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Genre Boundaries Of The Terms ‘Novella/Short Story/Qissa’ In 20th-Century European Fiction And Uzbek Prose: A Theoretical Comparison

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ABSTRACT

This article investigates the genre boundaries signaled by the terms novella, short story, and qissa across 20th-century European fiction and Uzbek prose. Building on narratology, historical poetics, and reception theory, it proposes a comparative framework that distinguishes terminological usage, structural features, and publishing conventions from underlying poetics. The study combines conceptual analysis with a small, purpose-built corpus of paratexts (prefaces, blurbs, catalog entries) and text-internal markers (focalization, plot architecture, motif density) taken from representative works in German, Anglo-American, Russian, and Uzbek traditions. Results indicate that although length has remained a pragmatic criterion, genre identity is secured less by word count than by dominance of a governing incident (*unerhörte Begebenheit*), by epiphanic closure, or by sectional narration with longitudinal temporality. In European usage, the novelle gravitates toward a concentrated causal core and symbolic motif chains; the short story tends toward epiphanic compression with an aesthetics of omission; and the повесть (often translated “novella”) emphasizes longitudinal exposition. In Uzbek literary practice, hikoya (short story) aligns closely with the Chekhov–Hemingway axis of minimalism, whereas qissa oscillates between the European “novella” and the Russian повесть, thereby producing translation and cataloging asymmetries. The discussion argues that the terms function as mobile labels whose meanings are stabilized by national publishing habits and pedagogical canons rather than by an absolute set of formal traits. Implications are drawn for translation, criticism, and curriculum design in comparative literature.

Keywords: Novella; short story; qissa; narratology; genre theory; European modernism; Uzbek prose; paratext; reception; poetics.

Introduction

Modern literary systems regularly rely on ostensibly stable genre labels to organize reading, teaching, translation, and marketing. Yet the terms novella, short story, and their Uzbek counterpart qissa resist simple equivalence. The 20th century intensified these tensions as European modernism reconfigured brevity into a privileged form for capturing epiphany, alienation, and episodic consciousness, whereas national traditions retained divergent legacies of the novella as a tightly wound narrative built around an exceptional event and of the

повесть/qissa as a middle form between story and novel. In practical terms, librarians, translators, and editors frequently treat the labels as interchangeable, while critics alternately police or dissolve their borders. The present article responds to this conceptual slippage not by searching for a unitary definition but by comparing how genre boundaries are performed across four constellations: the German Novelle, the Anglo-American short story, the Russian повесть and рассказ, and Uzbek qissa and hikoya. Such a comparison makes visible how formal traits, paratextual cues, and reading protocols interact to stabilize

usage in each system.

The inquiry draws on classic genre theory (Lukács, Bakhtin), structural narratology (Genette), historical poetics (Tomashevsky), and reception-oriented perspectives that treat genre as a contract negotiated among authors, institutions, and readers. It assumes that length is neither sufficient nor necessary to secure genre identity, that closure and causal density are more decisive than page count, and that national traditions stabilize different clusters of traits. It also assumes that Uzbek prose, emerging from a multi-layered contact zone—Persianate narrative heritage, Russian imperial and Soviet literary schooling, and later globalizing currents—offers a revealing site where the semantic ranges of novella/short story/qissa intersect and conflict.

The aim is to theorize and test genre boundaries among novella, short story, and qissa by describing their dominant formal and pragmatic traits in 20th-century European and Uzbek contexts, by mapping how those traits are signaled in paratexts and teaching canons, and by clarifying translation choices that affect cross-cultural equivalence. The article seeks to move beyond binary labels toward a model that accounts for family resemblances and institutional stabilization.

The study integrates three methodological components. First, a conceptual review synthesizes key claims from genre theory and narratology regarding middle forms and brevity. Lukács's reflection on the novel's relation to totality and Bakhtin's dialogism provide a horizon for understanding why short forms often foreground isolated value conflicts rather than social totality. Genette's categories of time and mood, together with Poe's doctrine of the "single effect" and later minimalist aesthetics, frame expectations for the short story's compressive strategies. German scholarship on the *Novelle*—from Goethe's formula of an "unheard-of event" to Heyse's "falcon theory"—supplies the traditional core that modernists contest and transform.

Second, a qualitative corpus of sixty items was compiled, consisting of paratexts (publisher classifications, blurbs, journal tables of contents) and short narrative texts spanning the period 1900–1990 in four languages. The corpus was not designed to be statistically representative; it serves to exemplify paratextual self-definition and text-internal tendencies. Each item was coded for declared genre label, length band (under 5,000; 5,000–20,000;

20,000–50,000 words), closure type (epiphanic, moral adjudication, open), and motif density (presence of a governing leitmotif or emblematic object). Additional narratological coding registered the distribution of focalization, the presence of a *Wendepunkt* (decisive turn), and the ratio of scene to summary.

Third, a translational audit examined how qissa is rendered in bilingual catalogues and anthologies and how Uzbek critics describe its scope. This included a cross-check of library metadata where qissa is mapped either to "novella," to "short novel," or to "long short story." Although these sources are uneven, they reveal institutional preferences that stabilize reader expectations independently of strict formalism.

Three recurrent configurations emerged from the comparative analysis. The first configuration is the *Novelle* as an architecture of concentrated causality. In German and Austrian practice, even as modernist experimentation widened permissible technique, the press and academy recurrently framed the *Novelle* as a narrative governed by a single causal core rendered emblematic through a symbolic object or scene sequence. Paratexts regularly invoked a motif that recurred as a hinge—an animal, an emblem, a gesture—while the plot tended to spiral toward an irreversible turn. Length was elastic, but the decisive features were the governing incident and the semantically charged repetition that bound the beginning and end. Closure typically ratified the event's moral or existential force rather than dissolving into ambiguity. In paratexts, the label *Novelle* signaled seriousness of craft and formal concentration, prompting reviewers to evaluate economy, symbol, and turn rather than breadth of milieu.

The second configuration is the short story as epiphanic compression. Anglo-American usage, while far from monolithic, coalesced around an aesthetic of brevity that privileges a felt shift in perception over causal complication. Paratexts often emphasized "glimpses," "moments," and "slices," and critical protocols valorized omission, subtext, and the unsaid. In the texts themselves, focalization tended to remain close, duration skewed toward scene over summary, and closure arrived as an epiphany or a charged stasis rather than a moral adjudication. A symbolic object might appear, but its function was less to bind the causal chain than to catalyze perception. Word counts were lower on average than the *Novelle*, though the range overlapped; what remained stable was the rhetoric of a single effect and the

prominence of silence.

The third configuration is the middle narrative, variously called повесть in Russian and qissa in Uzbek. In Russian traditions of the 20th century, the повесть is neither a miniature novel nor a dilated story; it is a longitudinal form with spacious exposition, looser causal knots, and a tendency to follow a character across a stretch of time sufficient to register social atmosphere. Paratexts and school curricula often encoded повесть as a pedagogically central middle form. In Uzbek usage, hikoya filled the function of the short story, often under strong Chekhovian influence and later minimalist models, whereas qissa oscillated between the Russian middle narrative and the European “novella,” depending on authorial practice and editorial policy. Paratexts labeled qissa even when causal concentration and emblematic closure resembled the German Novelle; conversely, qissa sometimes denoted a work whose longitudinal exposition and sectional structure placed it closer to the Russian повесть. In library mapping, qissa was divided between “novella” and “short novel,” creating diachronic inconsistency that affects translation and cataloguing.

These configurations also manifested in motif density and closure types. The German cluster showed the strongest correlation between emblematic motif and Wendepunkt, with repetition functioning as a structural hinge. The Anglo-American cluster preferred a charged ending where perception rather than action supplied completion, and reviewers rewarded subtextual coherence more than causal inevitability. The Russian and Uzbek middle forms registered greater tolerance for digression and for interludes that accumulate character knowledge across time; closure could be soft, returning the protagonist to a transformed normalcy without dramatic catastrophe. Where Uzbek authors sought to align with European modernist compression, they often retained paratextual qissa rather than adopting novella, producing mixed signals for translators.

The results confirm that the genre labels in question operate as stabilizers of reading protocols rather than as precise taxonomic terms. They cue expectations about the governing logic of form: whether the work should be judged for the force of a single occurrence, the intensity of an epiphanic perception, or the texture of longitudinal life. In the German lineage of the Novelle, Goethe’s and Heyse’s formulas persist as critical myths that shape reception even when texts deviate. The “unheard-of event”

carves out a space where causality is saturated with symbolic meaning, and the falcon theory’s call for an emblem that returns at the climax becomes a rubric by which critics measure formal integrity. Such expectations render the Novelle especially sensitive to motif economy; redundancy is penalized unless it strengthens the emblematic chain. The short story’s modernist canonization refashions Poe’s single effect, Chekhov’s disarticulation of plot, and Hemingway’s theory of omission into a cluster of values that prizes impressionistic unity over explicit resolution. The test here is whether silence resonates, whether the minimal surface presses into a larger moral or existential horizon without didacticism.

The Russian повесть diverges by decentering the event and foregrounding quotidian persistence. Historically connected to the 19th-century exploration of social milieu, the form survives the 20th century by cultivating elasticity in episode sequencing and a tolerance for digression. This elasticity is not lack of form; it is a different contract that privileges the registration of time’s flow in a social field over the concentration of plot. Uzbek qissa inherits both trajectories. Its premodern resonances connoted narrative amplitude and didactic tenor; its 20th-century modernization under the influence of Russian schooling and translation practices pulls it toward the middle narrative. At the same time, Uzbek prose also absorbed European modernist brevity, generating works whose internal mechanics fit the Novelle or short-story logics while retaining the paratextual label qissa. This hybridity explains cataloging inconsistency and complicates translation. Rendering qissa as “novella” may be apt when a governing incident and emblematic closure dominate; “novella” becomes misleading when longitudinal exposition is primary and the work functions like a short novel.

From the standpoint of poetics, length is a weak predictor of genre; the decisive traits are causal density, closure type, and the distribution of narrative time. The short story realizes its brevity when it subordinates causal development to perception and mood; the Novelle realizes its middle length when it concentrates causality around a singular incident; the повесть/qissa realizes its identity when it expands room for exposition without the architecture of a novel. These distinctions are not absolute; they are statistical tendencies reinforced by national institutions and teaching canons. Because paratexts do much of the stabilizing work, they must be included in any serious genre analysis. The observation that Uzbek

paratexts frequently prefer *qissa* regardless of internal mechanics suggests that genre labels are also instruments of cultural continuity and market positioning. Editors may select *qissa* to signal seriousness or to anchor a work in a local tradition, even as the text itself exhibits modernist compression.

The translational audit underscores the practical stakes of these distinctions. When *qissa* is translated into English as “novella,” reviewers and readers import expectations of emblematic economy and a single decisive event. If the translated work instead offers sectional narration and a leisurely accrual of social atmosphere, it risks being misread as formally slack. Conversely, if a concentrated Uzbek *qissa* with a strong *Wendepunkt* is rendered as “short story,” it may be measured against the epiphanic aesthetic and judged overly schematic. A descriptive subtitle can mitigate this problem by signaling the intended reading contract, but curricula and catalogues remain powerful normalizers. The comparative model proposed here therefore argues for a layered tagging practice in criticism and pedagogy: use the local label for cultural anchoring, but append a functional tag that makes explicit the dominant mechanics—“epiphanic short story,” “emblematic novella,” or “longitudinal middle narrative.”

The findings also speak to curriculum design in comparative literature. Teaching the three labels as if they denoted fixed bins forestalls insight into how form moves across languages. A better strategy is to stage the comparison around operative features: causal concentration, epiphanic closure, and longitudinal exposition. Placing representative texts on a triangular map makes visible both family resemblances and national stabilizations. Students then learn why a German *Novelle* can be longer than an Anglo-American short story without forfeiting its identity, and why an Uzbek *qissa* can satisfy the expectations of either depending on internal mechanics. Such a functional pedagogy improves translation choices and critical evaluation because it anchors decisions in formal behavior rather than in inherited labels.

Finally, the analysis complicates commonplace claims about modernism’s effect on short forms. The triumph of brevity in the 20th century did not erase the European *Novelle*’s governing incident; instead, it created a dialogic field where the incident could be internalized as epiphany or externalized as action. The Uzbek case shows that contact-zone literatures can overlay these options on a single label, preserving cultural continuity while

experimenting with imported forms. The result is not confusion but pluralization, provided that criticism articulates the rules of engagement.

The terms *novella*, short story, and *qissa* delimit overlapping but distinguishable genre territories across 20th-century European fiction and Uzbek prose. The *Novelle* is best understood as a form of concentrated causality organized by an emblematic chain and a decisive turn; the short story, as a vehicle of epiphanic compression and the aesthetics of omission; and the *повесть/qissa*, as a middle narrative that prioritizes longitudinal exposition and social atmosphere. These identities are stabilized as much by paratexts and national curricula as by internal poetics, which explains persistent translation asymmetries and cataloging variance. For translators and editors, a double strategy is recommended: retain the local label to respect cultural anchoring while appending functional descriptors that signal dominant mechanics. For pedagogy, a feature-based map of brevity should replace rigid bins, enabling students to read across systems with sensitivity to formal behavior and institutional stabilization. Future research can broaden the corpus, include prosodic analysis of voice in performance media, and model reader reception experimentally to test how labels shape expectation and evaluation.

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