

A Study of Folklorisms Based on Religious-Confessional Views

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ABSTRACT

This article presents a philological and theoretical-methodological analysis of the phenomenon of folklorisms based on religious-confessional views. Following the IMRAD framework, the study examines the genesis of the concept of folklorism, its functional-semantic features within literary texts, and its interrelationship with the religious-mythological layer. The investigation draws on a corpus of two historical novels by the contemporary Uzbek writer Isajon Sulton Abu Rayhon Beruniy (2023) and Alisher Navoiy (2021) which are analysed using comparative-typological, hermeneutic, and structural-semantic methods. The findings demonstrate that religious-folkloric motifs in historical fiction operate simultaneously as archetypal foundations, as mechanisms of legitimation, and as vehicles of didactic-critical commentary. Three principal patterns emerge: (1) the syncretic merging of pre-Islamic and Islamic belief layers; (2) the mythopoetic reinterpretation of historical figures (e.g. Musaylima, Bahofarid) as embodiments of "false-prophet" archetypes; and (3) the embedding of ritual practices such as the covering of the Ka'ba and the giving of alms (ehson) as ethnographic detail that authenticates the historical world of the novel. The article concludes that folkloric-religious motifs in the historical novel function not as decorative inserts but as a structural-semantic layer through which the writer mediates between historical fact and collective worldview.

Keywords: Folklorism, religious belief, mythological image, archetype, literary text, legitimation, historical novel, oral tradition.

1. INTRODUCTION

The interaction between folklore and written literature is recognised as one of the central theoretical concerns of contemporary folklore studies and literary scholarship. Within this broader field, the use in literary fiction of folkloric motifs linked to religious-confessional views constitutes one of the most significant manifestations of the phenomenon of folklorism. Religious representations are bound up with humanity's ancient cultural experience and have played a decisive role in shaping the worldview, spiritual values, and historical consciousness of societies. For this reason, religious-confessional motifs are widely reflected across the various genres of oral folk creativity in legends, myths, narratives, ritual songs, tales, and the wider system of folk beliefs.

Despite the substantial body of scholarship devoted to folklore and to historical fiction respectively, comparatively little attention has been paid to how religious-confessional folklorisms function as a structural-semantic device in the contemporary Uzbek historical novel. The present study addresses this gap. Its aim is to identify, classify, and theoretically interpret the forms and functions of religious-folkloric motifs in the historical novels of Isajon Sulton, a major contemporary Uzbek writer. The research is guided by three questions: (1) What types of religious-confessional folklorisms appear in the selected texts? (2) Through what literary mechanisms are they integrated into the historical narrative? (3) What artistic and ideological functions do they perform in the construction of the novel's world?

The theoretical foundations of the study draw on a tradition of folklore scholarship that links narrative structures to religious-mythological substrata. In his *Historical Roots of the Magic Tale*, V. Ya. Propp ties the origin of folkloric plots to ancient mythological and religious representations. In his view, many plot elements in folkloric texts were initially formed in connection with religious rituals or mythological beliefs and only subsequently became structural components of artistic plot.

A. N. Veselovsky, who studied the evolution of epic traditions, similarly emphasises the inseparable link between folklore and religious representations. According to his view, in oral folk creativity religious motifs, fused with historical events, acquire new semantic content. As a result, religious representations appear in folkloric texts not merely as echoes of religious views but as a significant cultural stratum that expresses the historical memory of the people.

S. N. Azbelev is among the scholars who have investigated the connections between folklore and historical thought. In his studies of epic traditions and historical memory, religious representations are interpreted as a constitutive component of the people's epic consciousness. According to Azbelev, in epic folklore religious motifs frequently perform the function of symbolically explaining historical events.

In Western folkloristics, the relationship between oral tradition and religious representations has likewise been extensively researched. In developing the theory of oral tradition, Walter Ong and Albert Lord emphasise that religious motifs played a significant role in the formation of epic thought. In their view, the traditions of oral creativity are tightly bound up with the spiritual values and religious representations of society, and artistic thought is formed on the basis of those traditions.

Against this background, the religious-confessional representations of the peoples of Central Asia have themselves been shaped by a multi-layered historical process, with pre-Islamic, Zoroastrian, Manichaean, Mazdakite, and Islamic strata coexisting and interacting over centuries. The historical novels of Isajon Sulton offer a particularly rich corpus for investigating how this layered religious heritage is recoded in modern literary fiction.

2. MATERIALS AND METHODS

The empirical basis of the study consists of two historical novels by Isajon Sulton: *Abu Rayhon Beruniy* (2023) and *Alisher Navoiy* (2021). These novels were selected because they reconstruct historical periods in which multiple religious systems pre-Islamic

cults, Zoroastrianism, Manichaeism, Mazdakism, and Islam interact, providing a dense field of religious-folkloric material. Supporting reference works include the Uzbek annotated translation of the Holy Qur'an (translated by Alouddin Mansur, 2004) and the *History of the Prophets* (2017), which were consulted in order to trace the religious-textual sources of motifs identified in the novels.

The study employs four interrelated methods. (1) The comparative-typological method is used to identify recurring religious-folkloric motifs across the two novels and to classify them by type. (2) The hermeneutic method is applied to interpret each motif within its literary context, attending to authorial intention, narrative voice, and the symbolic register of the passage. (3) The structural-semantic method is used to distinguish between the surface level of folklorism (motifs and images) and its deeper semantic-structural layer, in line with the distinction between explicit and "hidden" folklorism. (4) Where possible, the historical-genetic method is applied to trace each motif back to its religious-textual or mythological source.

Working from the source novels, key passages containing religious-folkloric content were extracted and grouped thematically. Each passage was then subjected to a four-step analytical procedure: identification of the folkloric or religious motif; tracing of its archetypal or ritual source; interpretation of its semantic transformation in the literary text; and assessment of its narrative function within the novel. The results of this procedure are reported in the following section.

3. RESULTS

3.1. *Pre-Islamic religious worldviews as a folkloric layer in Abu Rayhon Beruniy*

In the first part of the novel *Abu Rayhon Beruniy*, Isajon Sulton provides information about the Sabians and Harranians and their religious beliefs. According to the text, they worshipped idols and held that the world had existed from time immemorial, that souls migrate from body to body, and that the celestial sphere had been cast into infinite emptiness, which is why it moves in a

circular motion. The novel underlines that the religious confession of peoples is directly bound up with their customs, and that human beings have always organised their social life in accordance with their beliefs:

Out of fear of becoming feverish, they declared fish forbidden; the chick because it is always in a feverish state; garlic because it gives headache; and beans because they dull the mind.

The novel also gives information about Zoroastrians, Manichaeans, and Mazdakites and shows that their religious worldviews are likewise tied directly to their customs and conceptions of social life. Each religion has its own leader; whatever practices the leaders perform or whatever they enjoin, those rules and regulations apply equally to all who follow that religion. According to the conceptions of people, religions multiplied across the earth: although all of them arose out of human attitudes towards nature and society, their rules differed somewhat from one another. Furthermore, the objects of veneration of these religions also varied: in Zoroastrianism people regarded fire as sacred and worshipped it; the followers of Manichaeism worshipped buddhas; the Mazdakites venerated idols.

We used to make an idol from rice called hays and worship it. One year there was a severe famine. There was no food left. Then we went and ate our own idol. Afterwards Musaylima emerged from among us. We, the people of Yamama, were deceived by him. At that time people believed that 'God proves his messengers through miracles.' He promised to perform a miracle and placed an egg, soaked beforehand in vinegar, into a glass bottle; he clipped the wings of birds and then attached new feathers to them tailored to fit.

The presence of folklorism elements in this passage cannot be denied, since folk thinking, religious-confessional views, and mythopoetic representations are manifested in synthesis. Scholarly analysis of this text demonstrates that folklorism operates not only at the surface level (the level of motif and image) but also actively in the inner semantic-structural layer.

First, the motif of fashioning an idol from hays rice and worshipping it is directly connected with ancient primitive religious representations, particularly with totemistic and idolatrous views. This circumstance recalls the concept of "a sacred object created by human beings," which is widely encountered in oral folk creativity. Such motifs in folklore frequently serve to express symbolically the helplessness of human beings before nature and divine forces. The consumption of the very same idol during a famine, however, signals a transformation that has come about through the collision of religious belief with pragmatic that is, vital necessity. From the perspective of folklorism, this process is interpreted as the descent of a sacred object into the sphere of everyday need.

Second, the inclusion of the figure of Musaylima in the literary text reflects the reworking of a historical personage in folkloric consciousness that is, the mythological interpretation of historical reality. Here an important feature of folklorism is conspicuous: the transformation of historical events into symbolic and pictorial form in folk imagination. The episodes connected with Musaylima's "performance of miracles" correspond to the motif of "false miracle" or "deception-based magic," which is widely diffused in oral folk creativity. In particular, descriptions such as inserting an egg into a glass bottle or attaching artificial feathers to birds harmonise semantically with folk narratives about tricks, deceptions, or magical acts.

Such elements bring out another important dimension of folklorism its didactic and critical function. That is, through this text not only is a historical event or personage depicted, but false belief, false prophethood, and credulity are also criticised. This is consonant with the function of folkloric texts in shaping social consciousness. In addition, the view that "God proves His messengers through miracles" is given as a generalised model of the people's belief system, through which the question of religious view is expressed in a folkloric register.

The passage analysed displays a complex form of folklorism: primitive religious views, the mythological reinterpretation of a historical figure, motifs of magic and miracle, and a didactic-moral conclusion are harmonised in it as a single integrated

system. From this point of view, this text can be evaluated as a "hidden structure" of folklorism, since elements of folk thought are expressed in it not in open form but through artistic and semantic layers.

3.2. The figure of Bahofarid and the "false prophet" archetype

Similar views can be observed in the section of the novel entitled *The People of Zavzan*. The people of Zavzan consider themselves a community deceived by Bahofarid ibn Moh Furudin. The reason is that Furudin, having spent seven years in hiding in China, brings from there a fine and delicate sky-blue garment that fits in a human palm. He climbs Mount Novvus at night and descends from there in the morning. He tells a peasant that he has descended from the heavens, that God has sent him a revelation, and has clothed him in the garment in his hand. The peasant spreads the news to everyone.

Standing on one knee, Bahofarid commanded that they prostrate themselves before the Sun, grow out their hair and locks, refrain from murmuring incantations during meals, not slaughter livestock unless it had grown old, refrain from drinking intoxicants, refrain from consuming carrion, and perform prayer seven times. Many people followed him. This impostor was killed by Abu Muslim.

The presentation of the figure of Bahofarid in this passage is directly connected with the archetype of the "religious reformer" or "false prophet" formed in folk consciousness. The rules he advances prostration before the Sun, growing the hair, observing certain ethical restrictions, performing prayer seven times daily recall a synthesis of various religious and ritual systems. This circumstance reveals one of the important features of folklorism, namely syncretism: the fusion of various confessional layers within a single image and system.

Likewise, the motif of prostration before the Sun is connected with nature cults particularly sun-worship characteristic of primitive and ancient religious representations. This indicates the preservation of an archaic mythological layer in the text. Such elements in folklore are frequently grafted onto

the activities of historical figures, becoming a means of either symbolically reinforcing them or, conversely, criticising them. In this respect, the depiction of the people who follow Bahofarid is also interpreted as a folkloric model expressing the credulity of the nation and its susceptibility to religious influence.

The killing of Bahofarid by Abu Muslim, in turn, demonstrates that historical reality is presented in folk imagination with a didactic conclusion. Here the opposition between good and evil, true belief and false claim, is heightened in a folkloric manner. As a result, the event is interpreted not merely as a historical occurrence but as an artistic model directed towards the drawing of a moral conclusion.

Furthermore, the strict and ordered presentation of the system of religious rules in the text brings out yet another dimension of folklorism: its normative-didactic function. That is, through narratives of this kind, the boundary between modes of conduct that are accepted and those that are rejected by society is delineated. The evaluation of Bahofarid as an "impostor" shows on what criteria religious belief is formed in folk consciousness.

3.3. The covering of the Ka'ba: ritual, legitimation, and the historical novel

As emphasised above, society contained diverse religions. From the seventh century onwards, with the entrance of Islam, a change occurred in the religious worldview of our people. There are certain explanations for the way human consciousness becomes accustomed to such beliefs and accepts them.

Researchers explain this process through two principal cultural strata. The first stratum is connected with ancient mythological beliefs, in which worship of natural forces and conceptions about various spirits and supernatural powers are reflected. The second stratum embraces religious-confessional views connected with the religion of Islam. These two strata frequently coexist in synthesised form within examples of oral folk creativity. Although Islam had entered, there were still people among the population who remained loyal to their own religion.

Religious folklorisms appear in historical novels in several forms. One of their most important manifestations consists of folkloric motifs connected with religious legends and myths. Among the people, legends connected with saints, holy persons, or religious heroes are employed in historical novels as an important artistic device for depicting the spiritual atmosphere of a given period. Through such legends the writer reveals the religious representations of the people and the image of historical figures in folk consciousness.

In Isajon Sulton's novel Alisher Navoiy, folklorisms permeated with the content and essence of Islam fused with folk thought appear in many places.

A great festival in the lands of Khurasan! Two years ago Shahrukh Mirza obtained permission to cover Allah's house with a kiswa, that is, a covering, and having had it prepared from fine and durable fabrics, he had it draped over the Ka'ba together with Sheikh Nuriddin and Mavlon Shamsiddin. Today that caravan has arrived from Mecca. A thousand thanks the Turkic covering is now upon the Ka'ba said a tall, lean craftsman, unable to conceal his joy.

The covering of the Ka'ba indicated the strength and power of the state. According to folk thought, there was a belief that a state which had covered the Ka'ba would be powerful and rich. In the Holy Qur'an, the construction of the Ka'ba is connected with the names of Ibrahim (peace be upon him) and his son Ismail (peace be upon him).

In the religion of Islam, the Ka'ba is regarded as a sacred place. Among the Arabs, the word "Ka'ba" is applied to a lofty house. The Ka'ba was built by the Arabs in various years, and various legends concerning this circulate among the people.

According to a legend given in the book *History of the Prophets*, just as the people of heaven circumambulate Bayt al-Ma'mur, so that the people on earth might also perform circumambulation, God had the first Ka'ba a likeness of Bayt al-Ma'mur built through angels. The Ka'ba was a second time built by Adam (peace be upon him). After the death of Adam (peace

be upon him), his sons built the Ka'ba from stone and clay. After the Flood, the trace of this Ka'ba disappeared. The Ka'ba was preserved in the form of a hill of red soil. In those times, those who had been oppressed from various quarters would come and offer their prayers there. They would relate their sorrows and perform worship.

After the death of his father Ibrahim (peace be upon him), Ismail (peace be upon him) administered the Ka'ba and the rituals connected with the pilgrimage. First of all, he covered the Ka'ba with cloth.

Concerning the origin of the covering placed upon the Ka'ba, similar legends had been spread among the people.

When the passage cited above from the historical novel is analysed from the standpoint of folklorism characteristic of religious belief, folk religious thinking, the conception of a sacred religious space, and the symbolic-aesthetic interpretation of historical reality are observed to be manifested in synthesised form. This makes it possible to evaluate the text not as ordinary historical information, but as an artistic text enriched with elements of folklorism.

First of all, the interpretation of the event of covering the Ka'ba with the kiswa as a festival shows that the sacred place has been raised in folk consciousness to the level of a solemn and sacred ritual. Here the Ka'ba appears as the central sacred space, and the kiswa as a symbolic device that renews and reinforces sacredness. In folklorism, such depictions frequently perform the function of heightening the religious-spiritual significance of a particular event and of stabilising it in folk consciousness. Furthermore, expressions such as "Allah's house" and "a thousand thanks" produce in the text a model of folk religious speech. These elements serve as an expression of religious belief not as something individual, but as a manifestation of the nation. In particular, the joy of the figure of the craftsman depicts the acceptance of the event by the broad masses. This circumstance expresses the motif of emotion and shared popular joy characteristic of folklorism.

The mention of the name of Shahruxh Mirza in the text indicates the glorification of a historical figure within a religious context. This is connected with one of the important features of folklorism the elevation of a historical figure and the interpretation of his activity as religious service. That is, the historical event is presented not as an ordinary political or social occurrence but as a practice connected with divine will.

In addition, the motif of the caravan arriving from Mecca recalls folkloric representations connected with pilgrimage and sacred journey (the hajj). The image of the caravan is frequently interpreted in oral folk creativity as a vehicle that brings sacredness, blessing, and good news. Here, too, the arrival of the caravan is connected with general festivity and joy.

3.4. The custom of giving alms (ehson) as ethnographic detail and ethical model

The owners of the surrounding stalls, having heard the good news, with the hope of gaining a reward, would treat passers-by especially the children with such delicacies as Mashhad halva, Damascus qurabiya, the smiling pistachios of Juzjon, and the sweet cakes of Shibirgan.

Our analyses show that the custom of giving alms reflected in the text presented above is closely connected with folk thought and religious-confessional views and appears as one of the important manifestations of folklorism. Among our people, the practice of distributing delicacies to those around on the occasion of a joyful event is an artistic expression of the rite of gratitude formed in oral folk traditions.

First of all, the motif of giving alms is inseparably connected in folk consciousness with the concepts of "sharing blessing" and "accumulating reward." The use in the text of the expression "with the hope of gaining a reward" shows that this practice has a religious-spiritual basis. This circumstance is characterised by one of the principal features of folklorism the absorption into the literary text of representations characteristic of ritual and belief. The giving of alms here is not simply generosity but the

expression of a religious-ethical value firmly established in folk consciousness.

The delicacies enumerated in the text Mashhad halva, Damascus qurabiya, Juzjon pistachios, Shibirgan cakes are not only signs of material wealth but also folkloric details that reflect regional and national-cultural diversity. Such concretised depictions perform, in the artistry of the historical novel, the function of bringing reality to life and expressing the milieu in a national spirit. Thus folklorism participates here actively as ethnographic detail as well.

The fact that the process of giving alms is directed especially towards children and passers-by is connected with the motif of compassion and social solidarity, which is widely encountered in oral folk creativity. Through this, the writer advances in artistic form the ideas of humanity, generosity, and concord in society. From this point of view, the episode of giving alms is interpreted not only as a religious ritual but also as a socio-ethical model.

In the context of the historical novel, the artistic function of this motif is manifested at several levels. First, it serves to depict reliably the spirit of the time in which the event takes place, the way of life of the people, and their confessional worldview. Second, it constitutes an important means of revealing the characters of personages: through the figures of the stall owners, a type of generous and devout person is created. Third, the motif of alms-giving performs in the overall plot the function of a poetic device that intensifies joy, blessing, and a positive spiritual atmosphere.

4. DISCUSSION

The four sets of textual material analysed above the pre-Islamic worldviews of the Sabians, Harranians, and Mazdakites; the figure of Bahofarid; the covering of the Ka'ba; and the practice of giving alms converge on a single theoretical conclusion: in Isajon Sulton's historical novels, religious-confessional folklorisms operate as a unified structural-semantic system rather than as isolated decorative inserts. Each of the analytical questions posed in the introduction can now be addressed in light of this finding.

With respect to the typology of religious-folkloric motifs, the analysis identifies four principal forms: (a) primitive-religious motifs (idol worship, totemic objects, food taboos); (b) the "false prophet" archetype, into which historical figures such as Musaylima and Bahofarid are recoded; (c) sacred-spatial motifs centred on the Ka'ba; and (d) ritual-ethical motifs such as alms-giving. The first two forms appear chiefly in Abu Rayhon Beruniy, whose narrative world reaches back into pre-Islamic and early Islamic strata, while the latter two are concentrated in Alisher Navoiy, set in a fully Islamicised milieu. This distribution suggests that the writer calibrates the type of folklorism to the religious horizon of the period being depicted.

With respect to the mechanisms of integration, the analysis confirms the operation of a "hidden structure" of folklorism, in which folk thought is expressed not openly but through artistic and semantic layers. Three mechanisms are particularly evident. The first is syncretism – the fusion of pre-Islamic, Zoroastrian, and Islamic elements within a single image, as seen most clearly in the figure of Bahofarid, whose prescriptions combine sun-worship, hair rituals, food taboos, and a seven-fold prayer cycle. The second is the mythopoetic recoding of historical figures, by which Musaylima and Bahofarid are absorbed into the archetype of the impostor, generating a moral binary between true and false belief. The third is ethnographic anchoring, in which folkloric ritual practices – the *kiswa*, the alms function as authenticating details that bind the narrative to a specific historical and geographical reality.

With respect to artistic and ideological function, the findings indicate that religious-folkloric motifs perform at least four interrelated tasks in the historical novel. First, they fulfill a didactic-critical function, distinguishing genuine belief from false claim and shaping social consciousness as in the punitive narrative arc surrounding Musaylima and Bahofarid. Second, they fulfill a normative function, delineating the boundary between accepted and rejected modes of conduct. Third, they fulfill a legitimating function, presenting historical figures (Shahrukh Mirza) and their political acts (the covering of the Ka'ba) as participation in divine will rather than mere statecraft.

Fourth, they fulfill an ethnographic-aesthetic function, vivifying the historical world and expressing it in a national spirit through concrete material detail.

These findings are consistent with the theoretical positions of Propp, Veselovsky, Azbelev, Ong, and Lord cited in the introduction, all of whom emphasise the inseparability of folkloric structure from religious-mythological substrata. The contribution of the present study is to demonstrate that this inseparability persists in the modern Uzbek historical novel and is, indeed, one of its principal expressive resources. The novel does not merely cite folklore; it operates structurally as a folkloric text, transmitting and reframing the people's religious imagination through the techniques of literary fiction.

The principal limitation of the study is its restricted corpus: the analysis is based on two novels by a single author. Future research should test the typology proposed here against a broader corpus of contemporary Uzbek historical fiction and, ideally, against comparable works in other Central Asian literatures, in order to determine the extent to which the patterns identified are characteristic of the regional historical novel as a genre.

5. CONCLUSION

In conclusion, religious-confessional views employed in historical novels participate as a device that performs a specific artistic function. They serve to reveal the character of personages and to enliven the plot. More precisely, the present study has shown that in Isajon Sulton's historical novels *Abu Rayhon Beruniy* and *Alisher Navoiy*, religious-folkloric motifs constitute a structured semantic system that operates simultaneously as archetypal foundation, as mechanism of legitimation, as didactic-critical commentary, and as ethnographic anchor. The four motif-clusters analysed pre-Islamic worldviews, the "false prophet" archetype, the covering of the Ka'ba, and the custom of giving alms together demonstrate that folklorism in the contemporary Uzbek historical novel is not an external ornament but a structural-semantic layer through which the writer mediates between historical fact and the collective worldview of the

people. Recognising this function reorients critical analysis of the genre away from a purely historiographical reading and towards an integrated philological-folkloristic interpretation.

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