



## Backgrounds and Elements of Reformism in the Works of Ali Akbar Saber

\* Ali Sadeghi  \*\* Firouz Rad  \*\*\* Hossein Aghajani marsa 

\* PhD student in the field of cultural sociology, Olum ve Tahghighat Branch, Islamic Azad University of Tehran, Iran. [ali69198463@gmail.com](mailto:ali69198463@gmail.com)  
\*\* Assistant Professor, Department of Social Sciences, Payam Noor University, Tehran, Iran. [rad@pnu.ac.ir](mailto:rad@pnu.ac.ir)  
\*\*\* Associate Professor, Department of Social Sciences, Islamic Azad University, Tehran, Iran. [marsa886@gmail.com](mailto:marsa886@gmail.com)

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### Abstract

This paper is an attempt to better understand the social, political, economic, and cultural backgrounds of reformism and its elements and dimensions in the poems of "Ali Akbar Saber" included in the book "Hop Hop Name." Reformism in this article refers to a break from tradition or a re-evaluation of it with the aim of achieving modernity. This research is framed within the "reflection approach" and uses "qualitative content analysis" methods to analyze the texts of the poems and "library research" methods to describe and introduce the social, political, economic, and cultural contexts that shaped this tendency. The "reflection approach," along with the approaches of "shaping" and "work as a social institution," forms the three main approaches in the tradition of the sociology of literature. The concept of the reflection approach, which is the most significant trend in the sociology of literature, is that the literary work serves as a mirror reflecting social realities. The findings demonstrated that the rapid and fundamental political and social changes that began in the poet's society in the 19th century and exposed the social space to new concepts and phenomena are directly and clearly reflected in the poems included in "Hop Hop Name." Additionally, the components and dimensions of this reform and reformism were identified and explained. These components include the rule of law, dissemination of knowledge, education of girls, combating superstitions, the constitutional movement, political parties, civil rights, and more.

**Keywords:** Ali Akbar Saber †Tradition †Reformism †Reflection Approach †Qualitative Content Analysis

Corresponding Author: Firouz Rad - [Rad@pnu.ac.ir](mailto:Rad@pnu.ac.ir)



## 1. Introduction

### Problem Statement:

The term " Reformism " which is the fundamental concept of this article, can be defined in two ways: negatively, as the rejection of the current situation and opposition to it, and positively, as the aspiration for an ideal situation. However, a more precise examination reveals that Reformism can take various forms, such as the rejection of the current state with the aim of returning to the past or establishing an entirely new condition.

In this article, considering the historical context and the trends of the period under discussion, Reformism is used in the second sense, meaning moving beyond traditional status to the emergence of modernity, rather than a return to the past. Therefore, in this article, the concept of Reformism is equivalent to terms like "modernization," "modernism," and "progressivism,"

The idea or reality of modernity in the East perhaps became evident with the hostile encounters between the modern world and the traditional world. Specific events that can be highlighted include wars such as the conflict between the Safavid state and Portugal or the Iran-Russia wars, where one side was an Eastern traditional country and the other a relatively modern Western empire. These conflicts exposed the Eastern societies to the military, political, and cultural advancements of the West, creating a stark contrast between the stagnation of the East and the dynamism of the West.

However, the fundamental impact of modernity, which directly manifested in the daily lives of ordinary people, began in the 19th century. During this period, Western countries were experiencing rapid growth and changes in various aspects, including industrialization, technological advancements, and socio-political reforms. In contrast, the East was largely experiencing stagnation, with its traditional structures unable to keep pace with the changes occurring in the West. This disparity quickly widened the gap and exacerbated the relative weakness of Eastern societies, prompting intellectuals to seek the causes and find solutions to change the situation.

Among these intellectuals was Ali Akbar Sabir, who in Azerbaijan, through innovations in language and classical Azerbaijani Turkish poetry, introduced new themes related to societal transformations. Sabir's works reflect a keen awareness of the need for change and a deep engagement with the socio-political issues of his time. His poetry often critiques the existing social order and advocates for reform and modernization, embodying the spirit of transformation that was sweeping through many parts of the world.

### Objective:

The present study aims to answer the following questions:

1. What were the social, political, economic, and cultural conditions and contexts that led to the emergence of the discourse of Reformism during the period in question?
2. What components and dimensions does the discourse of Reformism in the works of Ali Akbar Sabir encompass?

By addressing these questions, the study seeks to provide a comprehensive understanding of the forces driving the desire for change in Sabir's time and how these forces are reflected in his literary works. Through a detailed analysis of Sabir's poetry, the study aims to uncover the underlying themes and motifs that characterize his vision of transformation and to situate his work within the broader context of social and political reform in the late 19th and early 20th centuries.

### Literature Review:

In the sociology of literature, three major approaches have been proposed to explain the relationship between "society" and the "literary work." These three approaches are "reflective," "shaping," and "the literary work as a social institution." In the first approach, reflective, the literary work is seen as a mirror reflecting the social realities of the society in which it was created. This approach suggests that literary works provide valuable insights into the socio-political and cultural conditions of their time, serving as documents that capture the spirit and concerns of their era.

The second approach, shaping, considers the effects of the literary work on society. According to this perspective, literature not only reflects social realities but also plays a role in shaping them by influencing public opinion, social attitudes, and cultural norms. Literary works can inspire change by challenging existing values and proposing new ways of thinking, thereby contributing to the transformation of society.

The third approach views the literary work as a social institution. This perspective emphasizes the role of literature as an integral part of the social and cultural fabric, functioning alongside other institutions such as education, politics, and religion. Literary works are seen as active participants in the construction of social reality, with their production and reception being influenced by and influencing the broader social context.

The predominant tradition in the sociology of literature is the reflective approach, which consists of several theories. Some theories prioritize the content of the literary work, focusing on the themes, characters, and narratives that reflect social realities. Others concentrate on the form and structure of the work, analyzing how literary techniques and conventions convey social meanings. The most prominent and well-known theory in the sociology of literature is Lucien Goldmann's "genetic structuralism," which belongs to the latter category and is a pioneer in this field. Goldmann's theory suggests that literary works are structured by the socio-historical conditions in which they are produced and that understanding these structures requires an analysis of both the content and form of the work.

Research on Sabir's works includes several significant contributions. Among these are:

1. The book "Azerbaijan Literature Materials" by Firidun bey Kocharli, which dedicates a section to Sabir, offering insights into his contributions to Azerbaijani literature.
2. "A View to the History of Azerbaijani Literature" by Javad Heyat, which contains a relatively detailed section on Sabir, discussing his influence on the literary and cultural developments of his time.
3. "Azeri and Persian Literature in Iranian Azerbaijan in the Twentieth Century" by Sakineh Berenjian, translated by Dr. Ismail Faqih, which explores the interplay between Azerbaijani and Persian literary traditions and the role of figures like Sabir in shaping these interactions.
4. "Hidden Dimensions of Azerbaijani Literature in the Soviet Era" by Malihe S. Tyrrell, translated by Dr. Ismail Faqih, which examines the impact of Soviet policies on Azerbaijani literature and includes a discussion of Sabir's legacy in this context.
5. "Azerbaijan and Russia" by Tadeusz Swietochowski, translated by Kazem Firouzmand, which provides a historical overview of Azerbaijani-Russian relations and their influence on Azerbaijani culture and literature.



### Methodology:

This research is a descriptive-analytical study. Given the theoretical framework based on the reflection approach and specifically the analysis of the content of literary works, the use of qualitative methods is necessary. As mentioned, the focus of this study will be on examining the themes and content of literary works, hence content analysis is chosen as the method.

Two methods are employed in this study: the main method is "qualitative content analysis" for analyzing the data, and the "library research" method is used to describe the historical, social, political, and cultural contexts of the discussed period and the personal life background of Mirza Ali Akbar Sabir. The qualitative content analysis method involves a detailed examination of Sabir's poetry to identify recurring themes, motifs, and patterns that reflect his views on transformation, Reformism and modernization. The library research method provides the necessary contextual information to situate Sabir's work within the broader historical and cultural landscape, allowing for a deeper understanding of the influences and conditions that shaped his literary output.

### Research Findings:

With the annexation of the northern part of Azerbaijan to the Russian Empire following the Iran-Russia wars, the northern and southern regions of Azerbaijan faced distinct historical trajectories. Despite a relatively long period, until the rise of the Communist and Pahlavi regimes in the north and south respectively, significant social separation between these two parts of Azerbaijan did not occur, and ordinary interactions among the people continued, with developments in one part often influencing the other.

However, in the northern region, influenced by the social realities and developments in Russia, the scope and pace of social changes and encounters with modernization and Westernization were more pronounced. During this period, the people's response to Russian rule initially took on a passive form. Alongside this, the weakening of the scattered feudal system, based on separate units, and the establishment of a unified economic system instead, created the possibility of cultural and identity unity.

In this period, Azerbaijani society, in confronting its new structure and social realities, was inevitably forced to reassess and define its cultural and identity relations with the Russians. Looking at this period, three major orientations in dealing with the Russian nation and related developments can be observed:

The first orientation, known as "Ananachi", was characterized by a conservative nature and aimed to preserve all traditions from the pre-occupation era.

The second orientation, "Gharbchi", was completely opposed to the first group and believed in adopting Western thought and civilization.

The third trend, the "Eslahatchi" or "reformist", took a moderate approach, synthesizing between the previous two trends and seeking a middle ground. This third trend manifested itself as a movement towards reformist teachings.

The reformists believed that despotism, oppression, and social problems could be alleviated by acquiring knowledge from the people and opposed the common characteristics of traditional society, such as absolutism and religious prejudice, and believed that education could also contribute to reform in society and politics. In the evolution of "reformism", two stages can be discerned:

The first stage belongs to the 19th century, during which the traditional system dominated society, and the reformist movement aimed to reform this system and make it more humane. Components of the reformist movement in this period included combating religious fanaticism,

superstitions, and ignorance. This movement is associated with figures such as Bakikhanov, Akhundzade, Zardabi, Vizirov, and Zakiyev.

The second stage relates to the late 19th and early 20th centuries. The reformist movement in this stage became more radical and revolutionary, demonstrating greater decisiveness in pursuing its goals. Important figures of this phase include Jalil Mammadguluzadeh, Ali Akbar Sabir, Naamanzadeh, Hajibeyov, Aghamalı Oghlu, and Nariman Narimanov.

Ali Akbar Sabir, with a realistic view of social issues, became the founder of a school in Azerbaijani poetry where social and political themes gained greater importance and priority compared to the subjects addressed in classical and traditional poetry. Sabir lived in a period when Asia and the East were in turmoil, and his poetry reflected these intellectual and social changes in the region. He was a thinker influenced by developments in Islamic East and Russia, promoting reformist or revolutionary ideas in various social, political, and cultural domains. He not only inspired other intellectuals but also had a direct impact on arousing and encouraging ordinary people and revolutionary activists. For example, his influence was highly noticeable in the Constitutional movements in Iran. His sensitivity was not confined to Azerbaijan and subsequently the Russian Empire, but extended to issues in Ottoman and Iran, and as mentioned, his poetry was very effective in stirring up constitutionalists in Iran.

Analyzing Sabir's poetry reveals relatively consistent patterns and themes. In most of his poems, two contrasting worlds and worldviews are depicted, with their contradictions illustrated. The traditional world is depicted as resisting against the formation of a new world and its realities, such as: rule of law and constitutional government, education and new schools, education for girls and women's rights, new institutions like representative bodies, parliaments, and parties, new science and its achievements, press, citizen rights, the process of becoming a citizen, social class inequalities, social responsibility, subjectivity and agency for citizens, revisiting religion, and new interpretations thereof, and similar themes.

### Discussion and Conclusion

Ali Akbar Sabir, as a member of the second generation of the enlightenment movement, inherited the intellectual, social, and literary concerns of this movement. At the same time, he experienced significant regional political events, such as the Russian Revolution, the Turkish Constitutional Revolution, and the Iranian Constitutional Revolution. As a result, his works reflect the main themes of these political and social movements while also serving as a catalyst and influencer in political and social currents.

By analyzing Sabir's poems, one can observe relatively consistent patterns and themes. In most of his poems, two opposing worlds and worldviews are depicted, and their conflicts are vividly illustrated. These poems portray the traditional world as resisting the emergence of the new world and its realities. This dualistic portrayal serves as a commentary on the socio-political changes of Sabir's time and highlights the tension between tradition and modernity.

