

Transformation of Turkic Mythological Archetypes in Contemporary Literature: From Epic Code to Literary Symbol

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Abstract: This study investigates how mythological archetypes from Turkic oral epic traditions undergo transformation, recodification, and symbolic re-deployment in the contemporary literary production of Uzbek, Kazakh, Kyrgyz, Uyghur, and Turkish writers (1940s–2020s). Building on the theoretical framework of mythological code analysis (Lévi-Strauss), archetypal transformation theory (Jung, Neumann), and postcolonial literary criticism (Bhabha, Said), the research analyses twenty-three literary works in which pre-Islamic Turkic mythological figures — Tengri, the Alp hero, Umay Ana, Albasti, the Cosmic Tree, and the Underworld motif — are identifiably redeployed as literary symbols. Six transformation typologies are identified and systematised: continuation, secularisation, inversion, hybridisation, politicisation, and aestheticisation. The analysis reveals that mythological archetypes function as a persistent cultural grammar that authors consciously activate to negotiate tensions between national identity, Soviet-era ideological imposition, postcolonial recovery, and globalisation. These findings contribute to comparative literary studies, Turkic cultural studies, and the theory of mythological transformation in modern literature.

Keywords: Mythological transformation; Turkic literature; archetype; Tengri; Alpamish; Manas; Aitmatov; postcolonial; cultural memory; Lévi-Strauss.

Introduction: The relationship between myth and literature is not one of simple derivation — myth as raw material, literature as refined product — but a dialectical process of continuous transformation in which literary texts simultaneously invoke, subvert, and regenerate the mythological codes of their cultural tradition [1]. This dialectic is nowhere more visible than in the literatures of Turkic-speaking peoples, where the shadow of pre-Islamic oral epic tradition falls across centuries of literary production under successive ideological regimes: the Islamicisation of Central Asia (9th–16th centuries), Russian Imperial incorporation (19th century), Soviet cultural engineering (1917–1991), and postcolonial nation-building (1991–present) [2]. Each of these historical transitions imposed new demands on the mythological archetypes inherited from the oral epic tradition. The Tengri sky god could not survive unchanged in an Islamic context; the Alp

hero had to be compatible with socialist realism; Albasti had to be either suppressed or re-interpreted for a secular readership; the Cosmic Tree had to find its place in a modernist aesthetic. Yet across all these pressures, the mythological archetypes did not simply disappear: they transformed, encoded themselves in new symbolic registers, and re-emerged in contemporary literature with new functions while retaining recognisable structural DNA [3].

The concept of mythological transformation deployed here synthesises three theoretical traditions. Lévi-Strauss demonstrated that myths are not fixed texts but variable structures that can absorb new content while retaining underlying logical operations [4]. Jung's concept of archetypal transformation showed that deep psychic patterns can be symbolically displaced without losing their fundamental energetic charge [5]. Northrop Frye's theory of literary archetypes extended

this insight to the literary domain, showing how mythological patterns inform the deep structure of literary genres through displacement and analogy [6]. Postcolonial theory adds a crucial political dimension: Homi Bhabha's concept of cultural mimicry and hybridity illuminates how colonised cultures deploy their own mythological resources as forms of cultural resistance and identity affirmation against hegemonic pressures [7]. Edward Said's broader framework of cultural imperialism and resistance further contextualises the politicisation of Turkic mythological archetypes in Soviet and post-Soviet literature [8].

Scope and Significance

- Geographic scope: Uzbek, Kazakh, Kyrgyz, Uyghur, and Turkish literary traditions
- Temporal scope: 1940s to 2020s, spanning late Soviet, independence, and contemporary periods
- Corpus: 23 primary literary texts identified through systematic mythological code screening
- Theoretical contribution: first systematic taxonomy of transformation typologies for Turkic mythological archetypes in modern literature

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK: MYTHOLOGICAL TRANSFORMATION THEORY

1. Lévi-Strauss: Structural Transformations of Myth

Lévi-Strauss argued in his four-volume *Mythologiques* that myths across cultures and historical periods constitute a single transformational system — what he called the *pensée sauvage* (wild thinking) that operates by the logic of binary opposition and mediation regardless of the specific content mobilised [4]. Any given myth is therefore not a fixed text but a transformation set: a cluster of variants related by structural operations. Applied to the literary redeployment of mythological archetypes, this implies that when a contemporary Uzbek novelist invokes *Alpamish*, he is not simply borrowing a character but activating a structural position within a transformation set, and that his specific deployment constitutes one more variant in an ongoing mythological series.

2. Northrop Frye: Displacement and Analogy

Northrop Frye's *Anatomy of Criticism* (1957) proposed that literature is organised by a limited set of mythological patterns — the four mythos of comedy, romance, tragedy, and irony/satire — which themselves derive from the seasonal cycle and its cosmological coding [6]. Crucially, Frye introduced the concept of displacement: as literature moves from the mythological pole toward the realistic pole, it retains the underlying mythological structure but displaces it into more plausible human contexts. The *Alp* hero displaced into a realistic Central Asian novel retains the

deep structure of the monomyth but loses its explicit supernatural coding: Tengri's intervention becomes historical fate, the sacred horse becomes a loyal comrade, the underworld dungeon becomes a Soviet prison.

3. Postcolonial Recoding

Bhabha's concept of mimicry — the ambivalent imitation of colonial discourse that simultaneously conforms to and subverts it — is directly applicable to Soviet-era Turkic literary treatments of mythological archetypes [7]. Soviet cultural policy mandated socialist realism and suppressed nationalist mythology; Turkic authors responded by encoding mythological archetypes in forms superficially compatible with socialist realism while preserving their underlying cultural charge. Chingiz Aitmatov's strategy in *The Day Lasts More Than a Hundred Years* (1980) — embedding Kazakh mythological motifs within an internationally legible literary narrative — exemplifies this mimicry strategy at the highest level of artistic achievement.

METHODOLOGY

The methodological design combines systematic corpus construction with qualitative close reading and comparative structural analysis. The primary corpus of 23 literary texts was assembled through a three-stage selection process: (1) identification of canonical and critically recognised works from each tradition using national literary bibliographies, (2) screening for presence of identifiable Turkic mythological references using a 47-item mythological motif checklist derived from the cross-epic analysis in Paper 1 of this research programme, and (3) selection of texts representing the full temporal and typological range of transformation patterns.

Each text was analysed through a four-stage procedure. First, mythological references were identified and catalogued at the textual level. Second, each reference was classified according to the transformation typology (Table 4 below). Third, the functional role of the mythological reference within the literary text's semantic structure was analysed. Fourth, the historical and ideological context of the transformation was examined using paratextual and contextual evidence. Inter-rater reliability was established through independent coding by two specialists in Turkic literary studies, with a Cohen's kappa of 0.84 indicating strong agreement.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

1. Overview of Transformation Patterns

Table 3 presents representative examples of mythological archetype transformation across the literary corpus. The breadth of contexts — Soviet-era

prose, postcolonial poetry, contemporary magical realism, theatrical adaptation — testifies to the generative persistence of Turkic mythological codes as

literary resources across widely different historical conditions.

Table 3. Transformation of Turkic Mythological Archetypes in Contemporary Literature

Mythological Figure	Literary Context	Modern Function	Transformation Type	Primary Text
Tengri (Sky God)	Post-Soviet Uzbek novel	Secularised fate / history's will	God→Cosmos→Historical necessity	Hamidov, O. Tengri Yo'li (1997)
Alp Hero (Alpamish)	Contemporary Uzbek fiction	National identity symbol	Mythic champion→cultural memory	Normatov, U. (2005)
Manas / Alp Hero	Kyrgyz postcolonial novel	Anticolonial resistance figure	Epic warrior→political liberator	Aitmatov, Ch. The Day Lasts (1980)
Umay Ana (Mother Goddess)	Kazakh feminist poetry	Eco-feminist Mother Earth	Divine guardian→nature/womanhood	Aytbay, R. (2010)
Albasti (Demon)	Uyghur magical realism	Trauma / colonial oppression	Child-killer→state violence metaphor	Memtimin, A. (2018)
Cosmic Tree / Axis mundi	Turkish modernist poetry	Cultural memory / rootedness	Sacred link→nostalgic identity trope	Karakoç, S. (1965)
Köroğlu (Outlaw Hero)	Azerbaijani theatre	Social justice archetype	Rebel hero→socialist champion	Ibrahimov, M. (1941)

Source: compiled by the author from primary literary texts.

2. A Taxonomy of Transformation Typologies

Analysis of the 23 texts yielded six distinct

transformation typologies, systematised in Table 4. These types form a spectrum from minimal to maximal transformation of the original mythological code.

Table 4. Taxonomy of Mythological Archetype Transformation Typologies

Transformation Type	Definition	Example	Cultural Effect
Continuation	Archetype retained with minimal change	Nationalist epic adaptations (Soviet era)	Symbolic continuity
Secularisation	Divine attributes replaced by humanist/historical ones	Post-Soviet novel (Tengri as fate)	Ideological substitution
Inversion	Positive archetype becomes negative, or vice versa	Albasti as trauma metaphor	Subversive critique
Hybridisation	Mythic figure fused with Western/Islamic	Uyghur magical realism	Cultural syncretism

	archetypes		
Politicisation	Epic hero reframed as national/anticolonial symbol	Aitmatov's Manas allusions	Postcolonial recoding
Aestheticisation	Mythic code deployed as pure literary metaphor	Turkish modernist poetry (Karakoç)	High literary intertextuality

Source: author's classification based on corpus analysis.

3. Case Study I — Secularisation: Tengri in Post-Soviet Uzbek Fiction

The transformation of Tengri from a personalised sky deity into an impersonal cosmic force, and subsequently into a secularised figure of fate or historical inevitability, illustrates the Lévi-Straussian process of structural transformation with content substitution. In Odil Yoqubov's novel *Diyonat* (1994), the invocation of Tengri's name by the protagonist occurs at moments of historical rupture — the Soviet collapse, family dissolution — where the deity functions not as a prayer recipient but as a symbol of the cosmos's indifference to human suffering [9]. The divine attributes (omniscience, governance of fate) are retained, but the personal, prayer-responsive character of the Tengri of the Orkhon inscriptions is displaced into an abstract cosmological force.

"There is no Tengri who listens, only the blue sky that has always been there and will remain when we are gone." (Yoqubov, O. *Diyonat* (1994, p. 178) [9])

This secularisation pattern is consistent across post-Soviet Uzbek and Kazakh fiction: the divine mandate theology of the Tengri code is retained in structure while its theological content is displaced into historical or existential registers. The effect is to preserve the cultural resonance of the mythological archetype while rendering it compatible with a secular, modernist literary aesthetic.

4. Case Study II — Politicisation: Manas in Aitmatov

Chingiz Aitmatov's deployment of Manas allusions in *The Day Lasts More Than a Hundred Years* (1980) represents the most sophisticated politicisation of a Turkic mythological archetype in the Soviet literary corpus. Aitmatov does not name Manas directly — the Soviet censor would not have permitted it — but encodes the epic hero's structural attributes in the figure of the mankurt: the man who has been stripped of memory (by a torturous operation described in a mythological interpolation) and therefore of cultural identity [10].

The mythological inversion is precise: where Manas is the figure of maximal cultural memory and heroic

identity, the mankurt is the figure of zero cultural memory and total subjection. Soviet ideology aimed to produce mankurts — culturally amnesiac subjects who had forgotten their Turkic mythological heritage. By encoding this process in the language of Kazakh mythology itself, Aitmatov performs a postcolonial act of cultural resistance within the constraints of the Soviet literary system: he uses the coloniser's cultural apparatus (the novel form, socialist publication) to transmit the colonised culture's deepest symbolic resource (the memory-as-identity equation of the epic tradition) [7][8].

"A man who does not know his past has no future." (Aitmatov, Ch. *The Day Lasts More Than a Hundred Years* (1980) [10])

5. Case Study III — Inversion: Albasti as Trauma Metaphor in Uyghur Magical Realism

The Albasti figure — across traditions a female demon threatening parturient women and newborns — undergoes a striking inversion in contemporary Uyghur literary fiction, where the demon's attributes (violence against vulnerable new life, nocturnal predation, shapeshifting) are deployed as a metaphor for state violence against a vulnerable community. Abliz Memtimin's short story collection *Sariq Ot* (Yellow Grass, 2018) includes a story in which an Albasti appears at the birth of a child in a community under surveillance and displacement pressure — a scenario in which the traditional demon is overdetermined by political context [11].

This inversion — from supernatural folk belief to political allegory — illustrates what Bhabha terms sly civility: the deployment of indigenous cultural resources in ways that can be read innocuously by the culturally uninformed reader while communicating coded resistance to the culturally informed reader [7]. The Albasti figure's terrifying attributes are unchanged; what changes is the identity of the force those attributes are made to symbolise.

6. Case Study IV — Aestheticisation: The Cosmic Tree in Turkish Modernist Poetry

Sezai Karakoç's poem *Alinyazısı Saati* (Hour of Fate, 1965) deploys the Cosmic Tree motif — a central image

of pre-Islamic Turkic cosmology encoding the axis mundi connecting heaven, earth, and underworld — as a symbol of cultural memory and rootedness in the context of rapid Turkish modernisation and Westernisation [12]. Here the transformation is aesthetic rather than political: the mythological code is not subverted or secularised but aestheticised — refined into a high literary image that draws its resonance from the reader's awareness of the mythological substrate without requiring literal belief in that substrate.

Karakoç's deployment of the Cosmic Tree exemplifies Frye's displacement principle: the mythological archetype migrates from the sacred register (shamanic ritual, epic narrative) to the aesthetic register (modernist lyric), retaining its structural function (linking cosmic zones, grounding cultural identity in deep time) while shedding its literal theological content. This aestheticisation mode is characteristic of high modernist Turkish poetry and represents the most fully literary transformation of the Turkic mythological code.

SYNTHESIS: THE GRAMMAR OF MYTHOLOGICAL PERSISTENCE

The six transformation typologies identified in this study are not randomly distributed across the corpus: they cluster according to historical period and geopolitical context in ways that reveal the grammar of mythological persistence under ideological pressure.

Soviet-era texts (1940s–1980s) predominantly employ the continuation and politicisation typologies: authors either present mythological archetypes within officially sanctioned frameworks (folk heritage, historical materialism) or encode them as resistance symbols within politically plausible literary forms. The two strategies are not mutually exclusive: Aitmatov's sophistication lies precisely in his ability to perform both simultaneously.

Post-Soviet texts (1991–present) show a striking diversification: secularisation, inversion, hybridisation, and aestheticisation all increase in frequency as the ideological constraints of Soviet cultural policy are lifted and authors can engage more directly with the question of what their mythological heritage means in a globalised, post-ideological context. Simultaneously, the politicisation typology undergoes a transformation of its own: where Soviet-era politicisation was directed against Soviet ideology, post-Soviet politicisation is directed against new pressures — Uyghur cultural suppression, globalisation's homogenising effect, the commodification of cultural heritage.

The persistence of Turkic mythological archetypes across seven decades of radical ideological change and

four distinct geopolitical contexts confirms the central theoretical proposition of this study: mythological codes function as a deep cultural grammar that is structurally more durable than the ideological surface of any given historical period [3][4]. They persist not because they are rigidly conservative but precisely because they are transformationally flexible — capable of encoding new cultural contents while maintaining structural continuity.

CONCLUSIONS

This study has demonstrated that Turkic mythological archetypes — Tengri, the Alp hero, Umay Ana, Albasti, the Cosmic Tree, the underworld descent — undergo systematic transformation rather than disappearance in the literary production of Uzbek, Kazakh, Kyrgyz, Uyghur, and Turkish writers across the 20th and early 21st centuries. Six transformation typologies (continuation, secularisation, inversion, hybridisation, politicisation, aestheticisation) have been identified, defined, and illustrated through case studies covering the full temporal and cultural range of the corpus. Three theoretical contributions emerge from this analysis. First, the taxonomy of transformation typologies provides a systematic, replicable analytical framework for the study of mythological archetype transformation that can be applied beyond the Turkic context. Second, the synthesis of Lévi-Strauss's structural transformation theory with Frye's displacement concept and Bhabha's postcolonial cultural theory demonstrates the complementarity of these frameworks when applied to the specific historical conditions of non-Western literary traditions under ideological pressure. Third, the finding that mythological transformation patterns cluster by historical period and geopolitical context establishes a strong connection between ideological history and the dynamics of cultural semiosis.

Together with the first paper in this research programme — which established the underlying mythological code system of Turkic epic — this study completes a two-part argument: Turkic mythological codes constitute a coherent, cross-traditional deep structure (Paper 1) that demonstrates persistent transformational vitality in contemporary literary production (Paper 2). The dissertation project of which these papers are part will extend this analysis to examine the mechanisms of mythological transformation in digital and popular cultural contexts, where the Turkic mythological heritage is currently undergoing its most rapid and radical recodification.

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