

# A Comparative Analysis of Genre Features in Saadi's "Gulistan" And Uzbek Folk Tales

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**Abstract:** Saadi Shirazi's *Gulistan* (1258 CE) and the Uzbek folk-tale tradition belong to different linguistic, temporal and geographic spheres, yet they share the broad purpose of transmitting ethical wisdom through narrative. This article undertakes a comparative, genre-oriented examination of *Gulistan*'s didactic anecdotes and representative Uzbek folk tales recorded in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Drawing on narratological theory, Persian and Turkic poetics, and Soviet-era folkloristics, the study employs a close reading of one hundred twenty-four Persian prose episodes and one hundred sixty-three Uzbek oral texts filtered through archival transcriptions. Qualitative analysis is complemented by a quantitative mapping of plot functions, actant structures and formulaic motifs. The findings show that *Gulistan* fuses adab prose conventions with sermonising verse to create a hybrid "mirror for princes" genre, whereas Uzbek tales retain epic and trickster subgenres with a cyclical plot architecture governed by formulaic openings and closings. Both corpora employ concise moral coda, but they differ in the distribution of humour, the role of supernatural intervention and the calibration of social hierarchy. The comparative perspective illuminates the historical diffusion of Persianate literary values in Central Asia while underscoring the resilience of indigenous Uzbek narrative patterns.

**Keywords:** Saadi Shirazi; *Gulistan*; Uzbek folklore; genre analysis; narratology; Central Asian literature; adab.

**Introduction:** Genre functions as a set of tacit rules that shape reader expectation and authorial choice, mediating the interplay between social function and aesthetic form. Persian classical literature, epitomised by Saadi's *Gulistan*, crystallised a sophisticated didactic prose-poetic hybrid located at the intersection of ethical exegesis (adab) and courtly entertainment. By contrast, Uzbek folk tales, preserved primarily through oral performance until their systematic collection during the Tsarist and Soviet periods, reveal a decentralised repertoire of epic, humorous, and moral narratives whose structures bear traces of both Turkic shamanistic cosmology and broader Islamic values. While scholars have examined the intertextual migration of motifs—such as the patient dervish, the just king, or the clever servant—across Persian and Turkic milieus, systematic genre comparison remains rare.

The present study addresses this gap by comparing

how Saadi and Uzbek tale-tellers encode moral authority, organise plot scaffolding, deploy character archetypes and shape tone. In doing so, it contributes to three debates: first, the reach of Persianate literary paradigms in Central Asian oral cultures; second, the adaptability of genre conventions across media (manuscript vs. performance); and third, the methodological question of whether quantitative narratology can complement philological interpretation in pre-modern comparative literature.

The Persian corpus comprises the standard eight-chapter edition of the *Gulistan*, amounting to 126 prose anecdotes interleaved with 165 verse passages. Two anecdotes whose authenticity is disputed in the critical Tehran edition were excluded, leaving one hundred twenty-four prose units for analysis. The Uzbek corpus draws on the Academy of Sciences' multi-volume *O'zbek xalq og'zaki ijodi* (1958–1975) and the Karakalpak-region field notebooks of folklorist

Hamidov (1926–1934). After removing variants differing by fewer than three narrative functions, one hundred sixty-three distinct tales remain, representing the animal fable, heroic epic fragment, didactic anecdote and trickster cycle subgenres.

The qualitative tier followed Todorov's genre markers (dominant narrative act, modality, and linguistic register) and Bakhtin's chronotope to trace moral versus entertainment priorities. The quantitative tier applied Propp's thirty-one function model, modified to reflect Islamic narrative cosmology by substituting "interdiction" with "divine decree" where relevant. Each tale's functions were encoded in an XML schema and processed in Python to generate frequency heatmaps.

Lexical density and direct speech ratios were calculated with AntConc 4.0; verse insertions in Gulistan were normalised by excluding hemistich repetitions. Statistical significance of function distribution differences was tested with chi-square ( $\alpha = 0.05$ ). All translations of Persian and Uzbek texts are by the author unless otherwise noted.

The folk corpus necessarily reflects the mediating influence of Soviet collectors who, despite philological rigour, occasionally bowdlerised explicit religious references. Conversely, Gulistan survives in multiple early manuscripts whose minor variants may affect thematic nuance. However, genre-level conclusions remain robust across textual witnesses.

Saadi's anecdotes average 280 words and foreground a concise three-step progression—situation, moral crisis, ethical resolution—often culminating in a rhymed couplet crystallising the teaching. Uzbek tales average 640 words, double Gulistan's length, and display a cyclical four-movement pattern of departure, trial, reward, and communal reintegration. Chi-square analysis confirms significant divergence in Proppian functions: "liquidation" (return to normalcy) appears in 21 % of Gulistan units versus 63 % of Uzbek tales ( $\chi^2 = 42.6$ ). Conversely, "exposure of false hero" surfaces in 14 % of Uzbek texts but only twice in Gulistan.

Gulistan's *dramatis personae* concentrate on four social archetypes: the king, the dervish, the sage, and the opportunistic courtier. Their dialogic encounters dramatise *adab* virtues of justice, humility and wit. Uzbek tales diversify the roster with mythic animals, underestimated youngest siblings, and feminine tricksters such as Zumrad. Kings appear in both corpora but play distinct rhetorical roles: Saadi's monarch embodies the ultimate ethical arbiter, whereas the Uzbek khan is often duped, thereby reinforcing communal egalitarian humour.

Verse intercalation in Gulistan averages 3.2 lines per

anecdote and employs mono-rhymed *masnavi* or *ghazal* fragments, moving from concrete anecdote to abstract gnomic wisdom. Uzbek tales favour formulaic oral mnemonics—"Bor ekanu yo'q ekan" ("Once there was and once there was not")—and tail-rhyme prayers seeking audience blessing. Direct speech comprises 48 % of Uzbek tale surface text but only 31 % in Gulistan, suggesting greater performative flexibility in oral storytelling. Humour surfaces in 37 % of Uzbek texts, often scatological or trickster-driven, versus 9 % of Gulistan anecdotes, where irony is subtle and moralistic.

Shared motifs include the grateful animal, the righteous judge, and the reversal of fortune for the arrogant. Yet their treatment reflects genre goals: Saadi uses the motifs to illustrate timeless *adab* axioms, while Uzbek tellers embed them within localised social critique, frequently highlighting village communal norms.

The data demonstrate that despite overlapping ethical motifs, Gulistan and Uzbek folk tales diverge strongly in genre engineering. Saadi writes within the elite manuscript culture of Shiraz, addressing courtiers and scholars attuned to brevity, intertextuality, and poetic exegesis. His fusion of prose anecdote with lyric insertions yields a polyphonic text whose authority stems from classical Arabic and Persian didactic norms. The Uzbek tale tradition, by contrast, emerges from communal performance, privileging extended suspense, audience interaction, and episodic humour.

These differences influence moral pedagogy. In Gulistan the moral lesson precedes narrative satisfaction; the anecdote's suspense is secondary to the crystallised verse aphorism. In Uzbek tales, catharsis and entertainment lead, with the moral implicitly absorbed through the hero's fate. Such divergence challenges universalist assumptions in comparative ethics: identical themes, such as generosity or humility, operate within distinct communicative economies.

Historically, Persian models penetrated Central Asia via madrasa curricula and court patronage, but their uptake in oral milieus was selective. The king–dervish dialogue, for instance, found resonance in Uzbek narratives yet underwent functional realignment, often satirising the ruler's pomposity rather than confirming his virtue. The resilience of epic and trickster frames suggests a Turkic narrative substrate predating Islamic influence, later syncretised rather than supplanted.

The methodological blend of quantitative narratology and philological reading proved fruitful. Function mapping clarified macro-structural divergence invisible to purely thematic comparison, while close reading

anchored statistical patterns in cultural context. Future studies could extend the algorithmic annotation to Tajik oral prose or digitally trace interlinear Persian citations within Uzbek manuscripts to refine diffusion timelines.

A genre lens reveals Gulistan and Uzbek folk tales as complementary yet distinct vehicles of ethical communication. Saadi's work exemplifies an elite adab hybrid whose authority resides in brevity, poetic gnosis and the persona of the sage. Uzbek folk tales embody a communal performative tradition emphasising narrative pleasure, cyclic structure and social levelling humour. Recognising these contrasts deepens our understanding of Persianate cultural diffusion and highlights the adaptive creativity of Central Asian oral literature. Such insights hold pedagogical value for comparative literature curricula and can inform contemporary retellings that respect genre integrity while fostering intercultural appreciation.

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