

The Tale Heard and the Tale Lived: Folklore Heritage in the Child Image of Russian
and Uzbek Prose

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Abstract. Folklore is one of the earliest cultural environments of a child, and childhood prose in both Russian and Uzbek literature draws on it extensively. This paper compares how the two traditions use folklore heritage in constructing the child image. The material includes Lev Tolstoy's *Childhood*, Sergei Aksakov's *Childhood Years of Bagrov's Grandson*, G'afur G'ulom's *The Mischievous Boy*, Xudoyberdi To'xtaboyev's *Riding the Yellow Giant* and Erkin A'zam's *Farewell to the Fairy Tale*. Drawing on Propp's morphology of the folktale, studies of the trickster and the typological method of comparative literature, the paper argues that the Russian texts present folklore mainly as something *heard and remembered*, an element of the child's perception and inner world, whereas the Uzbek texts present it mainly as something *lived*, a model of action through which the child is tested. Folk motifs thus serve the psychological paradigm of childhood in Russian prose and the axiological-ethical paradigm in Uzbek prose.

Keywords: child image; folklore; folktale; trickster; magic agent; Tolstoy; Aksakov; G'afur G'ulom; To'xtaboyev; Erkin A'zam; comparative literature

Introduction

Before a child learns to read, the child already lives inside a world of stories: lullabies, folk tales, proverbs, jokes about clever tricksters and foolish rich men, legends told by grandparents and servants. It is therefore not surprising that literary narratives of childhood so often include folklore. A nanny tells a tale, a grandmother recites a proverb, a boy plays a trick worthy of a folk hero, a magic object appears in an ordinary school. What is less obvious is that different literatures can use the same folk heritage for different purposes. Folklore may enter a childhood narrative as a source of impressions that shape the child's imagination, or as a ready-made pattern of action and moral judgement that the child must live through.

This paper compares the use of folklore in Russian and Uzbek childhood prose. The Russian material is represented by Lev Tolstoy's *Childhood* (1852) [11] and Sergei Aksakov's *Childhood Years of Bagrov's Grandson* (1858) [1]. The Uzbek material is represented by G'afur G'ulom's *The Mischievous Boy* (*Shum bola*, 1936) [5], Xudoyberdi To'xtaboyev's *Riding the Yellow Giant* (*Sariq devni minib*, 1968) [12] and Erkin A'zam's novella *Farewell to the Fairy Tale* (*Ertak bilan xayrlashuv*) [2]. The comparison is typological in the sense established by Zhirmunsky: it looks for the different ways in which two literatures develop a shared cultural resource, without assuming influence from one to the other [14].

The hypothesis of the paper is that the Russian texts present folklore mainly as something *heard and remembered*, while the Uzbek texts present it mainly as something *lived*. In the first case, folklore becomes part of the child's inner world and memory; in the second, it becomes a model of conduct through which the child is tested and judged. This contrast supports a broader observation developed in the author's dissertation research: Russian prose tends to construct childhood within an ontogenetic-psychological paradigm, and Uzbek prose within an axiological-ethical one.

Main Part

Theoretical frame

Two bodies of folklore theory are particularly useful here. The first is Propp's morphology of the folktale, which showed that the wondertale is built from a limited set of functions performed by recurring roles: the hero, the donor, the helper, the villain and others [10]. One of the central functions is the receipt of a magic agent, an object or helper that allows the hero to overcome obstacles. In the folktale the magic agent is earned through a test set by the donor, and its proper use depends on the hero's character. The second body of theory concerns the trickster, the figure who survives in an unjust order by wit, deception and play. Lipovetsky has shown that tricksters enjoyed unusual popularity in Soviet culture, where they turned survival in a contradictory world into a field of creativity and freedom, and he has traced the same figure in Soviet children's literature [7; 8].

These two frames allow a precise question. When a childhood narrative uses a folk element, does it place that element inside the child's consciousness, as a story heard

and remembered, or does it place the child inside the folk pattern, as a hero who must pass a test or play a trick?

The tale heard: folklore in Tolstoy and Aksakov

In Aksakov's book folklore is above all a voice heard in childhood. The book is followed by an appendix, the tale *The Scarlet Flower*, which the author presents as the story of the housekeeper Pelageya, heard many times in childhood and written down from memory [1]. The placement is significant. The tale is not woven into the boy's actions; it stands beside the narrative as a recollected sound of childhood, part of the world of impressions that the book records. Its moral content, the story of love that sees beyond a monstrous appearance, is real, but it reaches the child as something to be felt and imagined, not as a pattern to be enacted. Wachtel places Aksakov at the source of the Russian myth of a harmonious childhood recovered through memory, and the appended tale belongs precisely to that remembered harmony [13].

Tolstoy's *Childhood* contains no folktale, but it contains an equally important figure of folk culture: Grisha, the holy fool who wanders from house to house. In the chapter devoted to him, the children hide in a dark closet and secretly watch Grisha pray at night [11]. The episode is one of the strongest religious experiences of the book, and it is entirely an experience of observation. The narrator remembers the children's awe, the flickering candle and the old man's words, and he reflects as an adult on what that moment meant to him. A similar logic governs the portrait of the old housekeeper Natalya Savishna, a woman of peasant origin whose selfless devotion the narrator comes to understand only in retrospect. In both cases folk culture enters the child's life as something seen and later understood. The value of the encounter lies in its imprint on consciousness and memory.

The tale lived: folklore in G'ulom, To'xtaboyev and Erkin A'zam

In the Uzbek texts folklore works differently. G'afur G'ulom's *Qoravoy* is not a listener to folk humour; he is its embodiment. His adventures among misers, merchants and false holy men repeat the pattern of Central Asian trickster tales, in which a clever and poor hero outwits the rich and the pompous. Fort describes the novella as a childhood picaresque that combines folk humour, the grotesque and the memoir form [4], and a chapter of it is now available in English in the anthology *Tulips in Bloom*

[9]. Babaeva compared the novella with Mark Twain's boy books in a study of the artistic interpretation of childhood in Uzbek and American literature [3]. In folklore terms, Qoravoy does not hear the trickster's story; he lives it. Each trick is a deed performed among adults and judged by the reader against a shared sense of fairness. The folk pattern is thus turned into a moral trial.

To'xtaboyev's *Riding the Yellow Giant* uses a different folk element, the magic agent. The schoolboy Hoshimjon obtains a magic cap that makes him invisible, a motif familiar from folktales across Eurasia, and uses it to gain marks and successes he has not earned [12]. Read through Propp, the novel inverts the folktale logic [10]. In the wondertale, the hero receives the magic agent because he has passed the donor's test, and he uses it to restore order. Hoshimjon receives the agent without being tested and uses it to evade the ordinary tests of school and work. The plot then turns the magic agent itself into the test: a chain of adventures exposes the emptiness of unearned success until the boy returns to honest labour. The fantastic element exists to stage a moral trial, and the folk motif becomes an instrument of upbringing.

Erkin A'zam's *Farewell to the Fairy Tale* takes the relation to folklore to its limit [2]. Here the fairy tale is not a story heard or a pattern enacted, but a whole moral world in which good and evil are clearly distinguished and promises are kept. The child must leave this world because the adults around him do not live by it. The farewell is a moral event: the child discovers the gap between the values of the tale and the conduct of adults, and must decide how to live with that knowledge. Even when folklore is left behind, it serves as the measure by which conduct is judged.

Comparison

The two traditions thus draw on folklore in different ways. In the Russian texts, folk elements, whether a tale, a holy fool or a devoted servant, are placed in the child's field of perception and in the adult narrator's memory. They enrich the inner world of the child and contribute to the formation of consciousness. In the Uzbek texts, folk elements, whether the trickster pattern, the magic agent or the moral world of the fairy tale, are placed in the field of action. They structure the child's conduct and serve as instruments of moral testing.

This contrast should not be read as a claim about national character. Imagology warns against turning differences of poetics into ethnic stereotypes [6]. Russian folklore is

as rich in tricksters as Uzbek folklore is in lyrical tales, and the difference described here concerns the use made of folklore in specific literary texts. It is nevertheless a consistent difference, and it corresponds to the broader contrast between a psychological and an axiological concept of childhood. The Uzbek emphasis on folklore as a model of conduct also has deep roots in the region's didactic literary tradition, from medieval mirrors for princes to Abdulla Avloniy's reformist ethics textbook *Turkiy guliston yoxud axloq* (1913), in which the young person is addressed as a future member of a moral community.

Conclusion

Folklore heritage is present in both Russian and Uzbek childhood prose, but it performs different functions. In Tolstoy and Aksakov, the folk element is heard, seen and remembered: Pelageya's tale, Grisha's prayer and Natalya Savishna's devotion become part of the child's inner world and of the adult narrator's memory. In G'ulom, To'xtaboyev and Erkin A'zam, the folk element is lived and judged: the trickster pattern, the magic agent and the moral world of the fairy tale become frames for the child's conduct and instruments of moral trial. The comparison shows that a shared cultural resource can serve two different concepts of childhood, the psychological and the axiological-ethical. Further research could examine how translations and school editions of these works have presented their folk elements to new generations of readers.

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