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Uzbek Folk Proverbs and Dastans

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ABSTRACT

The national traditions, customs, history, and great values of our people have been preserved and passed down from generation to generation through examples of folk oral creativity. One of the most active, concise, and vividly expressive genres of folk oral creativity is proverbs. Proverbs are brief but carry profound meaning. They reflect the inner experiences, spiritual state, history, and social way of life of the people. Similarly, the role of proverbs in the artistry of folk epics is immensely significant. This article discusses the place of folk proverbs in epics. The functions of folk proverbs within the structure of epics, as well as the purpose behind the narrator's use of proverbs, are analyzed.

Keywords: Epic, bard, proverb, improvisation, poetic solution, Alpomish, variant, version, epic formula, terms, image, Oychinor.

INTRODUCTION

Folk oral creativity is primarily composed of lyrical and epic genres, with epics occupying a central position. Uzbek folk epics embody the destiny, history, culture, and aspirations of the nation. As academician T. Mirzaev emphasized, "Folk epics are a great legacy of antiquity, reflecting the worldview of their era while also capturing the objective state of the national spirit through living traditional creation and performance. Passed down orally across generations, they expand and contract in form and content, serving as literary monuments. They are a unique artistic expression of the heroic events of a people's history, wrapped in the veil of legend." [3, p.21]. Epics are performed by the most eloquent, worldly, and wise bakhshis of the people.

The epic repertoire of folk bakhshis (traditional oral performers) is principally composed of dastans (narrative epic poems) and termas (lyrical-epic compositions). The

bakhshi's repertoire is traditionally transmitted orally from master to disciple. The more robust the disciple's memorization skills, the more faithfully the learned dastan, terma, or episode maintains its authenticity in new performances - though these can never be considered exact replicas of the original.

During the performance process, the bakhshi enriches the epic work through their own creative capacity, introducing life truths, moral teachings, and didactic elements through improvisation. In this manner, dastans undergo continuous artistic refinement, reflecting both the bakhshi's worldview and linguistic virtuosity. The performer's verbal dexterity, along with the depth and richness of their thought and imagination, likewise influences the content of the epic being performed.

As Russian scholar V.P. Anikin observed regarding folklore traditions: "There can be no folkloric works

outside of tradition. Creative acts of improvisation must be grounded in tradition, otherwise the essential nature of events cannot be revealed. The improviser employs ready poetic solutions, concepts, imagery, poetic techniques, and stylistic formulas" [2, p.209].

Dastans (oral epic narratives) occupy a unique position in folklore due to their distinctive nature, encompassing:

- Special form and extensive thematic scope
- Unique expressive style and narrative technique
- Comprehensive quality of absorbing other oral genres

Structural and Functional Characteristics:

1. Embedded Genres:

a) Serve poetic functions like enriching content b) Enhancing dramatic impact of events c) Developing complex narrative structures

2.Paradox of Independence:

a) While integrated, they maintain autonomous generic nature b) Smaller embedded works (e.g., proverbs) gain independent circulation

Example: Proverbs in dastans often prove more vital than standalone versions due to their performance context

Purposes of Proverbs in Bakhshi Performances:

Uzbek folk bakhshis employ proverbs in dastans to:

1. Enrich the epic's thematic content
2. Substantiate their arguments with folk wisdom
3. Develop character portraits and traits
4. Provide concise summaries of events

Case Study: Proverbs in the "Alpomish" Epic

The millennium-old "Alpomish" epic, embodying Uzbek history and worldview, demonstrates masterful proverb usage:

1. Adaptation Techniques:

Sometimes quoted verbatim

Often modified to meet metrical and melodic demands

Always preserves the original meaning and idea

Narrative Context:

Proverbs appear more structurally intact in prose passages

Example: The proverb "A sultan doesn't humiliate his own kin" emerges in Barchin's dialogue: "While I live, I won't answer," she protested. "You took the daughter you wanted from Boysari - would you strike Boysari himself?" When Alpomish returned home, Barchin continued agitated: "There's a saying - 'A sultan doesn't humiliate his own kin.' Must my father live in disgrace among the Kalmaks while you're safe?" [1.209]

The proverb in question exists in two variants, both recorded in the collection "Uzbek Folk Proverbs":

1. "Sulton suyagini xo'rlamas" ("A sultan does not humiliate his own kin")

2. "Sulton suyagini xo'rlamas, olg'ir otini" ("A sultan does not humiliate his own kin, nor does he abandon his loyal horse") [10, p. 2.44].

Meaning and Ethical Message

At its core, the proverb emphasizes kinship loyalty and dignity, urging people to treat their relatives with respect and compassion. The term "sultan" here does not solely refer to royalty but symbolizes any person of noble standing—someone who values lineage and honor. Thus, the saying conveys that a truly dignified individual never degrades their own flesh and blood.

In the Alpomish epic, the proverb serves precisely this purpose—reinforcing the moral expectation that one must protect and honor their family.

Historical and Socio-Political Context

Prominent proverb scholars Sh. Shomaksudov and Sh. Shorahmedov, in their work "Hikmatnoma", provide a deeper historical interpretation:

In the Past: Rulers (hakim class) often clashed with their own kin for power, yet upon their death, they would bury them with grand ceremonies and build majestic tombs—a paradoxical display of posthumous respect.

- In Modern Times: The proverb critiques officials who abuse their power by appointing unqualified relatives to high positions, thus corrupting governance through nepotism [8, p. 379].

The current explanation of the proverb remains somewhat narrow in scope and necessitates broader interpretation from multiple perspectives.

Primary Considerations:

1. Contemporary Usage of "Sultan"

o The term "sultan" in modern contexts (and historically) carries generalized humanistic meaning

o Not exclusively applied to officials/rulers but used universally

2. Semantic Core in "Bone" Lexeme

o Folkloristics recognizes profound symbolic meaning of "bone" (suyak):

o Ancestral spirits believed to reside in bones (cross-cultural phenomenon)

o Taboos against desecrating bones

o Divination practices using astragali (knucklebones)

Ritual games among males involving bone casting

o Shamanic implements incorporating bones [6.128]

Comparative Mythology:

- Academician B. Rybakov traces the immortal Koschei archetype in Russian folklore to Turkic Koshchi traditions [5.318]

- Koschei's immortality derives from his skeletal nature

- Parallel concepts exist globally

- Islamic eschatology references resurrection originating from the coccyx (sacral bone) [7.355]

Functional Analysis in "Alpomish" Epic:

When Boysari's brother Boyburi faces crisis yet refuses his son's help:

- Barchinoy employs this proverb to influence Alpomish

- The "bone" metaphor encapsulates:

Kinship bonds (blood relations), Lineage continuity, Genetic heritage, Essential identity

- Every individual considers their lineage noble ("sultan-like")

Patriotism as Central Motif:

The epic's thematic core incorporates proverbs about homeland:

- "A bird clings to its branch as man to his Homeland"

- Boysari's lament in exile:

"In my land I feasted on royal delights,

Yet dreamed of Kalmak lands,

Like a bird clinging to a withered branch,

I hoped refugees would find shelter..." [1.36]

- Demonstrates proverbs transforming into:

Epic similes, psychological characterization devices, Vehicles for national consciousness

Proverbs as Epic Formulae:

Examples:

1. Original: "When state decays, even a fly claims khanship"

Epic version: "Should power alight on a fly's head,

Even Simurgh birds would bow to it" [1.23]

2. Original: "With life intact, hats can be found"

Epic reformulation: "This moment alone is 'moment' - name no other,

With health intact, count no wealth lesser" [1.23]

The poet Fazil skillfully employs proverbs in the speech of epic heroes to reflect their personalities. One of the central figures in the dastan is Barchinoy, who embodies the courage, intelligence, and dignity of Uzbek women. Her character traits are vividly expressed through the proverbs she uses in dialogue.

1. Proverbs as a Mirror of Barchinoy's Wisdom and Strength

Barchinoy's speech is marked by sharp wit and rhetorical mastery, as seen in her exchange:

"If the master comes, the disciple must step forward,

Is not a woman her husband's vizier?

Can a true man be without wisdom?

Can he not guide others with tact?" [1.27]

This proverb-laden retort demonstrates:

- Her assertiveness in challenging gender norms
- Her strategic mind, using traditional wisdom to justify her stance
- Her role as a moral guide, reinforcing the value of intelligence in leadership

2. Proverbs as Expressions of Loyalty and Pride

Barchinoy's unwavering loyalty to Alpomish is encapsulated in another proverb-rich declaration:

"I have Alpomish, my beloved steed,

A falcon awaits in my saddlebag,

A mighty hero stands by me in battle,

And a trusted camel in my caravan." [1.68]

Here, she subtly incorporates folk sayings such as:

- "If you have a camel in your caravan, your load won't stay behind"
- "He who has a strong camel has no shame"

These lines reinforce:

- Her confidence in Alpomish's strength
- Her own status as a woman of nobility and resolve
- The cultural ideal of steadfastness in love and war

3. The Structural Role of Proverbs in Epic Narration

The "Alpomish" dastan stands as a masterpiece of Uzbek oral tradition not only for its grand narrative but also for its intricate use of proverbs and sayings, which serve two key functions:

1. Enriching the plot by deepening character psychology and cultural authenticity.
2. Enhancing the bakhshi's performance by providing rhythmic and rhetorical flourishes.

4. Proverbs in Historical Dastans: The Case of "Oychinor"

The dastan "Oychinor", performed by the bard Qodir Rahim o'g'li, contains over 40 proverbs, which can be categorized as follows:

A. Proverbs Revealing Character Traits

- "Between the strong and the blind, there is no shame" [4.33]
- "A dried tree won't turn green just because you water it" [4.33]
- "A wealthy man's riches cannot be consumed by the poor" [4.35]
- "A loose bead will never stay in place" [4.43]

B. Proverbs on Leadership and Justice

- "If your vizier is wise, your land will prosper; if foolish, even a thriving land will decay" [4.61]

- "Outwardly human, inwardly a beast" [4.76]

C. Proverbs on Honor and Resilience

- "A bent neck, even if struck by a sword, will not break" [4.101]

- "The eye is tested not by the day, but by the moment" [4.101]

2. Proverbs as Parallel Formulas or Artistic Devices

Proverbs in dastans often serve as stylistic parallels or rhetorical embellishments, reinforcing themes through poetic repetition. Examples from "Oychinor" include:

- "Do not break a branch from a willow—it won't serve as a whip" (25)

- "A nightingale befriends the garden's flower, / A coward cannot tread the path of the brave" (33)

- "A hero is proven on the battlefield" (33)

- "A man's stature does not bend to scarcity, / A coat woven with care will not tear" (33)

- "When gems meet gems, they shine brighter" (33)

Functions:

- ✓ Rhythmic reinforcement – Proverbs often mirror the dastan's poetic meter.

- ✓ Moral contrast – Juxtaposing virtues (bravery, patience) against vices (cowardice, haste).

- ✓ Symbolic depth – Natural imagery (willow, nightingale) conveys cultural values.

3. Proverbs as Tools for Narrative Validation

Proverbs also substantiate arguments and summarize life experiences within the epic:

- "A man grows old, but his heart remains a flower" (39)

- "When duty calls, a man will wade through water

in boots" (73)

- "If oppressed, a man will eat even thorns with his bread" (74)

- "What enters with milk won't leave with decay" (79)

- "Better to shoot and miss than to hesitate" (99)

- "Do not chase after one who does not love you" (111)

- "A parent's death is a man's first sorrow" (116)

- "If unrecognized, do not weep" (123)

Additionally, "Oychinor" includes didactic sayings that blur the line between proverbs and moral axioms:

- "A coat woven with passion cannot be torn"

- "A dried tree won't turn green from watering"

- "Whatever you become, remain true among kin"

These function as "proto-proverbs"—worthy of inclusion in Uzbek paremiological studies.

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