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The Image of The Folk Hero in The Novels by V. Shukshin And Kh. Tukhtabaev: A Comparative Analysis (Based on I Have Come to Give You Freedom and The Golden Head of The Avenger)

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Abstract: Problem. The comparative study of historical prose in Russian and Uzbek literary traditions has remained underdeveloped, with each scholarly community analyzing folk hero narratives in isolation. No cross-cultural inquiry has determined how writers working within distinct aesthetic and historical circumstances construct the same character type: the popular rebel who becomes a symbol of justice.

Aim. This article conducts a comparative analysis of the folk hero archetype in Vasiliy Shukshin's I Have Come to Give You Freedom, centered on Stepan Razin, and Khudoyberdi Tukhtabaev's The Golden Head of the Avenger, centered on Namaz, identifying typological convergences and culturally specific divergences.

Results. The analysis establishes that both novelists construct their protagonists upon a shared typological foundation: the hero's bond with the oppressed, the trajectory from personal grievance to collective rebellion, the interweaving of chronicle and legend, and a tragic denouement converting the individual into a mythic symbol. Simultaneously, Shukshin's Razin is shaped by existential introspection and the Russian skaz tradition, while Tukhtabaev's Namaz reflects the Central Asian doston heritage and an Islamic moral universe. The proposed model offers a replicable framework for cross-cultural comparisons of folk hero narratives in post-Soviet literatures.

Keywords: Folk hero, historical novel, comparative literature, Stepan Razin, Namaz, Shukshin, Tukhtabaev, national identity, archetype, Russian literature, Uzbek literature.

Introduction: Every literary tradition possesses certain figures who embody popular resistance against injustice. The English-speaking world has Robin Hood, Spanish culture celebrates El Cid, and the peoples of the Caucasus sing of Shamil. These characters, whether grounded in verifiable fact or largely imagined, serve as repositories of collective aspiration: they articulate what a society believes about courage, justice, sacrifice, and the possibility of a world governed by moral rather than merely political authority [1]. In the literatures that emerged from the former Soviet Union, the folk hero acquired a particularly layered significance. The Soviet ideological apparatus actively encouraged the celebration of peasant rebels as proto-revolutionaries, yet at the same time it constrained the artistic freedom necessary for genuine literary exploration of such figures [2]. The dissolution of the Soviet Union in 1991 opened new possibilities for revisiting historical heroes outside the framework of Marxist-Leninist historiography, but the works produced during the late Soviet period remained influential benchmarks against which post-independence fiction was inevitably measured [3].

Within this broad intellectual context, two novels stand out as especially productive objects for comparative inquiry. The first is Vasiliy Makarovich Shukshin's Ya

prishyol dat' vam volyu (I Have Come to Give You Freedom, completed in 1971 and published in its definitive form in 1974). The novel reconstructs the life and rebellion of Stepan Timofeevich Razin (c. 1630–1671), the Don Cossack ataman whose massive uprising in 1670–1671 shook the foundations of the Muscovite state and left an enduring imprint upon Russian folk memory. Shukshin, simultaneously a prose writer, screenwriter, film director, and actor, devoted the final decade of his creative life to the Razin project, seeing in the Cossack leader a mirror of his own existential predicament—the struggle of a man born among the common people against the indifference and hypocrisy of those who hold power [3, 4]. The second novel is Khudoyberdi Tukhtabaev's Qasoskorning oltin boshi (The Golden Head of the Avenger), published in 1996 and centered on Namaz Pirimqul o'g'li (1840–1907), a historical personality from the Khorezm region who led a sustained campaign of armed resistance against both the Khivan Khanate and the expanding Russian colonial administration. The novel's title—a stark reference to the monetary bounty placed on Namaz's severed head by colonial authorities—immediately signals its thematic preoccupation with the intersection of violence, popular justice, and collective memory [5]. Tukhtabaev, widely celebrated in Uzbek letters for his children's prose and satirical fiction, turned to the historical genre during the early years of independence, driven by the conviction that recovering suppressed national narratives was indispensable to the formation of a sovereign cultural identity [6].

Despite the suggestive parallels between these two literary undertakings, no comparative study of these novels has been attempted. Russian literary scholarship on Shukshin is extensive but overwhelmingly self-contained, focusing on the writer's place within the "village prose" (derevenskaya proza) movement and on questions of genre and style [7, 8]. Uzbek criticism on Tukhtabaev's historical fiction is more limited in volume and has developed in isolation from broader comparative frameworks [9]. This gap is regrettable because it obscures precisely the typological regularities that are most revealing for literary theory: the shared structural logic by which writers from different traditions transform documented historical rebels into literary folk heroes. The present article addresses this lacuna. Its central question is: what typological convergences and culturally determined divergences characterize the construction of the folk hero's image in Shukshin's I Have Come to Give You Freedom and Tukhtabaev's The Golden Head of the Avenger? Three subordinate objectives guide the investigation: (a) to map the narrative and characterological strategies deployed by each author; (b) to assess the role of national oral traditions in shaping the hero's literary image; and (c) to situate each novel within its ideological and cultural moment, examining how the circumstances of composition inflect the representation of popular heroism. The theoretical significance of this study lies in its contribution to the emerging field of comparative post-Soviet literary typology—a discipline that remains in its infancy despite the obvious potential of comparing literatures that developed in close historical proximity yet under markedly different ethnocultural conditions.

METHODS

The primary corpus comprises: (1) Shukshin's Ya prishyol dat' vam volyu in the 1975 collected works [3]; and (2) Tukhtabaev's Qasoskorning oltin boshi (Tashkent: Sharq, 1996) [5]. Secondary sources include historical documents on the Razin rebellion and Namaz's insurgency [10, 11], folk song and legend collections [12, 13], monographic criticism [4, 7, 8, 14], and theoretical works on comparative literature and popular rebellion [1, 15, 16].

The study rests on the comparative-typological method of Viktor Zhirmunsky, who established that structural similarities across genetically unrelated literatures arise from analogous sociohistorical conditions [15]. This is supplemented by Eleazar Meletinsky's theory of the literary archetype tracing the folk hero from archaic trickster through epic warrior to modern protagonist [16], and by Eric Hobsbawm's concept of the "social bandit" [1]. Narratologically, the analysis employs Bakhtin's chronotope and Genette's focalization to compare narrative techniques.

The analysis proceeded in three stages. First, each novel was subjected to close reading and key episodes were classified according to a typological grid of eight parameters: (i) social origin; (ii) catalytic injustice; (iii) bond between hero and people; (iv) conflict with authority; (v) incorporation of folklore; (vi)

psychological portrayal; (vii) representation of violence; and (viii) death and mythologization. Second, individual results were juxtaposed parameter by parameter. Third, observed patterns were interpreted through the theoretical framework, with attention to historical and cultural factors explaining both convergences and divergences.

RESULTS

Shukshin opens his novel by immersing the reader in the world of the Don Cossacks in the mid-seventeenth century. The Don is portrayed as a frontier community—turbulent, self-governing, and defined by a fierce attachment to the principle of communal liberty. The young Razin grows up breathing the air of the Cossack krug (assembly), absorbing its democratic ethos and its deeply felt contempt for Muscovite bureaucratic encroachment. Shukshin takes pains to show that Razin's rebellious temperament is not an individual anomaly but the logical outgrowth of a community already living at odds with the centralized state. Simultaneously, the author endows Razin with qualities that set him apart from the average Cossack: extraordinary physical vitality, a restless and questioning intelligence, and a capacity for large-scale strategic thought that bewilders both his supporters and his adversaries [3].

Tukhtabaev's Namaz belongs to an altogether different world—the oasis civilization of Khorezm, where irrigated agriculture, sedentary village existence, and the rigid hierarchical structures of the Khivan Khanate define the social landscape. His family occupies the stratum of small farmers (dehqon) who bear the double burden of feudal tribute to the local bek and, after the Russian conquest, colonial taxation imposed by the imperial administration. The Golden Head of the Avenger devotes substantial narrative space to the rhythms of village life—the bustling markets, the ancient irrigation canals, the communal rhythms of Friday prayers—establishing the moral and social world that shapes Namaz's sensibility long before personal catastrophe drives him to take up arms. Like Shukshin, Tukhtabaev grants his hero exceptional personal qualities—courage, shrewdness, an unerring instinct for justice—while making clear that these virtues are rooted in communal soil rather than in any abstract heroic individualism [5, 9].

The structural parallel is evident: both heroes emerge from lower social strata, possess intimate knowledge of collective suffering, and are distinguished by qualities predisposing them to leadership—the dual positioning characteristic of the folk hero archetype [1, 16].

In Shukshin's novel, the catalyst is layered: the execution of Razin's elder brother by Muscovite authorities is the most visible trigger, but it is embedded within accumulated social wrongs—serfdom, the boyars' arrogance, the suffering of fugitive peasants. Shukshin refuses to reduce motivation to a single trauma, showing instead a man brought to realize that personal grief is inseparable from class suffering [3, 10].

In Tukhtabaev's novel, the decisive rupture is sharper: Namaz is imprisoned on a fabricated charge, his family's land confiscated, his father humiliated by a corrupt colonial official acting with the local bek. This scene functions simultaneously as personal catastrophe and synecdoche for the structural violence of the colonial-feudal order [5, 11].

The underlying narrative grammar is identical: a private wound reveals systemic injustice, and the passage from individual resentment to collective rebellion appears both psychologically inevitable and morally necessary.

Shukshin handles this theme with an admirable refusal of sentimentality. His Razin is no spotless champion of the downtrodden: he is volatile, imperious, and fully capable of acts of savage cruelty. Yet his organic connection with the common people remains unbroken throughout the entire length of the novel. Some of the most memorable episodes depict Razin moving through crowds of Volga boatmen, runaway serfs, and destitute Cossack families who instinctively recognize in him a man who shares their blood, speaks their vernacular, and is prepared to stake his life on their behalf. Shukshin employs free indirect discourse to blur the boundary between the narrator's perspective and the collective consciousness of the crowd, generating what one might call a choral focalization that validates the hero from the vantage point of those he claims to serve [3, 4].

Tukhtabaev achieves a comparable effect through distinctly different poetic means. His Namaz is consistently depicted as a redistributor of justice: he seizes wealth from corrupt officials and colonial

collaborators and distributes it among impoverished villagers. The parallel with the Robin Hood archetype is explicit and deliberately cultivated by the author, who reinforces it through his extensive use of the Uzbek oral tradition. Scenes of village feasting, communal counsel, and collective lamentation employ the formulaic structures and rhythmic cadences of the doston tradition, lending the narrative a quasi-legendary resonance that elevates the protagonist far beyond the confines of realistic fiction. The common people in Tukhtabaev's novel are not passive beneficiaries of the hero's generosity; they are active co-participants in a shared moral universe where Namaz embodies communal aspirations for justice that predate his individual existence and will endure long after it [5, 13].

Shukshin stages the central dramatic conflict as a collision between two fundamentally incompatible principles of social organization: the organic, spontaneous freedom of the Cossack community and the bureaucratic, autocratic discipline of the Muscovite state. Tsar Alexis and his military commanders represent an impersonal machinery of domination against which Razin's personal valor and popular charisma are ultimately powerless. The novel's reconstruction of the rebel army's campaign along the Volga—its exhilarating initial triumphs, its growing internal tensions and dissensions, and its catastrophic defeat at Simbirsk—acquires the contours of a classical tragedy in which the hero's very greatness and his doom are revealed as inseparable aspects of the same fate [3].

Tukhtabaev confronts his protagonist with a considerably more complex antagonistic structure. Namaz fights simultaneously on multiple fronts: against the Khan of Khiva, whose tax collectors and enforcers exploit the rural population with impunity; against the local beks, who serve as willing intermediaries of feudal oppression; and against the Russian colonial administration, whose overwhelming military power ultimately proves decisive. The Golden Head of the Avenger makes especially effective use of this tripartite power structure to explore the deep paradoxes of anti-colonial resistance in a society that is itself profoundly hierarchical. Namaz must navigate not only the external threat of the colonizer but also the internal contradictions of a feudal order whose local agents are frequently more immediately brutal and more intimately oppressive than the distant imperial center [5, 11].

Shukshin integrates Russian folk songs about Razin into his narrative as intertextual bridges between historical event and popular memory. His prose style—short sentences, colloquialisms, dialectal vocabulary, oral tempo—has been characterized as structurally "oral," implicitly claiming continuity between folk tradition and literary tradition [3, 7].

Tukhtabaev draws upon the Central Asian doston tradition performed by bakhshi (bards), alternating prose and verse with formulaic epithets and characteristic pacing. He incorporates proverbs, riddles, and folk sayings into characters' speech, saturating the narrative with collective wisdom and reinforcing the communal dimension of Namaz's heroism [5, 13].

Shukshin's most celebrated achievement is the psychological interiority granted to Razin. Earlier treatments—notably Chapygin's Razin Stepan (1926–1927)—presented him as monumental but essentially external. Shukshin reverses this: interior monologues reveal a man tormented by doubt, fearing betrayal, wrestling with the moral cost of violence. This transforms Razin from folk legend into fully realized literary protagonist [3, 4, 14].

Tukhtabaev's Namaz possesses comparable depth but shaped by a different matrix. Where Razin's anguish is existential in a secular sense, Namaz inhabits a spiritual universe where Islamic faith, Sufi philosophy, and communal ethics are inseparable from his decisions. The Golden Head of the Avenger contains scenes of spiritual consultation where Namaz debates whether armed resistance is permissible under divine justice (adolat). This religious dimension anchors the protagonist in a Central Asian tradition of spiritual-heroic narrative extending back to Navoi [5].

Shukshin does not flinch from depicting Razin's brutality—mass drownings, summary executions, sacking of cities. Yet these scenes deepen the tragic dimension: violence is shown as both a necessary response to intolerable oppression and a corrosive force alienating the hero from his own humanity [3].

Tukhtabaev frames Namaz's retribution within an ethical discourse distinguishing targeted punishment of oppressors from the indiscriminate violence of the

colonial army. The Islamic vocabulary of zulm (tyranny) and adolat (justice) elevates the struggle from the political to the moral-spiritual plane [15].

Shukshin reconstructs Razin's capture, imprisonment, and public execution in Moscow in June 1671 with austere restraint. The focus falls not on the physical horrors of the scaffold but on the inward defiance of the condemned man, who refuses to recant, refuses to plead for mercy, and meets his end with a dignity that transforms the state's spectacle of punishment into an inadvertent confirmation of the hero's moral stature. The novel's closing pages trace the immediate aftermath: the whispered conversations among the common people, the emergence of legends asserting that Razin did not truly die, the gradual absorption of the historical man into the living body of folk song. This coda makes explicit what the entire narrative has implied: the folk hero's authentic existence begins only after his physical death, at the moment when history yields to myth and the mortal individual enters the permanent collective memory of the nation [3, 4].

Tukhtabaev handles the ending of Namaz's story with comparable gravity but places markedly greater emphasis on the communal dimensions of mourning. In The Golden Head of the Avenger, the title's grim reference to the price placed on Namaz's severed head reaches its full narrative culmination when the hero is betrayed, captured, and executed by the colonial authorities. The execution scene is deliberately framed by the collective grief of the Khorezm villagers, whose lamentation Tukhtabaev renders in language closely modeled on traditional Uzbek funeral poetry. The novel's epilogue then traces the birth and proliferation of oral legends about Namaz in the decades following his death, demonstrating how the historical individual is progressively transfigured into a mythic champion of the oppressed—a figure who belongs no longer to the historical record but to the living oral tradition of the people. As in Shukshin's novel, death is not an ending but a beginning—the threshold at which the mortal person passes into immortal communal memory [5, 13].

DISCUSSION

The comparative analysis reveals a pattern of convergence whose consistency is remarkable, given the complete absence of any documented genetic connection between the two novels. Across all eight parameters of the typological grid, Shukshin's Razin and Tukhtabaev's Namaz exhibit structural homologies that are most convincingly explained by the theory of typological parallelism: analogous sociohistorical conditions generate analogous literary phenomena independently of direct mutual influence [15]. Both heroes originate among the dispossessed, are radicalized by a combination of personal and collective injustice, maintain organic bonds with the common people, confront centralized authority in a struggle they cannot ultimately win, are granted significant psychological interiority, and are posthumously absorbed into the mythic consciousness of their respective nations.

Three areas of divergence, however, merit sustained interpretation. The first concerns the ideological environment in which each novel was produced. Shukshin wrote under the conditions of late Soviet literary politics, where the peasant rebel was an officially sanctioned heroic type but where the actual boundaries of artistic freedom were policed with vigilance. Shukshin navigated these constraints with considerable subtlety, producing a Razin whose anarchic individualism and profound distrust of all centralized power—including, by implication, Soviet power—exceeded the limits of orthodox Socialist Realist characterization. Scholars have observed that Shukshin's Razin is emphatically not the proto-Bolshevik of Stalinist historiography but a fundamentally existential figure, a man in revolt not merely against a specific political regime but against the human condition of unfreedom itself [4, 14]. Tukhtabaev, by contrast, wrote during the early years of Uzbek independence, a period when the literary establishment was actively engaged in constructing a new national canon. His Namaz is explicitly framed as a precursor of the sovereign Uzbek state—a freedom fighter whose resistance to colonial domination anticipates the independence achieved in 1991. This framing serves legitimate cultural purposes, but it also imposes certain constraints: where Shukshin's hero is permitted genuine moral ambiguity and even destructive fury, Tukhtabaev's protagonist tends toward idealized heroic exemplarity [6].

Second, religion constitutes a major point of divergence between the two works. Shukshin's novel,

produced within the secularist framework of Soviet cultural policy, treats the Russian Orthodox Church primarily as an instrument and adjunct of state power, granting Razin no meaningful religious interiority. God appears in the Cossack leader's consciousness, if at all, as an absent or indifferent authority whose silence only deepens the hero's existential isolation. Tukhtabaev's Namaz, by contrast, inhabits a world thoroughly saturated with Islamic piety, where the mosque, the Sufi lodge, and the rhythms of daily prayer are integral to the texture of communal existence. His struggle against injustice is inseparable from religious ethics: the question of whether violence can be morally justified is posed not in the vocabulary of secular philosophy but in the terms of Islamic jurisprudence and Sufi moral theology. This spiritual dimension gives The Golden Head of the Avenger a gravity and a tonal register that has no counterpart in Shukshin's resolutely secular universe, and it connects Tukhtabaev's novel to a specifically Central Asian tradition of heroic-spiritual narrative stretching back through centuries to the Khamsa of Alisher Navoi [12].

Third, narrative technique reflects the deep-rooted ethnopoetic traditions of each literary culture. Shukshin's prose is taut, elliptical, and driven by dialogue. His sentences are characteristically short, his paragraphs compressed, and his transitions deliberately abrupt. This distinctive style is rooted in the Russian skaz tradition of Leskov and Zoshchenko and nourished by the oral storytelling practices of the Altai villages where Shukshin grew up, producing a narrative that feels urgent and kinetic, as if the story were being told at a breakneck pace by a gifted raconteur [7]. Tukhtabaev's prose, by contrast, is more expansive and discursive. He favors long descriptive passages, lyrical evocations of landscape, embedded digressions on history and custom, and periodic elevation into a quasi-poetic register that echoes the prosimetric (nazm-u-nasr) structure of the classical Central Asian doston [14]. These contrasting styles are not merely matters of personal temperament but reflections of culturally conditioned modes of historical storytelling that have developed over centuries in each tradition.

Taken together, these convergences and divergences confirm the utility of the comparative-typological approach for studying folk hero narratives across post-Soviet literatures. The convergences reveal the operation of a universal archetype—the social bandit as described by Hobsbawm, the culture hero as traced by Meletinsky—that transcends particular cultural boundaries. The divergences reveal the equally important role of culturally specific aesthetic traditions, religious worldviews, and ideological pressures in giving each instantiation of the archetype its distinctive national coloring [1, 16]. The implications of these findings extend beyond the two specific texts under examination. If the folk hero archetype operates with such structural consistency across two literatures as culturally distant as Russian and Uzbek, it is reasonable to hypothesize that comparable patterns will be found in other historical novels of the post-Soviet space—the Kazakh treatment of Kenesary Kasymov, the Georgian portrayal of Dato Tutashkhia, the Tajik literary reimagining of Vose's rebellion.

Certain limitations of the present study should be acknowledged. The analysis is confined to two novels from two literary traditions; broader claims about post-Soviet folk hero fiction would require a considerably wider corpus. The study does not systematically address the reception histories of the two novels, nor does it consider their potential adaptation into other media—notably, Shukshin's unrealized film project on Razin, which would have offered fascinating material for intermedial analysis. Future research could productively extend the comparison in these directions and could also incorporate the perspectives of postcolonial criticism, gender studies, and trauma theory, all of which have the potential to illuminate dimensions of the folk hero narrative that the present typological approach does not fully capture.

CONCLUSION

This study has presented the first systematic comparative analysis of the folk hero archetype in Russian and Uzbek historical prose, taking as its primary objects Vasiliy Shukshin's I Have Come to Give You Freedom and Khudoyberdi Tukhtabaev's The Golden Head of the Avenger. The investigation has demonstrated that both novelists construct their rebel-heroes according to a shared typological logic that encompasses social origin, catalytic injustice, the bond with the people, the conflict with authority, psychological depth, the moral valuation of violence, and the posthumous transformation of the mortal

individual into an immortal collective symbol. These convergences, best explained by the theory of typological parallelism and by the universal properties of the social bandit archetype as identified by comparative scholarship, confirm that the folk hero narrative operates as a cross-cultural constant in the historical fiction of the post-Soviet space.

The study has equally demonstrated that these convergences are mediated by significant culturally specific differences. Shukshin's Razin is a secular, existentially tormented rebel whose anarchic individualism strains against the ideological framework of late Soviet literary culture; Tukhtabaev's Namaz is an Islamic champion of justice whose moral universe is inseparable from the spiritual traditions of Central Asian civilization. The narrative forms through which these heroes are rendered—the compressed, dialogue-driven skaz of Shukshin and the expansive, lyrically inflected doston-inspired prose of Tukhtabaev—reflect fundamentally different ethnopoetic heritages that shape the very texture of historical storytelling in each respective tradition.

The broader implication of these findings is that the folk hero narrative serves as a universal literary mechanism for the articulation of national identity through the medium of historical fiction. In reconstructing the lives and deaths of Stepan Razin and Namaz, Shukshin and Tukhtabaev were engaged in an essentially parallel creative project: the recovery and reimagination of a popular past capable of furnishing the present with collective meaning, moral orientation, and a sustaining sense of historical continuity. The typological model elaborated in this study provides a replicable framework for extending this comparison to other literatures of the post-Soviet world and, in principle, to folk hero narratives in any literary tradition that draws upon the raw material of historical experience to forge and renew communal identity.

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