

Artistic Identity Across Cultures: A Comparative Study of Irving Stone's *The Agony and the Ecstasy* and Oybek's *Navoiy*

Makhfirat U. Hikmatova

Chief Specialist, Master's Degree Holder

Bukhara State Medical Institute Named After Abu Ali ibn Sino, Bukhara, Uzbekistan

makhfiratkikhikmatova1402@gmail.com



Abstract

This article examines the construction of artistic identity in Irving Stone's *The Agony and the Ecstasy* and Oybek's *Navoiy* from a comparative literary perspective. Although the novels emerge from different linguistic, cultural, historical, and aesthetic traditions, both transform historically significant creative personalities into literary protagonists and explore the relationship between individual vocation, creative labour, social responsibility, and cultural memory. The study focuses on Michelangelo and Alisher Navoi and compares four dimensions of their literary representation. They are artistic vocation, creative struggle, the relationship between the creator and society, and the cultural function of artistic production. The analysis demonstrates that Stone constructs Michelangelo predominantly as an autonomous artist whose identity develops through material engagement, discipline, physical labour, and resistance to external limitations. Oybek, by contrast, presents Navoi as a poet-intellectual whose creative identity is closely connected with language, moral values, social responsibility, and the cultural development of his society. The comparison shows that artistic identity is represented in both works as a dynamic process rather than an innate and unchanging quality. At the same time, the two novels reveal culturally specific models of the creator, which are the artist as master and individual creator in Stone's novel, and the poet as cultural and social figure in Oybek's novel. The article argues that the comparison of English and Uzbek biographical fiction makes it possible to identify both universal and culture-specific dimensions of artistic identity.

Keywords: Artistic identity; comparative literature; biographical fiction; Irving Stone; Oybek; Michelangelo; Alisher Navoi; artistic vocation; creative personality; Uzbek literature.

Introduction

Biographical fiction occupies a distinctive position between historical representation and literary invention. It takes the life of a historical person as its narrative basis but reconstructs that life through characterization, psychological interpretation, dialogue, imagery, and narrative selection. Therefore, the genre is especially productive for comparative literary studies because different national literatures may represent similar historical or creative personalities through substantially different cultural frameworks.

Irving Stone's *The Agony and the Ecstasy* and Oybek's *Navoiy* provide a particularly productive pair for comparison. In fact, Stone's novel presents Michelangelo Buonarroti, a central figure of the Italian Renaissance, while Oybek's historical-biographical novel presents Alisher Navoi, one of the major literary and intellectual figures of Central Asian history. Both protagonists are historically documented creative personalities. Although, their literary identities are shaped by different cultural traditions and different understandings of the social function of art.

The choice of these two novels is also significant because both belong to biographical fiction. A description of Oybek's *Navoiy* identifies it as a rare example of the historical-biographical novel and emphasizes that the narrative covers the most productive and meaningful period of Navoi's life, while revealing his services to homeland, people, and literature. Stone's novel similarly transforms the documented life of Michelangelo into a narrative centred on artistic work and the formation of the artist.

The present study is connected with the broader research problem of artistic identity in Irving Stone's fiction. Earlier analysis of *The Agony and the Ecstasy* demonstrated that Stone's metaphorical language represents artistic labour, inspiration, materiality, and struggle. In particular, metaphors conceptualize sculpture as physical labour and the relationship between artist and material as a dialogue. This article develops that line of inquiry in a different direction by introducing an Uzbek literary text and examining artistic identity comparatively.

The aim of the article is to identify similarities and differences in the literary construction of the creative personality in *The Agony and the Ecstasy* and *Navoiy*. The study concentrates on four aspects: artistic vocation, creative labour and struggle, the relationship between the artist and society, and the cultural function of artistic creation.

Theoretical and Methodological Framework

The article uses comparative literary analysis as its principal methodological approach. Comparative literature allows literary texts belonging to different national and linguistic traditions to be examined relationally. The purpose is not to establish that the texts are identical but to determine how comparable literary problems are interpreted through different cultural systems. The concept of artistic identity is understood as a literary construction consisting of several interconnected elements. For example, creative vocation, artistic values, working practices, personal convictions, social relationships, and the creator's understanding of the purpose of art. Artistic identity is consequently treated as dynamic. It develops through experience, conflict, work, and interaction with the historical environment.

The analysis is qualitative and text-centred. The primary texts are Irving Stone's *The Agony and the Ecstasy* and Oybek's *Navoiy*. Particular attention is given to passages in which the authors

explicitly or metaphorically describe artistic work, creative personality, and the relationship between the creator and the world.

Michelangelo And the Construction of the Artist

Stone constructs Michelangelo's artistic identity primarily through his relationship with the act of creation. The protagonist is not represented merely as a historical figure who happens to produce works of art. Artistic activity becomes the central principle through which his character is understood. One of the clearest examples occurs in Michelangelo's description of sculpture: "To sculpture is to remove; it is also to probe, dig, sweat, think, feel and live with it until it is completed" (Stone, 1961, p. 335). The passage combines physical and intellectual dimensions of artistic production. The verbs "probe," "dig," and "sweat" present artistic work as labour, while "think" and "feel" expand it into an intellectual and emotional process. The final phrase, "live with it," conceptualizes the relationship between artist and work as prolonged coexistence. This representation is important for artistic identity because it challenges the stereotype of the artist as a passive genius who creates through inspiration alone. Michelangelo's exceptional ability is demonstrated through persistence. His identity as an artist is therefore constructed through action and endurance. The relationship between artist and material is developed further through the statement: "Stone will speak to you. Listen as you strike with the side of your hammer" (Stone, 1961, p. 50). Here marble is given the ability to speak, transforming the material into a participant in the creative process. The metaphor suggests that artistic creation is not a unilateral act of imposing form on matter. The artist must observe, listen, and respond.

The same principle is visible in the description of Michelangelo's work on the Bacchus: "The marble was tenacious; he was equally tenacious" (Stone, 1961, p. 336). The parallel creates an implicit contest between the artist and the material. Marble becomes an opponent whose resistance tests the artist's determination. The artist's identity is consequently constructed through perseverance. The representation of Michelangelo becomes even more intense during the work on the Sistine Chapel. Stone writes: "Either he was the stronger, and could displace this vault space, or the force of the vault to resist would crush him" (Stone, 1961, p. 538). The vault is conceptualized as an opponent in a physical struggle. Artistic work is transformed into a contest between human will and monumental resistance.

These passages reveal a coherent model of the artist. Michelangelo is the creator who achieves artistic identity through labour, material sensitivity, endurance, and confrontation. His genius is therefore represented not as effortless talent but as disciplined creative power.

Navoi as Creative Personality and Cultural Figure

Oybek's *Navoiy* constructs a different but related model of the creative personality. Alisher Navoi is represented not only as a poet but also as a thinker, statesman, intellectual, and cultural figure. The novel's historical-biographical framework allows the protagonist's artistic identity to develop through interaction with society and historical circumstances. The cultural importance of the novel is emphasized by its representation of Navoi's service to "Vatan, xalq va adabiyot" — homeland, people, and literature. Secondary literary commentary on the novel specifically notes that these dimensions are progressively revealed through the protagonist's characterization. This triad is significant for the present comparison because it demonstrates that Navoi's creative identity

cannot be separated from social and cultural responsibility. The novel also foregrounds the importance of language and literary culture. Navoi's identity as a poet is inseparable from his contribution to the development and prestige of Turkic literary expression. Thus, creativity in Oybek's novel is not limited to personal artistic realization, but also it is connected with the preservation and development of cultural values.

An especially useful primary-source statement comes from Oybek's own account of writing the novel. He explains: "Navoiy she'riyati va Navoiy obrazi hamisha kuchli bir quyosh kabi ko'nglimni tortar edi. O'z asarlarimda shoir Navoiy obrazi yaratishga zo'r mayl, orzu, istagim bor edi" (Oybek, 2017/2018, author's essay accompanying Navoiy). The statement is important because it reveals the author's own conception of Navoi as a powerful creative and cultural figure. The same essay records Oybek's long engagement with Navoi's poetry and explains that he studied Navoi's works and historical environment before creating the novel.

The available digital text of Navoiy begins with an extensive historical-literary setting and places the young Navoi within the intellectual environment of Herat. The opening description of the madrasa, its students, books, and intellectual activity establish culture and learning as part of the protagonist's world. Accordingly, Oybek's model of artistic identity is broader than the identity of an individual poet. Navoi's creative personality is constructed through the intersection of literature, language, intellectual life, political responsibility, and cultural memory.

Artistic Vocation and Creative Labour

The concept of artistic vocation creates one of the strongest points of comparison between the two novels. Both Michelangelo and Navoi are represented as individuals for whom creative activity becomes a central principle of existence. Nevertheless, the cultural meaning of that vocation differs.

In *The Agony and the Ecstasy*, artistic vocation is manifested through physical and intellectual labour. The statement "To sculpture is to remove; it is also to probe, dig, sweat, think, feel and live with it until it is completed" directly rejects the separation of artistic inspiration from work. Sculpture involves the body, intellect, emotions, and time.

In *Navoiy*, vocation is more strongly associated with language and cultural responsibility. The poet's literary work contributes to a broader cultural project. The novel presents Navoi as a figure whose literary service is connected with the interests of his people and homeland. This difference can be formulated as follows: Stone emphasizes the artist's struggle to realize a personal artistic vision, while Oybek emphasizes the poet's contribution to collective cultural life. The contrast should not be interpreted as an absolute opposition. Michelangelo is also a historical and cultural figure whose works become part of collective memory, while Navoi is also an individual creator with personal aspirations and experiences. The difference concerns narrative emphasis. Stone foregrounds the process of making art; Oybek gives greater prominence to the cultural and social meaning of the creator's activity.

Creative Struggle: Material Resistance and Historical Responsibility

Creative struggle is another central feature shared by the two texts. In Stone's novel, struggle is frequently represented through the physical relationship between Michelangelo and his materials. The description "The marble was tenacious; he was equally tenacious" turns artistic creation into

a confrontation of forces (Stone, 1961, p. 336). The artist's identity is strengthened through resistance. The Sistine Chapel passage develops the same model at a larger scale. The vault is represented as something that can resist and potentially "crush" the artist (Stone, 1961, p. 538). As a result, painting becomes analogous to combat. The metaphor does not simply decorate the narrative; it defines artistic labour as a test of endurance.

In *Navoiy*, creative struggle has a more social and intellectual dimension. The protagonist operates within a complex political and cultural environment. His identity develops through the tension between intellectual ideals, public responsibility, political realities, and the interests of the people. Thus, while Michelangelo's struggle is often externalized through material and institutional resistance, Navoi's struggle is more closely connected with the responsibilities of the intellectual within society. The comparison demonstrates that the concept of struggle is culturally adaptable. The underlying structure is similar; the creative personality must overcome resistance. Although the object of resistance changes. For Michelangelo it may be marble, architecture, patrons, or artistic expectations and for Navoi it is more closely connected with social, political, and cultural circumstances.

The Creator and Society

The relationship between the creator and society provides a major distinction between the two literary models. Stone's Michelangelo is frequently constructed through tension with patrons and institutions. His artistic identity depends partly on maintaining a degree of creative independence. The artist therefore appears as an autonomous personality whose vision may conflict with external expectations.

Oybek's Navoi is integrated more directly into the social and political life of his period. His identity is not constructed primarily through separation from society. Instead, participation in public and cultural life becomes part of his identity as a poet and intellectual.

This difference can be described as two models of creative individuality. The first is the autonomous artist, whose identity is strengthened through resistance and personal artistic vision. The second is the socially responsible intellectual, whose identity is strengthened through cultural service. The distinction is important for comparative literary studies because it demonstrates how artistic identity reflects broader cultural conceptions of the role of the creator. The artist is not represented in a cultural vacuum. The meaning of creativity depends on relationships with institutions, communities, language, history, and cultural expectations.

Art, Cultural Memory and Legacy

Both novels ultimately connect creative activity with cultural memory. Michelangelo's works are represented as achievements capable of surviving the individual artist. His struggle is therefore connected with permanence. The physical work of the sculptor becomes a form of cultural continuity. Navoi's literary legacy operates through language and literary memory. His works become part of the development of Uzbek literary culture and continue to shape later understandings of language, literature, morality, and cultural identity. The continuing publication and translation of Oybek's *Navoiy* also demonstrate the novel's place within Uzbek literary memory. The work has been translated into numerous languages, including English.

The two models can therefore be summarized as follows:

MICHELANGELO → artistic labour → material creation → artistic permanence

NAVOI → poetic creation → cultural responsibility → cultural memory

These are not mutually exclusive patterns. Both creators produce works that exceed the boundaries of individual life. The difference lies in the route through which literary representation connects the creator to cultural legacy.

Comparative Discussion

The comparative analysis reveals that Stone and Oybek use biographical fiction to construct creative personalities through different but related cultural models.

First, both protagonists are represented as active creators rather than passive geniuses. Michelangelo's identity is demonstrated through labour, while Navoi's identity is demonstrated through sustained intellectual and literary activity. Second, both texts connect creativity with struggle. In Stone's novel, this struggle is strongly materialized through marble and architecture. In Oybek's novel, the creative personality is embedded in social, political, and cultural realities. Third, both authors establish a connection between individual creativity and a larger cultural legacy. Michelangelo's artistic works become part of the cultural memory of the Renaissance, while Navoi's literary activity becomes part of the cultural memory of the Turkic and Uzbek literary tradition. Fourth, the texts differ in their dominant conception of artistic autonomy. Stone foregrounds the artist's individual struggle for creative realization, whereas Oybek foregrounds the poet's social and cultural responsibility. Finally, both novels demonstrate that artistic identity is relational and developmental. It emerges through interaction with material, language, society, history, institutions, and cultural values. This makes the concept particularly productive for comparative literary analysis.

Conclusion

The comparison of Irving Stone's *The Agony and the Ecstasy* and Oybek's *Navoiy* demonstrates that artistic identity is constructed through a dynamic relationship between individual creativity and the surrounding cultural environment.

Stone's Michelangelo represents the model of the autonomous artist and master. His identity is formed through labour, discipline, material engagement, endurance, and resistance. The quotations concerning sculpture, the speaking stone, the tenacious marble, and the resisting Sistine Chapel demonstrate how artistic creation is conceptualized as physical, intellectual, emotional, and even combative activity.

Oybek's Navoi represents a different model: the poet-intellectual and cultural figure. His artistic identity is inseparable from language, literature, social responsibility, and cultural memory. The novel's emphasis on Navoi's service to homeland, people, and literature demonstrates that creative achievement is presented as a form of cultural responsibility.

The comparison therefore identifies two complementary models of artistic identity: the artist as individual creator and master, and the poet as cultural and socially responsible intellectual. Both models, however, reject the idea that artistic greatness is simply an innate quality. Artistic identity develops through work, commitment, struggle, historical experience, and interaction with society. The study contributes to comparative literary research by placing an English-language biographical novel and an Uzbek historical-biographical novel within one analytical framework.

It demonstrates that the concept of the creative personality provides a productive basis for identifying both universal and culturally specific patterns of artistic representation. Further research may extend the comparison to other English and Uzbek biographical novels and examine the representation of artistic identity through metaphor, narrative structure, cultural memory, and historical imagination.

References

1. Abdulhayrov, M. H. (2018). Alisher Navoiy asarlari izohli lug'ati. O'zbekiston Respublikasi Ensiklopediyasi Davlat Ilmiy Nashriyoti.
2. Bruzelius, M. (2004). Romancing the novel: The biographical fiction of Irving Stone.
3. Khajiyeva, F. M. (2013). Narrator in the biographical novels: A typological comparison. *Academic Journal of Interdisciplinary Studies*, 2(9), 357–360. <https://doi.org/10.5901/ajis.2013.v2n9p357>
4. Kwiatkowska, A. (2013). The reflection of High Renaissance and Mannerism of the works of Michelangelo Buonarroti in the interpretation of Irving Stone in his last biographical novel *The Agony and the Ecstasy*. *Acta Neophilologica*, 15(2), 139–148.
5. Lakoff, G., & Johnson, M. (1980). *Metaphors We Live By*. University of Chicago Press.
6. Oybek. (2018). *Navoiy*. Toshkent: Sharq. ISBN 978-9943-26-783-1.
7. Oybek. (2017). *Navoiy romanini qanday yozdim*. Ziyouz.uz.
8. Ricoeur, P. (1978). *The Rule of Metaphor: Multi-disciplinary Studies of the Creation of Meaning in Language*. University of Toronto Press.
9. Stone, I. (1961). *The Agony and the Ecstasy: A Biographical Novel of Michelangelo*. Doubleday.
10. Hikmatova, M. U. (2025). *Art Through Metaphors in Irving Stone's The Agony and the Ecstasy*. Master's research work, Bukhara State University/Sofia University joint programme.