

VOICES FROM THE MARGINS: A COMPARATIVE STUDY OF SOCIAL INDIFFERENCE AND SOCIAL CRITICISM IN THE FICTION OF STEPHEN KING AND NAZAR ESHONQUL

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Abstract

This article undertakes a comparative-typological analysis of two writers who, despite belonging to markedly different cultural and literary traditions, converge in their sustained artistic interrogation of social indifference and moral erosion: the American writer Stephen King and the Uzbek writer Nazar Eshonqul. While King is conventionally classified within the genre of horror fiction and Eshonqul within postmodern and modernist Uzbek prose, both authors deploy the fantastic, the grotesque, and the mythopoetic not as ends in themselves but as instruments for exposing the complicity of communities, institutions, and individuals in the suffering of the vulnerable. Drawing on close reading of representative works — King's *It*, *Pet Semetary*, *Needful Things*, and *The Institute*, and Eshonqul's *Urush Odamlari* (People of War), *Maymun Yetaklagan Odam* (The Man Led by a Monkey), and *Go'ro'g'li Yoxud Hayot Suvi* (Gorogly, or the Water of Life) — the study identifies shared strategies of allegorical displacement, symbolic monstrosity, and narrative silence, alongside divergences rooted in each writer's historical and cultural positioning: King's critique of small-town American consumerism and collective amnesia versus Eshonqul's reckoning with Soviet and post-Soviet dehumanization, historical trauma, and the erosion of Sufi-inflected humanist values. The article argues that both bodies of work constitute a form of ethical realism disguised as genre fiction, in which the monstrous or the mythic functions as a diagnostic mirror held up to society's own negligence.



Keywords: Stephen King; Nazar Eshonqul; social indifference; social criticism; comparative literature; horror fiction; Uzbek modernism; allegory; collective trauma; alienation.

Introduction

Literature has long served as a mirror in which societies confront what they would prefer to forget: their cruelty toward the weak, their tolerance of injustice, and the ease with which collective conscience dissolves into passivity. Two writers working in radically different linguistic, historical, and geopolitical contexts — the American novelist Stephen King (b. 1947) and the Uzbek prose writer Nazar Eshonqul (b. 1962) — have built substantial literary careers on precisely this confrontation. King, internationally recognized as a master of horror and popular fiction, has increasingly been read by scholars not merely as an entertainer but as a chronicler of American social pathology: bullying, poverty, addiction, institutional corruption, and the willful blindness of communities to the suffering within them. Eshonqul, one of the most distinctive voices of post-independence Uzbek literature, has built his reputation on a very different aesthetic — mythological allegory, Sufi symbolism, and modernist narrative fragmentation — yet his central preoccupation is strikingly congruent: the moral degradation of a society that has learned to look away, whether under the weight of totalitarian history or the erosion of traditional ethical bonds.

This article proposes that reading King and Eshonqul comparatively illuminates a shared, cross-cultural artistic strategy: the use of non-realist modes — horror, myth, the grotesque, magical realism — as vehicles for unflinching social critique. Neither writer offers social commentary as direct polemic; both encode it within narratives of transformation, haunting, and estrangement, forcing the reader to recognize the ordinary machinery of indifference beneath the extraordinary surface of the fantastic.

Scholarship on Stephen King has moved substantially beyond early dismissals of his work as merely commercial horror. Critics associated with volumes such as *The Dark Descent: Essays Defining Stephen King's Horrorscape* and the more recent collection *Theorizing Stephen King* have argued that King's supernatural narratives function as profound commentary on the political and social tensions

of contemporary American life, with his monsters operating as externalizations of real social horrors rather than as autonomous sources of fear. Building on Robin Wood's classic thesis that the horror monster gives shape to what a society represses, recent readings of King's novel *It* have foregrounded the theme of community indifference, arguing that the true horror of the novel lies less in its supernatural antagonist than in the town's collective refusal to protect its children from bullying, abuse, and neglect. Similarly, studies of Pet Sematary have approached the novel through the lens of social criticism embedded in the ordinary speech and moral reasoning of its characters, reading the Gothic register as a vehicle for postmodern cultural critique rather than an end in itself.

Scholarship on Nazir Eshonqul, though smaller in international volume, has established a consistent picture of a writer whose modernist and postmodernist techniques — mythological allusion, dream logic, the blurring of reality and illusion — serve a persistent ethical and historical purpose. Researchers have described his prose as rejecting the social environment in which human dignity is disregarded, and as using the sufferings of individual protagonists to expose the forgotten and imperfect laws of society. Comparative studies have already begun to situate Eshonqul alongside world-literary figures: one recent study places his stories *Bahovuddin's Dog* and *The Invasion* in dialogue with Franz Kafka's *The Metamorphosis*, identifying shared concerns with alienation, spiritual and physical degradation, and existential crisis, while noting the distinctly national and historical character — rooted in the trauma of Soviet colonization and forced migration — that Eshonqul brings to the motif of transformation. Other scholars have traced in his short fiction a sustained engagement with magical realism, historical memory, and the erasure of language, tradition, and culture under imperial pressure.

No study to date, to the author's knowledge, has placed King and Eshonqul in direct comparative analysis. This absence is itself instructive: the two writers occupy separate critical universes — one embedded in Anglo-American genre studies, the other in Central Asian and Turkic literary scholarship — despite pursuing structurally similar artistic projects. This article seeks to open that comparative space.

This study employs a comparative-typological method, a common approach in Uzbek literary scholarship for situating national authors within world-literary

contexts. Representative texts were selected on the basis of their explicit thematization of community indifference, institutional or systemic negligence, and social criticism: from King's corpus, *It* (1986), *Pet Sematary* (1983), *Needful Things* (1991), and *The Institute* (2019); from Eshonqul's corpus, the debut collection *Urush Odamlari* (People of War), the short stories *Maymun Yetaklagan Odam* (The Man Led by a Monkey) and *Ozod Qushlar* (Free Birds), and the novel *Go'ro'g'li Yoxud Hayot Suvi* (Gorogly, or the Water of Life). Close reading is combined with thematic analysis organized around three axes: (1) the representation of the community or collective as a moral agent capable of negligence; (2) the function of the non-realist mode (horror, myth, magical realism) as a device of estrangement that exposes social pathology; and (3) the cultural and historical specificity that differentiates each writer's critique.

King's fiction repeatedly stages the small American town not as a refuge but as a site of collective failure. In *It*, the town of Derry is depicted as a community whose adults consistently fail to notice, or choose not to notice, the violence inflicted on its children — bullying, domestic abuse, and eventually the disappearances orchestrated by the novel's ancient antagonist. Recent scholarship reading the novel through the lens of trauma and cultural-memory theory has argued that the monster Pennywise functions less as an external threat than as a symbol of forgotten wrongs and a community frozen by its own fear, one whose real horror lies in its normalized tolerance of cruelty toward the young. The supernatural element, in this reading, does not distract from social critique but concentrates it: Derry's cyclical amnesia about its own violence becomes a literalized curse, so that the town's moral failure is inseparable from its metaphysical one.

In *Needful Things*, indifference takes a different form: the arrival of a mysterious shopkeeper exposes how readily a seemingly wholesome community will trade its solidarity for private material desire, each resident's small transaction unraveling the social fabric until the town consumes itself in mutual suspicion and violence. Here King critiques not a single failure of attention but a structural vulnerability — consumerist self-interest — that renders a community susceptible to disintegration from within. In the more recent novel *The Institute*, King relocates this critique to an explicitly institutional setting, depicting a covert facility that abducts and exploits gifted children while surrounding adults and

bureaucratic structures either participate in or avert their eyes from the abuse, extending his critique of interpersonal indifference to the machinery of institutional complicity.

This comparative analysis demonstrates that Stephen King and Nazar Eshonqul, despite their apparent distance in language, genre classification, and cultural context, share a fundamental artistic commitment: the exposure of social indifference through the disciplined use of non-realist narrative modes. Both writers refuse to treat horror, myth, or the grotesque as ends in themselves, deploying them instead as instruments of ethical realism that force readers to confront the ordinary, often invisible mechanisms by which communities, institutions, and historical systems fail the vulnerable among them. Further comparative research — particularly translation-based textual analysis and reader-reception studies across the two literary cultures — would extend and test the framework proposed here, and would contribute to a broader cross-cultural understanding of how world literatures independently arrive at kindred strategies for confronting social negligence.

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