

The Origins and Gradual Evolution of The Comedy Genre in Eastern and Western Literature

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Abstract: This article investigates the diachronic development of the comedy genre within the context of Eastern and Western literature, encompassing the period from antiquity to the Middle Ages. Two major aspects of the genre's evolution are emphasized: its earliest manifestations and the key factors that contributed to its subsequent development. The study draws on theoretical frameworks, notably Aristotle's Poetics, to support its analysis.

Introduction: Until relatively recently, the cultural cradle of humanity was widely believed to lie in ancient Greece and Rome. This assumption influenced centuries of scholarly, cultural, and scientific endeavors. However, archaeological discoveries over the past century have increasingly suggested that the true origins of early civilization lie in the East, not the classical West. In contrast to the West, where the comedy genre evolved primarily through theatrical forms, in the East it developed along two parallel lines: as a formal genre and as an integral part of oral folk traditions. Drawing upon these findings, it becomes plausible to assert that the earliest manifestations of dramatic literature can be traced to the East. For instance, a papyrus dated to approximately 1970 BCE contains what is believed to be the first known dramatic scene in world literature. Similarly, early Egyptian literature exhibits proto-generic features of travel narratives and fables. In the East, drama evolved uniquely: in India, it took a complete form during the first millennium CE; in Japan by the 10th–11th centuries; and in China by the 14th–15th centuries.

METHOD

When studying the emergence and development of the comedy genre in Eastern literature, it is essential to emphasize that our homeland holds a unique position among all Turkic countries due to its distinct nationality, traditions, and rich oral folk heritage. Therefore, we decided to examine this genre within the

confines of our own region, without venturing beyond it. The reason for this lies in the fact that Ancient Turkestan, which has been one of the dominant powers in the world for thousands of years, was one of the centers of the very land we inhabit today. Hence, these phenomena reflect the richness of our history, culture, customs, and especially the oral folk creativity embedded in the studied genre. All positive qualities typical of the East are embodied in it. For this reason, to compare Eastern comedic elements with the comedy genre in Western literature, the example of Uzbek literature was chosen for study.

The dramaturgy of the Uzbek people is steeped in centuries of history and tradition. It has existed for a long time in the form of oral plays incorporated into various public festivities such as jesting, clowning, puppet theater, and other mass celebrations. The fact that it has appeared in various forms and is deeply connected with our cultural history indicates that this art form has a syncretic nature. Medieval scholars also had their own reflections on the term "comedy." In particular, the renowned scholar Abu Nasr al-Farabi, who possessed deep knowledge of the world's science, traditions, culture, and customs, expressed the following ideas about comedy:

"As for comedy, it is a specific kind of poetry, which also has a certain meter; it mentions bad character traits, ridiculing people and the nature of their morals that are considered blameworthy and undesirable. Often, it is accompanied by musical intonations, in which the

ridiculed behaviors are recalled. These referenced behaviors involve ugly forms-symbols related to humans, animals, or both.” (Al-Farabi based his reasoning on literary traditions. Also, here the great scholar referred not so much to the genre of comedy but rather to amusing situations. — Editor’s note). Al-Farabi provides a clearer and more detailed definition of tragedy compared to Ibn Rushd. However, the radically different religious and cultural conditions prevent understanding tragedy in the way Aristotle defined it. Indeed, tragedy and comedy are products of different cultural environments, and their comprehension requires a similar context. For Islamic culture, this genre was entirely foreign.

Another medieval encyclopedic scholar, Abu Ali ibn Sina (Avicenna), in his book *Salomon and Ibsol*, devoted the fourth chapter to “The relationship of the number of verses to their intent, especially regarding tragedy.” He stated: “We will postpone the discussion about Geksamatr—six-footed—and comedy, since tragedy is more important than satire and irony.” Ibn Sina also relied on Aristotle’s *Poetics* in his reflections. In antiquity, tragedy was glorified while comedy received comparatively less attention. Ibn Sina continued this tradition. Following the Arab conquests and the spread of Islam, there was some hindrance to the formation of comedy as known in antiquity, because the majority of ancient comedic works consisted of crude and thoughtless jokes, which were unsuitable for our culture. In our sacred religion, mocking others is also negatively evaluated. However, over time, it was understood that comedy could be a means to expose those harming society, false religious leaders, and scoundrels, as well as an instrument for educating people.

The sovereign of the word, Alisher Navoi, although he did not explicitly express his views on comedy, incorporated comedic and satirical elements characteristic of this genre into his works. Navoi’s attitude toward humor is valuable and noteworthy. As an example, one may cite the story in the 131st chapter of the epic *Lisonut-Tayr*. In it, a madman sets off to visit the shrine of Baytullah, but when darkness falls and rain begins to pour, he entrusts his donkey to God and enters a hut. After resting, when he goes out, he cannot find his donkey in the darkness. He addresses God:

“I caused great distress to Majnun,
I angrily spoke to the Creator,
‘Who is the beast I entrusted to you now?
You showed kindness, or so I thought.
If you had not been careless,
Not lost in heedlessness and neglect,

I would have kept my beast safe,
Yet you made it vanish in the dark night!’”

Suddenly, lightning flashes, illuminating everything, and he sees his donkey grazing nearby. Filled with anger, he calls out to God again:

“Oh, my soul is devoted to my body...
With wrath, I treated you harshly.
For I entrusted my donkey to you,
Yet you neglected your duty.
Although I have every right to be angry,
I completely forgot about you.
You should also endure this displeasure,
For I will never shame you,
Do not disgrace me either.”

The madman’s behavior and his conversation with God—sometimes praising himself, sometimes acting petulantly—evoke pure laughter. After all, who dares to address the Almighty with such bold and careless words except a madman? This situation is thus humorous and creates a feeling of laughter.

“If every madman speaks secrets to God,
It can be recklessness or freedom.

For the beloved is the Lord of this world,

Whatever the beloved does is to be accepted.”

If every madman confides in God, this may be seen as innocence and liberty, because such people are beloved by the Creator. Every action of the beloved one is pleasing. Navoi emphasizes that to a person beloved by God, everything is permissible. Even if they commit rudeness, it is not considered sinful. However, not everyone is capable of such behavior, except those whom society regards as wise fools or eccentrics.

As stated earlier, the development of the comedy genre in Western Europe advanced more rapidly compared to the East. Western literary figures considered themselves heirs to ancient literature and modeled their works on all the compositions created by their predecessors. Therefore, in Western literature, for centuries, plots from ancient Greek and Roman works were repeatedly adapted. After the fall of the Roman Empire, Latin became the unifying language for various peoples inhabiting different regions of Europe. Medieval Western European scholars and philosophers wrote their works in this language. Although the exact form of the comedy genre as such was not yet visible in this period, the fable genre can be regarded as its precursor. The fable was a short poetic story intended to entertain people’s minds and was associated with urban literature and close to anecdotal forms. The style

of fables was imperfect and generally simple. Characters in this genre were portrayed as clever, mischievous, wise, or cunning. While originally designed to amuse, this genre gradually laid the foundation for the creation of novels. One of the most famous medieval Western European works, *The Romance of the Fox*, is evidence of this. Likewise, in Molière's *The Imaginary Invalid* and La Fontaine's *Fables*, elements of the fable's plot and style can be observed. In German literature, influenced by this genre, satirical and realistic works known as *Schwank* emerged.

Unlike the East, in the West, comedy sometimes included coarse jokes and themes considered inappropriate. Comedy that relied on crude humor was classified as low comedy. However, some comedies were devoted to social problems and their resolution, which were regarded as high comedy. The division of comedy into such types was mostly based on thematic criteria. The use of coarse jokes in comedy originated in ancient Greek theaters, where this type of comedy was designed for stage performance and was called satire. Satyr characters were half-human, half-animal beings, such as one-eyed creatures. Satyr actors wore special costumes before performances to embody these creatures' appearances. These characters were openly dressed and distinguished by their crude language.

Throughout the centuries, reflections on comedy were studied according to Aristotle's teachings. According to Aristotle, comedy should depict people from the lower social strata and their ordinary way of life. However, today this definition has evolved and become more complex. The medieval researcher Terence Donatus, having studied ancient comedies, stated the following about the names given to Greek comedic characters: "Athenians depicted some people humorously to expose the faults in their lives." German literary scholar Lessing, in his work *Hamburg Dramaturgy*, wrote: "Dramatists who write humor rich in satire increasingly created satirical comedies directed at state officials, endeavoring to name the criticized characters openly." By doing so, playwrights openly exposed corrupt officials who troubled ordinary people and had no business with anyone else. Aristotle's other definition of comedy reads: "Comedy is the representation of relatively worse people," and "Laughter is the diversity of ugliness that does not cause shame or suffering to anyone." Comedy may not cause pain to people but has the power to expose.

CONCLUSION

Although comedic literature exists in all cultures, perceptions of it vary according to each society's moral and cultural frameworks. Western literature has

historically accorded high importance to comedy, leading to its earlier and more diverse development. By contrast, Eastern literary traditions, constrained by religious and ethical concerns, developed comedy more cautiously and in tandem with oral performance traditions. The discrepancy in the development of the comedy genre between Eastern and Western literature spans over four centuries.

This study explores the development of the comedy genre in Eastern literature, with a particular focus on Uzbek literary traditions, highlighting the unique cultural and historical context of the region. Unlike Western Europe, where comedy evolved rapidly influenced by ancient Greek and Roman models, Eastern comedy developed more gradually, often intertwined with oral folk art and cultural norms.

Medieval Islamic scholars like Al-Farabi and Ibn Sina provided early reflections on comedy, although the genre was not fully embraced due to religious and cultural constraints. Comedy was often seen as inappropriate when involving ridicule, but over time it became recognized as a tool for social critique and education.

Uzbek literature, exemplified by the works of Alisher Navoi, incorporates comedic elements that balance humor and moral teaching, often using satire to expose societal flaws without disrespecting religious values. In contrast, Western comedy evolved through influences such as fables and satirical plays, sometimes including coarse humor (low comedy) and more refined social critique (high comedy). Aristotle's definition of comedy as depicting "worse people" and evoking laughter without harm remains influential, though contemporary understandings are more nuanced.

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