

The System of Characters in Khorezm Folk Tales and their Artistic and Functional Features

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ABSTRACT

This article examines the system of characters in Khorezm folk tales through the lens of contemporary folkloristic approaches. It analyzes mythological, demonological, allegorical, and socio-domestic characters, revealing their artistic functions and their role in reflecting the historical memory, worldview, and moral values of the people. The educational and aesthetic significance of the character system is substantiated on the basis of scientific sources. The study highlights the three-tiered genetic stratification of the characters and their comparative-typological features within the broader Turkic folklore context, emphasizing the unique local specifics shaped by the geographical and historical environment of the Khorezm oasis.

Keywords: Khorezm folklore, folk tales, character system, mythological characters, demonological figures, allegory, artistic function, folkloristics.

1. INTRODUCTION

Folk tales, as one of the most ancient and mass genres of Uzbek oral literature, constitute an invaluable repository of the people's centuries-old worldview, socio-domestic life, and spiritual-moral criteria. The folklore of various regions of the country, particularly the Khorezm region, stands out for its richness, diversity, and distinct local color. In the study of Khorezm tales, fundamental research by folklorist J. Yusupov, *Khorezm Tale and Life Reality* (1997), and the collection *Khorezm Tales*

prepared for publication by F. Abdullaev (1961), serve as crucial primary sources [1: 2].

The relevance of this topic is multifaceted. Firstly, the ongoing reforms aimed at elevating national spirituality and fostering patriotism and humanism among the younger generation necessitate a profound, scientifically grounded study of oral literature, including regional storytelling traditions. Secondly, while general issues of Uzbek folkloristics have been sufficiently illuminated, the internal structure, artistic-functional features, and comparative aspects of the character system specific to the Khorezm oasis have not yet been fully analyzed within a comprehensive monographic framework. Thirdly, in the era of digital technologies, preserving the role of national oral literature in shaping the consciousness of the youth and promoting it through modern pedagogical and informational tools holds significant scientific and practical value.

The “object” of this study comprises the texts of tales widely circulated among the populace of the Khorezm oasis, sourced from F. Abdullaev’s *Khorezm Tales*, the three-volume *Uzbek Folk Tales*, and the *Everyday-Life Tales* compilation. The “subject” of the research is the character system within these tales, their typological features, and their artistic-aesthetic and educational-pedagogical functions.

The “aim” of the study is to conduct a holistic scientific analysis of the character system in Khorezm folk tales, identifying their genetic origins, classification principles, and their artistic-functional and educational potential. To achieve this, the following “tasks” were defined: to elucidate the theoretical and methodological foundations of the character system; to classify and analyze characters in magic-fantastic, animal, and socio-domestic tales; to specifically examine the role of female characters; to compare Khorezm tales with the storytelling traditions of other Uzbek and Turkic peoples; and to substantiate the educational-pedagogical significance of the character system.

The research employs “comparative-typological, historical-genetic, structuro-semantic, and content-analysis methods”. This methodological synergy allows for the analysis of the character

system both synchronically (in its current state) and diachronically (in the process of historical development).

Regarding the “degree of elaboration”, the theoretical foundations of Uzbek folkloristics were established by scholars such as M. Afzalov [3], K. Imomov [4], G‘. Jalolov [5], O. Safarov [8], while the specific features of Khorezm tales were individually studied by J. Yusupov [1] and F. Abdullaev [2]. Nevertheless, the character system has not been specifically investigated as an integral system from the perspective of its hierarchical-functional interdependencies, which defines the “scientific novelty” of this article.

The character system in tales is not merely a product of artistic fiction; it is a mirror of the people's historical memory, social struggles, and aesthetic taste. This article provides a scientific analysis of the character system in Khorezm folk tales, their classification, and their artistic-functional features.

2. THEORETICAL AND METHODOLOGICAL FOUNDATIONS AND CLASSIFICATION OF THE CHARACTER SYSTEM

The system of characters in tales was formed on the basis of the mythological worldview of primitive humans, their animistic and totemistic beliefs, and later, the social relations within class-based societies. In folkloristics, tale characters are classified into several types based on their origin and function. Prominent scholars such as M. Afzalov [3], K. Imomov [4], and G‘. Jalolov [5] have studied the characters in Uzbek folk tales as magic-fantastic, animal (allegorical), and socio-domestic figures. These general patterns are also reflected in Khorezm tales, acquiring a unique character under the influence of the local natural and social environment. The heroes of the tales express the aspirations and interests of the people, advancing the idea of triumphing over evil and injustice.

The systematic study of tale characters in global folkloristics has a long history. Notably, V. Propp, a representative of the Russian formal school, proposed classifying tale heroes based on their functions within the plot. This approach allows for the isolation of roles such as the hero, the helper, the villain, and the

donor. The internationally recognized Aarne-Thompson classification system serves to group tales by plot type. Applying these two approaches to Uzbek, including Khorezm, tales enables the analysis of the character system not only semantically but also structurally. A character must be studied not only as an isolated artistic entity but also as a functional unit within the plot.

Another crucial criterion for classifying the character system is their “genetic stratification.” The first layer comprises characters born from primitive religious-mythological concepts (*Khizr*, *Simurgh*, *div*, *pari*, *ajdar*). The second layer consists of zoomorphic-allegorical characters formed on the basis of totemistic beliefs (lion, wolf, fox, snake). The third layer encompasses socio-domestic characters that emerged from the relations of class society (the rich, the qazi, the shah, the poor peasant, the wise girl). This stratification is conditional; in practice, characters are closely intertwined and can coexist within a single tale text. For instance, in a magic-fantastic tale, the image of a helper animal (allegorical layer) may appear alongside a div testing the hero (mythological layer), indicating the syncretic nature of the character system.

Characters can also be classified by their “artistic function”: the protagonist, the antagonist, the helper-patron, the tester, and the mediator. This functional system finds expression in almost all types of Khorezm tales, although the nature of the characters performing these functions varies across genres.

3. THE SYSTEM OF MYTHOLOGICAL AND DEMONOLOGICAL CHARACTERS IN MAGIC-FANTASTIC TALES

In magic-fantastic tales, mythological and demonological characters occupy a leading position. These characters originated from the primitive ancestors’ attempts to explain the forces of nature and unknown, terrifying phenomena. Khorezm tales feature characters such as *Khizr*, *Simurgh*, the witch *Yalmog‘iz*, *div*, *pari*, and *ajdar* (dragon).

3.1. *Patron-helper characters*

As folklorist M. Afzalov noted, when humans faced insurmountable hardships, they dreamed of escaping darkness and attaining light; this fantastic guide image, later intertwined with Islamic concepts, found its place in tales [3]. In Khorezm folklore, the image of Khizr or a wise old man manifests as a guiding force that leads the hero through trials. Professor G. Jalolov links the ancient roots of the wise old man to patriarchal life: "In Uzbek folk tales, the image of a wise old man who guides and advises the main hero is frequently encountered... this old man is the elder of the tribe" [5]. The advisory role of elders in tribal life served as the realistic basis for the creation of the patron old man in tales.

The image of "Simurgh" holds a special place in Khorezm tales. This bird-totem traces back to ancient Iranian-Turanian mythological systems and is typically interpreted as a symbol of elevation, ascension, and divine assistance. The plot motif of Simurgh appearing during the hero's severe trials and carrying him away from an unfamiliar or terrifying realm is found in several variants of Khorezm tales. This narrative structure artistically substantiates the hero's need for a power beyond human capabilities, while simultaneously highlighting that his honesty, patience, and courage make him worthy of such divine help. Thus, the patron character never appears by chance; it is introduced into the plot as an adequate response to the hero's moral virtues, underscoring the profound moral-didactic essence of folk tales.

3.2. *Characters of evil forces*

Characters such as the dragon (ajdar), div, and the witch Yalmog'iz are symbolic representations of evil forces opposing human intellect and the terrifying phenomena of nature. Through these characters, the people affirm the triumph of light over darkness, intellect over ignorance, and good over evil.

The "dev" typically represents the dominance of physical strength coupled with mental weakness. In Khorezm tales, the div is often depicted as a giant, wild-looking, yet simple-minded and easily deceived creature, promoting the idea that a physically

weak hero can achieve victory through intellect and sagacity. The “ajdar” (dragon) often manifests as a force that captures water sources, depriving the people of water. This image reflects the vital importance of water in arid, irrigated agricultural regions and the necessity to protect and wisely utilize it. Given that Khorezm is historically an irrigated agricultural oasis, this interpretation of the dragon is organically linked to the local ecological and economic conditions.

The “Yalmog‘iz” (wicked witch) appears in Khorezm tales as the ultimate embodiment of ruthlessness, greed, and deceit. This character often approaches the hero under the mask of false kindness, endowing it with special psychological-artistic power: it instills in the child’s mind the understanding that evil is not always overt and can sometimes manifest under the guise of goodness.

3.3. *Magic objects and metamorphosis*

In magic-fantastic tales, the characters’ transformation into various forms (metamorphosis) and their realization of desires through magic objects (flying carpet, magic wand, tablecloth, magic mirror) represent the artistic modeling of the people’s ancient desires for technical and spiritual elevation. Notably, while these magic objects do not hold the status of independent characters, they perform a “mediator function” within the character system – serving as a linking link between the patron and the hero. For example, a flying carpet or a swift horse frees the hero from the boundaries of space and time, while a magic wand grants the necessary power to restore justice. The fact that most of these objects are gifted directly to the hero by a patron (Khizr, a wise old man, a grateful animal) is no coincidence; it reiterates the people’s idea of the reward for virtue: honesty and courage are always supported by higher powers.

4. ALLEGORICAL (METAPHORICAL) CHARACTERS IN ANIMAL TALES

In animal tales, the character system is based on the allegorical expression of totemistic views and social relations. Primitive

humans perceived harmful predators as protectors and worshipped them. With the establishment of class society, the oppressed people increasingly tended to express their discontent in a hidden, artistic form through the images of animals, resulting in the emergence of allegorical tales.

4.1. Social semantics of zoomorphic characters

In Khorezm and general Uzbek folklore, animals are considered permanent allegorical characters. The “lion,” as the king of beasts and the most powerful creature, often represents the image of a cruel and bloodthirsty shah; the “wolf” acts as the embodiment of ignorant, foolish, and violent court officials; the “fox” is the image of a cunning, deceitful, and self-serving trickster; and the “snake” symbolizes malicious, slanderous individuals. Conversely, the “ox” represents hard work and endurance; the “dog” stands for loyalty; and the “sheep” or “rabbit” symbolizes the weak, oppressed people.

A careful observation reveals a strict hierarchical structure within this system of images: the upper tier consists of oppressive ruler images (lion, wolf); the middle tier comprises cunning mediator images (fox, snake); and the lower tier contains oppressed, yet morally pure images (sheep, rabbit, ox). This three-tiered system artistically recreates the social stratification of feudal society – the relations between the ruler, the official-mediator, and the common people. From this perspective, animal tales should be evaluated not merely as a “children’s” genre, but as a complex artistic-political text expressing the social-critical thinking of the people.

4.2. Zoomorphic characters specific to Khorezm tales

For instance, in the tale ‘The Hungry Wolf,’ the wolf’s foolishness and lack of intellect lead to its ruin. In such tales, the people use their satirical and critical eye to expose social ills and the ignorance of the ruling class. Animal tales are based on dramatic performance; during the storytelling, narrators enhanced the impact of the characters by imitating their voices and movements.

The unique natural-geographical conditions of the Khorezm oasis – the close interconnection of cattle breeding and agriculture – are reflected in the relatively active participation of camel, donkey, and bird characters in local tales. On the one hand, such characters are a direct reflection of daily economic life; on the other hand, they acquire specific allegorical meanings: for example, the camel as a symbol of patience and endurance, and the donkey as an image of simplicity and honest labor. This demonstrates that Khorezm tales possess local nuances distinct from the general Uzbek zoomorphic character system.

5. THE SYSTEM OF SOCIAL CHARACTERS IN EVERYDAY-LIFE TALES

In everyday-life (socio-domestic) tales, the character system is directly linked to real life and the socio-domestic reality of Khorezm. These tales are almost devoid of excessive fiction; real social reality is depicted on the basis of realistic invention. J. Yusupov demonstrated in his research how deeply life reality and social contradictions are reflected through characters in Khorezm tales [1].

5.1. *Positive and negative social types*

In these tales, negative characters such as the stingy rich man, the greedy qazi, the cruel shah, and the merciless bandit are juxtaposed against positive characters like Kal, No‘xatpolvon, the poor simple peasant, and the wise girl, who emerge as generalized images of the laboring people. Characters like Kal and No‘xatpolvon, through their quick-wittedness, humor, wordplay, and metaphorical dialogues, shame the representatives of the ruling class, expressing the people's aspiration for justice and truth.

In everyday tales, honesty and deceit, hard work and laziness, courage and betrayal are constantly contrasted. Throughout the tale, the people skillfully utilize small, seemingly insignificant details to resolve the situation.

It is particularly noteworthy that negative social characters in everyday-life tales (the rich, the qazi, the shah) differ fundamentally from the mythological evil forces (dev, ajdar) in magic-fantastic tales: if in the former case evil is interpreted as a supernatural, external force, in the latter, it is embodied precisely within the social system, in the real relations between people. This difference artistically reflects the historical development of the people's storytelling tradition, namely the transition from mythological thinking to social-critical thinking.

5.2. The system of female characters

Female characters occupy a special place in the character system of Khorezm tales. On the one hand, they appear as bearers of positive qualities such as the wise girl, the loyal daughter-in-law, and the kind mother; on the other hand (though rarely), as negative characters like the envious concubine or the unfaithful wife. However, the general trend indicates that the female image in Khorezm tales is most often distinguished by intellect, patience, and moral purity. For example, the daughter-in-law in the tale 'The Slandered Daughter-in-law' manifests the unique mental traits of the Uzbek nation, such as supreme magnanimity and broad-mindedness. By choosing not to punish her slanderers and instead responding, "one should not descend to their level," she demonstrates the people's belief that responding to evil with evil diminishes one's own dignity [9].

Through such characters, the people interpret the socio-familial status of women as a high value: she is not only a symbol of patience but also a bearer of justice and intellect. The image of the wise girl often plays a decisive role in the plot—she solves the complex tasks of the shah or vizier with her intellect, thereby artistically affirming that female intellect is not inferior to male intellect, but in many cases, surpasses it. This aspect can serve as an important source for studying the gender attitudes in Khorezm tales.

6. COMPARATIVE-TYPOLOGICAL FEATURES OF THE CHARACTER SYSTEM

Comparing the character system in Khorezm tales with the storytelling traditions of other Uzbek regions (the Fergana Valley, the Bukhara-Samarkand oasis, Surkhan-Sherobod) and related Turkic peoples (Karakalpak, Turkmen, Kazakh) allows for the isolation of pan-Turkic and local-specific layers within the character system. As a general pattern, the images of the patron old man, the evil div, and the cunning fox are found in the tales of almost all Turkic peoples, indicating their common Turkic mythological-genetic roots.

At the same time, the historical-geographical uniqueness of Khorezm – ancient Khorezm statehood, the irrigated agricultural culture of the Amu Darya oasis, and its location at the crossroads of trade routes – has endowed the local character system with unique features. Specifically, the more active participation of water-related characters (dragon, water fairy) compared to other landlocked regions, and the richer artistic interpretation of certain characters (such as Simurgh) resulting from cross-cultural interactions with Persian-Tajik and other neighboring folklores via trade routes, are prime examples. Such comparative analysis allows Khorezm tales to be evaluated within the general system of Uzbek folkloristics as an independent, yet inseparable, unique artistic-typological phenomenon.

7. EDUCATIONAL AND PEDAGOGICAL POTENTIAL OF THE CHARACTER SYSTEM

The character system in tales exerts a strong influence on the upbringing of the younger generation. As folklorist G'. Jahonogirov noted, children's tales are an important factor that reflects their pure world and nurtures their souls [6]. Through tale characters, children learn noble virtues such as hard work, honesty, patriotism, and respect for elders.

The characters in Khorezm tales develop children's aesthetic taste and shape their ability to perceive beauty. While positive characters awaken feelings of heroism, courage, and justice in

children, overcoming negative characters (stinginess, greed, deceit) strengthens the youth's belief in the ultimate triumph of truth and justice.

From a pedagogical perspective, the mechanism of the educational impact of the character system can be described in three stages. In the “stage”, the child emotionally identifies with the tale character (the process of identification) – feeling as if they are undergoing the hero's trials. In the “second stage,” the child observes the hero's problem-solving methods, thereby assimilating specific behavioral patterns and learning how to act in problematic situations. In the “third stage,” the tale's conclusion – the triumph of good – reinforces the child's basic trust in a just world, creating a crucial psychological foundation for their subsequent socialization.

Furthermore, the education implemented through the character system is not only moral but also national-ethno-pedagogical. The manifestation of local customs, family relations, hospitality, and respect for elders through the actions of characters fosters a sense of national identity in children. In this regard, it is advisable to actively utilize Khorezm tales as an ethno-pedagogical tool in the modern preschool and primary education systems.

8. PROSPECTS FOR STUDYING AND PROMOTING THE CHARACTER SYSTEM OF KHOREZM TALES IN MODERN CONDITIONS

In the context of modern information and communication technologies, developing new forms and methods of delivering traditional oral literature to the younger generation is a pressing task. Promoting the character system of Khorezm tales through digital platforms – multimedia textbooks, audio-video tales, and interactive educational applications – can serve as an effective means of ensuring they reach the consciousness of the new generation.

This approach requires, on the one hand, preserving the original essence and artistic-thematic integrity of the tale text, and on the other, presenting it in a format adapted to the

perceptual characteristics of the modern child. From this perspective, interdisciplinary research based on the collaboration of philologists, pedagogues, and IT specialists is of paramount importance. Presenting the character system of Khorezm tales in a scientifically systematized form as digital dictionaries and electronic anthologies could be one of the promising directions for future research.

9. CONCLUSION

In conclusion, the character system in Khorezm folk tales is not merely a product of artistic fiction, but a mirror of the people's centuries-old socio-philosophical, spiritual-moral, and aesthetic views. The system of characters, ranging from mythological patrons to allegorical animals and real social types, serves the ideas of the people's struggle against evil and the glorification of labor and justice.

The conducted analysis demonstrates that the character system in Khorezm tales possesses a three-tiered genetic stratification: the mythological-demonological, zoomorphic-allegorical, and socio-domestic layers form a single artistic system in organic interconnection. Within this system, each character bears a specific functional load – performing the role of patron, tester, antagonist, or mediator – and this functional precision ensures the artistic robustness of the tales. Furthermore, a separate analysis of the female character system vividly revealed the attitude of Khorezm tales towards gender issues and the status of the female hero as a bearer of intellect and moral purity.

Comparative-typological analysis showed the close connection of Khorezm tales with pan-Turkic folklore traditions, alongside their acquisition of unique artistic-content features under the influence of the local historical-geographical environment (irrigated agriculture, crossroads of trade routes). This once again confirms the necessity of studying Khorezm tales more deeply as an independent subject of scientific research within the system of Uzbek folkloristics.

The contributions of scholars such as J. Yusupov and F. Abdullaev in Khorezm folkloristics serve as the foundation for studying this rich heritage. The character system in tales remains highly significant today in nurturing the younger generation in the spirit of a perfect individual and preserving our national mentality. Therefore, not only deeply studying Khorezm tales scientifically but also continuing to deliver them to the youth through modern information technologies is a crucial factor in preserving our national spirituality. Future research should focus on deeper comparative studies of the character system of Khorezm tales with other regional storytelling traditions, as well as their promotion based on modern educational technologies.

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