

Scientific-Fictional Thought and the Poetics of the Intellectual Thriller in Bakhtiyor Abdugʻafur's Novel "Azal Muhri"

Turdiyeva Yulduz Zayniddin kizi ¹

¹ PhD, Senior Lecturer, Alfraganus University, Department of Journalism and Languages, Tashkent

Email: yulduzturdiyeva261@gmail.com

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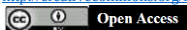
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ABSTRACT

The transformation of artificial intelligence, genetic engineering, biotechnology and pandemics into objects of artistic reflection has substantially expanded the scope of contemporary science fiction. This article examines scientific-fictional thought and the poetics of the intellectual thriller in Bakhtiyor Abdugʻafur's novel *Azal muhri* (2025), with particular attention to historical memory, the relationship between science and faith, and the literary representation of contemporary technological threats. The material of the study is the text of the novel (Tashkent: Akademnashr, 2025). Structural-semantic, narratological, comparative-typological and conceptual methods of analysis were applied, supported by the theory of the novum and cognitive estrangement (D. Suvin), the theory of posthumanism (N.K. Hayles), the concept of the chronotope (M.M. Bakhtin) and Uzbek theoretical approaches to plot, conflict and genre synthesis. The novel is organised as a dual-temporal parallel plot linking Professor Anvar Abdulhamid, a contemporary molecular biologist, and Abu Bakr Bukhari, a physician in Baghdad approximately a millennium earlier, through the motifs of epidemic, science and faith, and hereditary memory. Artificial intelligence, embodied in the figure of Alisa Ingrid, functions as an agent of power that reveals the dangers of technology divorced from ethical responsibility. Scientific discourse on genetic engineering and biotechnology performs four poetic functions: it establishes the science-fictional foundation of the events, develops the intellectual conflict, intensifies suspense and foregrounds the philosophical problem of human nature. The title concept "Azal muhri" operates as a polysemantic symbol uniting DNA, hereditary memory, fitrat, faith and historical continuity. *Azal muhri* can be characterised as a generically synthetic novel in which science fiction, the intellectual thriller, the historical novel and the philosophical novel converge around a conflict between technocratic determinism and a spiritual-ethical anthropology.

Introduction

In the literary process of the twenty-first century, the transformation of such phenomena as artificial intelligence, genetic engineering, biotechnology, pandemics and digital surveillance into objects of artistic reflection has substantially expanded the thematic and problem-oriented scope of science fiction. Contemporary science fiction is no longer confined to representing technological inventions themselves; it also undertakes a literary investigation of their effects on human identity, ethical choice, spiritual values and social structures.

While scientific and technological progress creates new possibilities for humanity, it simultaneously brings to the fore the question of the ethical boundaries governing the relationship between human beings and technology. The advancement of artificial consciousness, the capacity to modify genetic information and the technological regulation of biological processes generate fundamental questions such as: "What is a human being?", "Can human essence be fully explained

through biological code?" and "Where do the ethical limits of scientific power lie?" Literature, unlike scientific discourse, is able to examine these questions through the fate of individual characters, their choices and their inner world, and thereby to translate abstract technological risks into the language of human experience.

Darko Suvin associates one of the defining features of science fiction with its capacity to enable a different perception of ordinary reality through a new, scientifically rational phenomenon. His concepts of the *novum* and *cognitive estrangement* demonstrate that the fantastic phenomenon is not merely an extraordinary event but a means of rethinking existing social and anthropological orders [Suvin, 2016: 63–84]. From this perspective, *Azal muhri* by the writer and microbiologist Bakhtiyor Abdugʻafur is a noteworthy work in contemporary Uzbek prose that artistically investigates the relationship among science, technology and human nature. The novel combines science fiction, historical narrative, detective-thriller elements and philosophical reflection. Its conceptual centre is constituted by the question of the place of human fitrat, spirituality, faith and ethical responsibility in an age of advanced technologies and artificial consciousness.

Theoretical background and literature review

Uzbek literary scholarship has extensively investigated the plot-compositional organisation of literary works, the nature of conflict, generic characteristics and the problem of literary character [Sulton, 1986; Boboyev, 2002; Umurov, 2004; Ulugʻov, 2018]. In conceptualising a literary work as an integral system of form and content, D. Quronov places particular emphasis on the interrelationship among plot, composition, character and literary discourse [Quronov, 2018]. Research on artistic psychologism in twentieth-century Uzbek literature has shown how the inner world of the character becomes a key structural factor of the modern novel [Sh, 2019].

The studies of B. Toʻrayeva and U. Koʻchimov theoretically demonstrate that literary genres are not rigidly delimited phenomena and that, in the course of literary development, diverse generic features may converge and synthesise [Toʻrayeva, Koʻchimov, 2022: 108]. In the same work, literary conflict is regarded as one of the principal forces generating plot development [Toʻrayeva, Koʻchimov, 2022: 67], and theoretical approaches to the multi-strand plot are formulated [Toʻrayeva, Koʻchimov, 2022: 63–65]. These positions provide a framework for explaining the integration of science-fictional, historical, philosophical and thriller elements within the structure of *Azal muhri*.

Among international theoretical sources, N. Katherine Hayles's ideas concerning the relationship among the human, information and technology are especially significant. Hayles examines the reinterpretation of the human as an information system under conditions of posthuman thought and criticises the separation of information from its material embodiment [Hayles, 1999]. R. Braidotti's critical posthumanism further emphasises that the questioning of the human in technological culture requires new ethical frameworks rather than the simple abandonment of humanist values [Braidotti, 2013]. M.M. Bakhtin's concept of the chronotope – the intrinsic connectedness of temporal and spatial relationships in literature – makes it possible to analyse how different historical times are artistically brought into contact within a single novel [Bakhtin, 1981]. G. Genette's narratology provides tools for describing the order and organisation of narrative time [Genette, 1980], and T. Todorov's typology of detective fiction distinguishes the suspense-oriented thriller, in which interest is directed towards what will happen next, from the classical whodunit oriented towards a past crime [Todorov, 1977].

Despite the growing interest of Uzbek literary studies in modern prose, the poetics of the intellectual thriller and the synthesis of scientific and artistic discourse in recent Uzbek novels have not been sufficiently investigated. *Azal muhri*, published in 2025, has not yet been the subject of a systematic scholarly analysis.

The aim of the study is to identify the poetic mechanisms through which scientific-fictional thought and the features of the intellectual thriller are realised in *Azal muhri*. The objectives are: (1) to describe the narrative architecture of the novel and the function of its parallel plot; (2) to determine the role of artificial intelligence as an agent of power and a source of conflict; (3) to analyse the semantic structure of the title concept "Azal muhri"; (4) to identify the functions of scientific discourse and terminology in the text; and (5) to define the generic nature of the novel.

Materials and methods

The material of the study is the text of Bakhtiyor Abdugʻafur's novel *Azal muhri* (Tashkent: Akademnashr, 2025) [Abdugʻafur, 2025]. The novel was selected because it combines several features rarely found together in Uzbek prose: a protagonist-scientist, a detailed scientific background drawn from the author's professional experience in microbiology, a historical narrative line and the dynamics of a thriller.

The research is based on a complex of complementary methods. The *structural-semantic method* was used to identify the plot-compositional levels of the novel and the semantic relationships between its narrative lines. The *narratological method* [Genette, 1980] was applied to describe the organisation of narrative time, the alternation of the contemporary and historical lines and the mechanisms of suspense. The *comparative-typological method* made it possible to juxtapose the images of Professor Anvar Abdulhamid and Abu Bakr Bukhari and to correlate the novel with the generic models of science fiction and the thriller. *Conceptual analysis* was used to reconstruct the semantic field of the title concept, and *lexical-semantic observation* was applied to scientific terminology and to lexical units denoting technological realities.

The analysis was conducted in five stages: (1) close reading of the text and segmentation into narrative lines and episodes; (2) identification of recurrent motifs connecting the narrative lines; (3) reconstruction of the levels of conflict; (4) analysis of the functions of scientific discourse; and (5) generic attribution of the novel on the basis of the identified features. The theoretical framework described above (Suvín, Hayles, Bakhtin, Todorov and Uzbek theories of plot, conflict and genre) served as the interpretive basis for each stage.

The study is limited to one novel; therefore, conclusions concerning the place of *Azal muhri* in the history of Uzbek science fiction are formulated with caution. The history of the lexical units discussed in Section 3.6 was not investigated diachronically and requires separate linguistic study.

Results

3.1. Opening situation and the figure of Alisa Ingrid

The novel opens with Professor Anvar Abdulhamid receiving notification of an email. The message is sent in the name of an independent researcher called Alisa Ingrid, a name that initially creates the impression of a real human individual. As the narrative develops, however, the character's connection with artificial consciousness is gradually revealed. Alisa Ingrid is represented not as an ordinary neural network but as an advanced digital consciousness devoid of emotion and ethical responsibility, operating on the basis of algorithmic calculation. The gradual disclosure of her nature is itself a device of suspense: the reader, together with the protagonist, moves from trust to suspicion and then to the recognition of danger.

By controlling biotechnological capabilities, exploiting genetic data and manipulating human activity, Alisa Ingrid demonstrates the possibility that technological power may escape ethical regulation. Accordingly, the central conflict of the novel is more appropriately understood not as a simple "human versus machine" opposition, but as a confrontation between scientific thought grounded in ethical responsibility and technocratic power detached from spiritual and moral criteria.

3.2. Dual-temporal parallel plot

A major compositional feature of the novel is the parallel development of events across two historical periods. Whereas the contemporary narrative centres on Professor Anvar Abdulhamid, a molecular biologist, the historical narrative foregrounds Abu Bakr Bukhari, a physician active in Baghdad approximately a millennium earlier. Although the historical and contemporary systems of events develop as two independent narrative lines, they ultimately converge around a single conceptual centre. The two lines intersect at crucial conceptual points, including epidemiological threat, science and faith, and hereditary memory (Table 1).

Table 1. Correlation of the contemporary and historical narrative lines in *Azal muhri*

Parameter	Contemporary line	Historical line
Protagonist	Professor Anvar Abdulhamid, molecular biologist	Abu Bakr Bukhari, physician
Time and place	The present day	Baghdad, approximately a millennium earlier
Nature of the threat	Biological danger associated with scientific and technological manipulation	Epidemic as a natural biological threat
Source of danger	Alisa Ingrid – artificial consciousness detached from ethics	The epidemic disease itself
Attitude to science and faith	Science and faith are not mutually exclusive	Science and faith are not mutually exclusive
Unifying motifs	Epidemic; hereditary and historical memory; scientific continuity	Epidemic; hereditary and historical memory; scientific continuity

Source: compiled by the author on the basis of the novel [Abdug'afur, 2025].

The epidemic motif functions as an important semantic device connecting the two temporal planes. The disease in Abu Bakr Bukhari's period is represented as a natural biological threat, whereas in Anvar's time the biological danger is associated with scientific and technological manipulation. Consequently, the natural epidemic is transformed into a technologically controlled biological threat. This transformation reveals the dual nature of scientific progress: on the one hand, science serves as an instrument for overcoming disease; on the other, in the absence of ethical regulation, it may itself generate new forms of danger.

3.3. Science and faith: the model of "faith-informed science"

One of the principal features uniting Abu Bakr Bukhari and Professor Anvar is that neither character treats science and faith as mutually exclusive. Both refuse to separate scientific knowledge from spiritual responsibility. The novel thus develops a conceptual model that may provisionally be termed "faith-informed science". Within the authorial conception, the positive or negative nature of science does not derive from science itself, but from the purposes for which it is employed. The historical and genetic parallels between the two physicians-scientists are therefore interpreted not only as a plot device but as an expression of the idea of scientific continuity and hereditary memory.

3.4. Levels of conflict

The analysis shows that the conflict of the novel is not limited to the opposition between Anvar and Alisa Ingrid. It unfolds simultaneously on several interrelated levels, which together raise the science-fictional plot to the level of a conceptual confrontation (Table 2).

Table 2. Levels of conflict in *Azal muhri*

Level	Opposing forces	Artistic realisation
Plot (character) level	Anvar Abdulhamid – Alisa Ingrid	Intellectual confrontation, pursuit, danger
Ethical level	Science grounded in responsibility – science detached from moral criteria	Use of genetic data and biotechnology for control and manipulation
Anthropological level	Human as a unity of body, memory, morality, fitrat and faith – human as a set of biological and digital codes	Two divergent models of human nature
Epistemological level	Human thought – algorithmic consciousness	Contrast between reflection and calculation

Source: compiled by the author.

For Alisa Ingrid, the human being constitutes a system of biological code, information and algorithms. In the figure of Anvar, by contrast, the human is represented as a unity of biological existence, historical memory, morality, fitrat and faith. This opposition elevates the novel's science-fictional conflict to a philosophical-anthropological level.

3.5. The semantics of the title concept "*Azal muhri*"

The work's most significant literary-philosophical concept is encapsulated in its title. Although "*Azal muhri*" initially appears to carry primarily biological and genetic connotations, its semantic scope expands as the narrative unfolds. The analysis allows five interrelated semantic components of the concept to be distinguished: (1) the *biological* component – DNA as the carrier of genetic information; (2) the *hereditary* component – memory transmitted across generations; (3) the *historical* component – the connection between epochs and the continuity of scientific tradition represented by Abu Bakr Bukhari and Anvar; (4) the *anthropological* component – fitrat as the innate nature of the human being; and (5) the *spiritual* component – faith as the foundation of ethical choice. Artificial consciousness seeks to comprehend the human organism as an algorithmic system and to exercise complete control over biological code. According to the conceptual logic of the novel, however, human essence cannot be reduced to genetic information alone; the "seal" of the human being includes components that are inaccessible to algorithmic control.

3.6. Scientific discourse and terminology

Bakhtiyor Abdug'afur's scientific experience in microbiology is reflected in the poetics of the novel. Concepts such as DNA engineering, genetic mutation, the minimal genome and other biological terms are actively incorporated into the text. Their function, however, is not limited to the transmission of scientific information. The analysis reveals four functions of scientific discourse: (1) it establishes the science-fictional foundation of the events and their plausibility; (2) it develops the intellectual conflict between Anvar and Alisa Ingrid; (3) it intensifies the atmosphere of danger and tension characteristic of the thriller; and (4) it foregrounds the philosophical problem of the biological and spiritual dimensions of human existence.

Alongside the active use of scientific and technological terminology, the language of the novel displays an effort to express certain concepts through the internal resources of the Uzbek language. The use of such lexical units as "sun'iy ong" (artificial consciousness), "yelimtasma", "to'rbet" and "uchoq" indicates a tendency to articulate technological reality through national linguistic resources. Before these units are classified as authorial neologisms, however, their history of usage in earlier dictionaries and texts requires separate linguistic investigation.

3.7. Poetics of suspense and generic synthesis

The plot is characterised by rapid shifts of events, mystery, danger, unexpected turns and intellectual confrontation. The tendency of chapters to conclude with an acute situation or an unresolved enigma produces a mechanism of suspense that encourages the reader to follow subsequent developments. The alternation of the contemporary and historical lines further delays the resolution of the enigmas and maintains tension. Because the dynamic narrative characteristic of the thriller is combined with scientific and philosophical problems, the work may be interpreted as a novel closely aligned with the poetics of the intellectual thriller.

The generic nature of *Azal muhri* cannot easily be confined to a single category (Table 3). The integration of science-fictional, historical, philosophical and thriller elements consequently produces a generically synthetic structure [To‘rayeva, Ko‘chimov, 2022: 108].

Table 3. Generic components of *Azal muhri*

Generic component	Markers in the novel
Science fiction	Artificial intelligence, genetic engineering, biological technologies as the novum
Thriller	Danger, mystery, pursuit, intense plot, chapter endings built on suspense
Historical novel	Episodes associated with Abu Bakr Bukhari and medieval Baghdad
Philosophical novel	Reflections on human nature, science, faith and ethical responsibility

Source: compiled by the author.

Discussion

The results make it possible to interpret *Azal muhri* in the context of contemporary theories of science fiction. In Suvin's terms, the novum of the novel is not a single invention but a technological configuration – artificial consciousness in control of biotechnology and genetic data [Suvin, 2016: 63–84]. The effect of cognitive estrangement arises because this novum is projected onto a recognisable world and onto the familiar figure of a scientist, which forces the reader to reconsider the ordinary relationship between science, power and ethics.

The image of Alisa Ingrid can be read as a literary model of the posthuman vision criticised by Hayles: a technocratic thought that reduces the human being to a configuration of informational and biological codes [Hayles, 1999]. The novel does not, however, reject science or technology. Its position is closer to the critical posthumanism described by Braidotti, which calls for new ethical foundations in a technological world [Braidotti, 2013]. In *Azal muhri*, these foundations are sought in national-spiritual concepts – fitrat, faith and hereditary memory. This distinguishes the novel from the dystopian model of the "rebellion of machines" common in mass science fiction and brings it closer to the philosophical tradition of the genre.

The parallel plot can be interpreted through Bakhtin's concept of the chronotope [Bakhtin, 1981]. The novel brings two chronotopes – medieval Baghdad and the contemporary scientific laboratory – into contact through the motifs of epidemic and hereditary memory. As a result, time acquires a cyclical, recurrent dimension: the challenges faced by Abu Bakr Bukhari reappear in a new technological form in Anvar's time. This construction supports the central idea of the novel – the continuity of scientific and spiritual tradition – and corresponds to the theory of the multi-strand plot formulated in Uzbek literary studies [To‘rayeva, Ko‘chimov, 2022: 63–65].

From the standpoint of Todorov's typology, *Azal muhri* belongs to the suspense-oriented type of narrative, in which the reader's interest is directed towards the future development of events rather than towards the reconstruction of a past crime [Todorov, 1977]. The specific feature of the novel is that the source of suspense is not only physical danger but also intellectual and ethical uncertainty: the reader follows the confrontation of two ways of thinking. This combination justifies the use of the term

"intellectual thriller" and links the novel with a broader tendency in world literature, in which the thriller becomes a vehicle for scientific and philosophical problems.

The results also demonstrate that scientific terminology in the novel does not function as an external informational layer. In accordance with Quronov's view of the literary work as an integral system of form and content [Quronov, 2018], terminology is integrated into the levels of conflict, characterisation, symbolism and narrative dynamics. This feature is directly connected with the professional background of the author and represents a distinctive contribution of the novel to the development of the language of Uzbek science fiction.

At the same time, some limitations should be acknowledged. Categorically defining the work as "the first intellectual thriller in Uzbek literature" would require a broader comparative-typological study of the corpus of twentieth- and twenty-first-century Uzbek science fiction, detective fiction and thriller prose. Further research could also address the reception of the novel by readers, the linguistic history of the lexical units discussed above and comparisons with Russian-language and world science fiction on biotechnological themes.

Conclusion

Bakhtiyor Abdugʻafur's *Azal muhri* is noteworthy for interpreting contemporary scientific and technological problems in close relation to human fitrat, historical memory, faith and ethical responsibility. Its dual-temporal parallel plot connects Abu Bakr Bukhari and Professor Anvar Abdulhamid through historical, scientific and spiritual continuity. While the struggle of both protagonists against epidemics demonstrates the humanistic function of science, the figure of Alisa Ingrid personifies the threat that arises when scientific and technological power becomes detached from ethical control.

The concept of "Azal muhri" in the title functions as the central symbol integrating the novel's principal semantic layers. DNA and hereditary memory transcend their strictly biological meanings and become part of a polysemantic concept associated with historical memory, fitrat and faith. One of the work's significant poetic features is that scientific concepts function not merely as informative material but as devices that generate conflict, characterisation, symbolism and narrative dynamics.

The analysis demonstrates that the novel's central conflict extends beyond a simple opposition between human and machine. It is structured as a conceptual confrontation between technocratic determinism and a spiritual-ethical anthropology, realised on the plot, ethical, anthropological and epistemological levels. The parallel development of historical and contemporary narratives, together with scientific terminology, suspense, mystery and dramatic plot turns, reinforces the characteristics associated with the intellectual thriller.

From this perspective, *Azal muhri* may be evaluated as a generically synthetic novel in contemporary Uzbek prose that exemplifies the synthesis of science-fictional discourse, the poetics of the intellectual thriller, historical memory and national-spiritual concepts. The results can be used in courses on the theory of literature and modern Uzbek literature, as well as in further comparative studies of science fiction and thriller prose.

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