ara* (Biography of Poets), notes that Fuzuli reached a high rank in knowledge and virtue and “ascended to the level of melevism”. Mutribi describes Fuzuli as one of the greatest poets writing in Turkish and provides examples from his Turkish divan. The fact that a Central Asian tazkira writer recognized Fuzuli as having achieved the rank of “mevlevi” demonstrates the widespread acceptance of this honorific across the Turkic world.

Seyid Azim Shirvani (19th century), a representative of classical Azerbaijani literature, in his own *Tazkira*, introduces Fuzuli as “Molla Muhammad Baghdadi Fuzuli”. He calls the poet “the flower of the garden of eloquence and the fresh herb of the spring of beautiful expression, the master of eloquent poets”. By using “molla”, Shirvani emphasizes Fuzuli’s mastery of religious subjects, particularly evident in *Hadiqat al-su’ada*, and his profound knowledge of the Qur’an and hadith.

The first systematic literary historian of Azerbaijan, Firudin bey Kocharli (19th–20th century), also presents Fuzuli as “Molla Muhammad Baghdadi”. Kocharli interprets “molla” as a title indicating the poet’s religious and educational level. He famously states: “It can be said with fairness that the founder of Turkish literature is Molla Muhammad Baghdadi.” This authoritative judgment from the founder of Azerbaijani literary historiography confirms the importance of the title “molla” in understanding Fuzuli’s place in literary history.

Western Scholarship and the Question of Titles

It is noteworthy that Western scholars of Ottoman poetry, such as E. J. W. Gibb (author of *A History of Ottoman Poetry*), refer to Fuzuli simply as “Fuzuli of Baghdad” without using “molla” or “mevlana”. Gibb describes Fuzuli as having “achieved fame with the originality of his genius” and representing “the sun that shines with its own light in the East”. He declares that there is no greater name in all Turkish literature than Fuzuli.

The absence of honorific titles in Gibb’s work can be explained by the different conventions of Western literary scholarship. Gibb evaluated Fuzuli based on his poetic power and universal literary merit, not on his religious or scholarly status. Similarly, the French orientalist Edmond Fazy, in his *Anthologie de l’Amour Turc* (Anthology of Turkish Love), calls Fuzuli “the greatest lyric poet of the Asian literary school” without using any religious title. Fazy sought to present Fuzuli’s poetic identity to the French reader. Had he used “molla”, he would have created the image of a religious scholar rather than a world-class poet.

This contrast between Eastern and Western scholarly traditions highlights that the use of “molla” and “mevlana” for Fuzuli is deeply embedded in the specific cultural and religious context of the classical Islamic world. These titles are not arbitrary but reflect the values and hierarchies of that world.

Comparative Perspective: Other Poets Called “Molla”

Fuzuli is not the only poet in Azerbaijani literature to be called “molla”. Two other notable examples are Molla Panah Vagif (18th century) and Molla Juma (19th century). Vagif, who studied the Eastern sciences under Molla Muhammad Shafi, worked as a schoolteacher in a mosque, learned Arabic and Persian, and became familiar with religious sciences – all of which led to him receiving the title “molla”. Vagif’s poetry, while not exclusively religious, reflects his deep knowledge of classical Eastern literature and Islamic culture.

Molla Juma’s literary heritage is almost entirely built on Islamic and Eastern mythology. He based his works on the Qur’an, promoting honest living and righteousness. The depth of knowledge, life experience, and worldview evident in his poetry, combined with his skillful application of religious knowledge, resulted in him being given the title “molla”.

These examples confirm that in Azerbaijani literary tradition, “molla” was used for poets who combined literary talent with deep religious and philosophical learning. Fuzuli, as the greatest representative of this tradition, was naturally accorded this title.

Conclusion

The analysis of tazkiras from the 16th to the 19th century shows that the word “molla” in relation to Fuzuli indicates his education, erudition, and leading position in the intellectual sphere. Fuzuli received religious education from a young age and deeply mastered numerous religious and philosophical works in Arabic and Persian. The title “molla” symbolizes this education and knowledge.

The use of “mövlana” (mevlana) similarly reflects the poet’s high status as a philosopher and spiritual guide. In the Ottoman literary milieu, “mevlana” was not simply a religious title but a comprehensive symbol of philosophical depth and moral perfection. By calling Fuzuli “Mevlana”, tazkira writers

placed him in the same category as Jalal al-Din Rumi – as a guide who calls people to become perfect through the integration of knowledge and spirituality.

These titles do not limit Fuzuli’s personality to a religious framework but rather present him as a person familiar with both universal sciences and religious knowledge. As Hasibe Mazioglu noted, to understand Fuzuli’s mastery of Arabic, Persian, and Turkish, and his profound knowledge of religious sciences, one must examine his works – and for this reason, sources call him “Mevlana Fuzuli”. The use of “molla” and “mevlana” for Fuzuli is thus a fitting recognition of his encyclopedic learning, philosophical depth, and poetic genius.

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