



THE FOLK HERO IN RUSSIAN AND UZBEK HISTORICAL PROSE: STEPAN RAZIN AND NAMAZ

(Based on the Novels by V. Shukshin and Kh. Tukhtabaev)

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Abstract

Problem. Comparative literary scholarship on historical prose from the post-Soviet space has long overlooked parallels between the folk hero archetypes shaped within Russian and Uzbek national literary traditions. While the figure of Stepan Razin has received considerable attention from Russianists, and while Namaz has been studied sporadically within Uzbek literary criticism, no systematic cross-cultural comparison has been attempted. This gap limits our understanding of how different peoples deploy strikingly similar narrative strategies when mythologizing rebellion, justice, and collective memory through fiction. Aim. The present study aims to conduct a comparative analysis of the folk hero archetype as realized in Vasiliy Shukshin's novel *I Have Come to Give You Freedom* (1971) and Khudoyberdi Tukhtabaev's novel *Namaz* (1994), identifying common typological features and culturally specific divergences in the portrayal of the rebel-hero. Results. The analysis reveals that both novelists construct their protagonists along convergent lines—emphasizing the hero's organic bond with the common people, a tragic conflict with centralized authority, the transformation of a historical person into a mythic figure, and an underlying philosophy of popular justice. At the same time, significant differences emerge in narrative voice, ethnopoetic traditions of oral folklore incorporated into the prose texture, the spiritual and religious dimensions of heroism, and the ideological frameworks within which each author operated. The study contributes a new typological model for comparing folk hero narratives across post-Soviet literatures and demonstrates that the rebel-hero archetype functions as a universal mechanism for articulating national identity through historical fiction.



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

Introduction

The figure of the folk hero occupies a privileged position in the literary imagination of virtually every culture. Whether we consider the English Robin Hood, the Hungarian Sandor Rozsa, or the Mexican Pancho Villa, the rebel who rises from the lower strata of society to challenge an unjust order constitutes one of the most persistent and emotionally charged character types in world narrative [1]. In the literatures of the former Soviet Union, this archetype acquired additional complexity owing to the ideological demands of Socialist Realism on the one hand and the post-independence search for authentic national roots on the other [2]. Within this broad panorama, the Russian Cossack leader Stepan Timofeevich Razin (c. 1630–1671) and the Uzbek popular avenger Namaz Pirmqul o‘g‘li (1840–1907) stand as exemplary cases. Both figures led armed uprisings against oppressive regimes; both were eventually captured and executed; and both underwent a remarkable posthumous transformation from historical persons into semi-legendary champions of the dispossessed [3, 4].

In Russian literature, Razin has inspired works spanning from folk songs of the seventeenth century to the poetry of Velimir Khlebnikov, the prose of Aleksey Chapygin, and—most notably—Vasiliy Makarovich Shukshin’s novel *Ya prishyol dat’ vam volyu* (I Have Come to Give You Freedom, completed in 1971). Shukshin, who was simultaneously a prose writer, film director, and actor, devoted the last decade of his creative life to Razin, seeing in the Cossack ataman a kindred spirit—a man of the people who could not reconcile himself with social falsehood [5]. In Uzbek literature, the figure of Namaz—a real historical personality who operated in the Khorezm region during the late nineteenth century—was first treated in folklore and later became the protagonist of Khudoyberdi Tukhtabaev’s eponymous novel *Namaz* (first published in 1994). Tukhtabaev, widely known for his children’s literature and satirical prose, turned to historical fiction in the independence era, constructing Namaz as both a national freedom fighter and a morally complex individual shaped by the social contradictions of colonial Turkestan [6].



Despite the apparent similarities between these two literary projects, no sustained comparative study has been undertaken. Russian and Uzbek literary traditions have been examined in parallel primarily with respect to bilingualism, translation practices, and mutual influence during the Soviet period [7, 8], but not in terms of shared character typologies in historical fiction. This omission is surprising, given that both Shukshin and Tukhtabaev were working within a broadly post-Soviet cultural space and were responding—albeit in different decades and from different national vantage points—to the same fundamental question: how does a writer transform a documented historical rebel into a literary folk hero without either reducing him to a propagandistic cliché or stripping him of his historical specificity?

The present article addresses this gap. Its central research question may be formulated as follows: what are the typological similarities and culturally determined differences in the construction of the folk hero archetype in Shukshin's *I Have Come to Give You Freedom* and Tukhtabaev's *Namaz*? To answer this question, the study pursues three subordinate objectives: (a) to identify the principal narrative and characterological strategies through which each author constructs the folk hero; (b) to analyze the role of oral folklore and ethnopoetic tradition in shaping the hero's image; and (c) to evaluate the ideological and philosophical frameworks that underpin each novelist's vision of popular heroism.

The theoretical significance of the study lies in its contribution to the comparative typology of national hero narratives in post-Soviet literatures—a field that remains underdeveloped relative to its potential [9]. Its practical significance consists in the possibility of applying the proposed analytical model to other pairs of historical novels from different literary traditions of the former Soviet space.

Materials and Methods

The primary sources for this study are two novels: (1) Vasiliy Shukshin's *Ya prishyol dat' vam volyu* (*I Have Come to Give You Freedom*), in its definitive text as published in the 1975 collected works, and (2) Khudoyberdi Tukhtabaev's *Namaz*, in its first edition of 1994 and the revised edition of 2001 [5, 6]. In addition to the primary texts, the study draws upon a range of secondary materials: historical chronicles and archival documents pertaining to the Razin



rebellion and to Namaz's activities in Khorezm, published collections of folk songs and legends about both figures, and the existing body of literary criticism on both novels [10, 11, 12].

The study is grounded in the comparative-typological method as developed in the works of Viktor Zhirmunsky, who demonstrated that typological parallels in world literature can arise independently of direct genetic contact and are frequently conditioned by analogous stages of social and cultural development [13]. This approach is supplemented by insights from the theory of the literary archetype, particularly as elaborated by Eleazar Meletinsky, who traced the folk hero's roots to the trickster-culture hero of archaic mythology and showed how this figure is progressively historicized and socialized in later narrative forms [14]. The concept of the "social bandit," as articulated by Eric Hobsbawm in his influential study *Bandits* (1969, revised 2000), provides a sociological lens through which the hero's relationship with the peasant community and the state can be examined [15].

In addition, the analysis employs Mikhail Bakhtin's notion of the chronotope to examine how each novel organizes time and space around the hero's trajectory [15], and draws upon narratological tools—particularly the concepts of focalization (Gérard Genette) and narrative voice—to compare the techniques by which Shukshin and Tukhtabaev position their narrators in relation to the depicted events [14].

The comparative analysis was conducted in three stages. In the first stage, each novel was subjected to a close reading aimed at identifying the principal scenes, episodes, and discursive passages in which the folk hero's characterization is most densely concentrated. These key segments were inventoried and classified according to a purpose-designed typological grid comprising seven parameters: (i) social origin and early formation of the hero; (ii) the catalytic event or injustice that triggers the hero's rebellion; (iii) the hero's relationship with the common people; (iv) the hero's relationship with institutional authority; (v) the incorporation of oral folklore and legend; (vi) the hero's inner world and psychological portrayal; and (vii) the hero's death and posthumous mythologization.

In the second stage, the results of the individual analyses were juxtaposed parameter by parameter, yielding a matrix of convergences and divergences. In



the third stage, the observed patterns were interpreted in light of the theoretical framework outlined above, with particular attention to the cultural, historical, and ideological factors that account for the differences between the two novels.

Results

Both Shukshin and Tukhtabaev devote considerable attention to the social milieu from which their heroes emerge, yet they do so with markedly different emphases. Shukshin's Razin is a Don Cossack, a man born into a community that already exists on the margins of the Muscovite state. From the opening chapters of *I Have Come to Give You Freedom*, the reader is immersed in the Cossack way of life on the Don—its democratic assemblies (krugi), its martial traditions, and its fierce sense of autonomy. Razin does not need to discover injustice from the outside; he absorbs it with the very air he breathes on the steppe. Shukshin presents the young Stepan as a man of extraordinary physical vitality and restless intelligence who chafes against the increasing encroachment of Muscovite bureaucracy upon Cossack freedoms [5].

Tukhtabaev's Namaz, by contrast, comes from a settled agricultural community in Khorezm, the ancient oasis civilization in the lower reaches of the Amu Darya. His early life is shaped not by the relative egalitarianism of the Cossack circle but by the rigid hierarchical structures of the Khanate, overlaid in the late nineteenth century with the new extractive apparatus of Russian colonial administration. Namaz's family belongs to the class of small-scale farmers who bear the double burden of tribute to the local bek and taxes to the colonial authorities. The novel carefully details the process by which Namaz's initially peaceful disposition is ground down by successive acts of injustice—the seizure of family land, the humiliation of his father, and the corruption of local courts [6].

Despite these contextual differences, a structural parallel is evident. In both novels, the hero's social origin places him close enough to the common people to share their suffering but endows him with exceptional personal qualities—courage, intelligence, charisma—that set him apart and make leadership possible. This double positioning is a hallmark of the folk hero archetype as described by Hobsbawm and Meletinsky [14, 15].

A pivotal moment in both narratives is the specific act of injustice that transforms the protagonist from a passive sufferer into an active rebel. For Shukshin's Razin,



this catalyst is complex and multi-layered. The novel alludes to the execution of Razin's elder brother by Muscovite authorities—a historical fact that most scholars regard as a turning point in the real Razin's biography [10]. However, Shukshin does not reduce the motivation to a single traumatic event. Rather, the novel accumulates a critical mass of social grievances—serfdom, the arrogance of boyars, the suffering of fugitive peasants on the Don—until rebellion becomes not merely a personal vendetta but a moral imperative rooted in collective pain. For Tukhtabaev's Namaz, the catalytic event is more localized and personally wounding. The decisive scene involves the unjust imprisonment of Namaz on a fabricated charge, followed by the loss of his family's meagre property. This moment of supreme personal injustice resonates outward, however, because Tukhtabaev embeds it within a broader canvas of colonial exploitation and feudal oppression. Namaz's individual grievance becomes metonymic of the entire community's suffering under the dual yoke of the Khanate and the Russian Empire [6].

The structural logic is identical in both cases: a private injury opens the hero's eyes to a systemic wrong, and the transition from individual resentment to collective championship is portrayed as both psychologically inevitable and morally justified.

Perhaps the most important parameter for the folk hero archetype is the quality of the bond between the protagonist and the common people. Shukshin's treatment of this theme is notable for its avoidance of sentimentality. His Razin is not a flawless champion of the oppressed; he is a volatile, sometimes cruel man capable of acts of shocking violence. Yet the Cossack leader's organic connection with the people is never in doubt. In some of the novel's most memorable scenes, Razin moves through crowds of peasants and boatmen who instinctively recognize in him one of their own—a man who speaks their language, shares their anger, and is willing to die for their freedom. Shukshin uses free indirect discourse to merge the narrator's voice with the collective consciousness of the people, creating what might be termed a “polyphonic folk perspective” that validates Razin's heroism from below [5].

Tukhtabaev achieves a comparable effect through different means. His Namaz is consistently portrayed as a protector of the weak, a man who redistributes the wealth he seizes from corrupt officials and wealthy collaborators among the poor



villagers of Khorezm. The author draws heavily on the Uzbek oral tradition of the *doston* (epic narrative poem) to frame Namaz's relationship with the people. Scenes of communal feasting, collective mourning, and village assembly employ the rhythms and formulaic expressions of oral narrative, lending Namaz's story a quasi-legendary quality even within the realistic framework of the novel [6]. The people in Tukhtabaev's novel are not a passive mass awaiting liberation; they are active participants in a shared moral universe where Namaz functions as the embodiment of communal aspirations for justice.

The hero's antagonistic relationship with centralized power forms the dramatic spine of both novels. In Shukshin's work, the principal antagonist is the Muscovite state, personified by the tsar and his military commanders. Shukshin stages the conflict as a clash between two irreconcilable principles: the organic, anarchic freedom of the Cossack community and the bureaucratic, autocratic order of Muscovy. Razin's rebellion is not merely a political insurrection; it is an existential revolt against a world in which the individual is subordinated to a faceless administrative machine. The novel's depiction of Razin's increasingly desperate military campaign along the Volga is suffused with a tragic grandeur that elevates the conflict from the historical to the philosophical plane [5].

Tukhtabaev's Namaz faces a more complex antagonistic structure. His enemies include the Khan of Khiva, the local beks and tax collectors, and—at a higher level—the Russian colonial administration. This tripartite power structure compels Namaz to navigate multiple fronts simultaneously, and Tukhtabaev uses this complexity to explore the contradictions of anti-colonial resistance in a society that is itself deeply stratified. Namaz fights not only against foreign domination but also against indigenous forms of exploitation, a thematic duality that distinguishes the Uzbek novel from its Russian counterpart and reflects the specific historical conditions of late-nineteenth-century Central Asia [6].

Both authors incorporate elements of oral folklore into their prose, but the nature and function of these elements differ considerably. Shukshin integrates Russian folk songs about Razin—the famous “Sten’ka Razin” cycle—into the narrative fabric, using them as intertextual echoes that bridge the gap between historical event and popular memory. Additionally, Shukshin's prose style itself has been widely noted for its “oral quality”: short, rhythmic sentences; abundant use of colloquial and dialectal vocabulary; and a narrative tempo that mimics the pace



of spoken storytelling [5]. The effect is to root the literary hero firmly in the tradition of folk narrative from which he originally sprang.

Tukhtabaev draws upon a different but analogous tradition—the Uzbek *doston* and the broader Central Asian oral heritage of *bakhshi* (bardic) performance. Passages in the novel echo the structure of the classical Uzbek epic, with its alternation between prose narration and verse, its formulaic epithets, and its characteristic pacing. Tukhtabaev also incorporates proverbs, riddles, and folk sayings into Namaz’s speech, constructing a character whose verbal register is saturated with the collective wisdom of the Uzbek people [6, 28]. In both novels, therefore, folklore serves not merely as decoration but as a structural principle that mediates between history and myth.

One of the most striking aspects of both novels is the degree to which their authors grant psychological depth to figures who might easily have been reduced to one-dimensional symbols. Shukshin’s Razin is tormented by doubt, loneliness, and an acute awareness of the gulf between his utopian vision and the brutal realities of war. Extended passages of interior monologue reveal a man who questions his own motives, fears betrayal, and struggles with the moral cost of violence. This psychological complexity has been recognized by critics as Shukshin’s most significant contribution to the literary treatment of Razin, surpassing earlier portrayals by Chapygin and others [14].

Tukhtabaev’s Namaz is similarly endowed with an inner life that transcends the folk hero stereotype. The Uzbek novel devotes particular attention to Namaz’s spiritual dimension: his relationship with Islam, his consultations with Sufi mentors, and his moral wrestling with the question of whether armed resistance is permissible under Islamic ethics. This religious-philosophical strand, largely absent from Shukshin’s secular treatment of Razin, gives Tukhtabaev’s novel a distinctive texture and connects it to a broader tradition of Central Asian spiritual-heroic narrative [6].

Both novels culminate in the hero’s defeat and death—a conclusion that is historically predetermined and generically appropriate for the tragic folk hero. Shukshin’s treatment of Razin’s capture, torture, and public execution in Moscow in 1671 is restrained yet devastating. The final chapters focus less on the physical agony of the condemned man than on his spiritual defiance: Razin goes to his death without recanting, and the novel’s closing pages suggest that his execution,



far from silencing his cause, transformed him permanently into a symbol of popular resistance. The last image—of the people gathering to whisper Razin’s name—completes the arc of mythologization [5].

Tukhtabaev handles Namaz’s end with comparable gravity but places greater emphasis on the communal dimension of mourning. The scene of Namaz’s execution is framed by the collective grief of the Khorezm villagers, whose lamentation is rendered in language closely modeled on traditional Uzbek funeral poetry. The novel’s epilogue traces the birth of legends about Namaz in the years following his death, showing how the historical person is gradually absorbed into oral tradition and reconstituted as a mythic figure of justice [6]. In both works, the hero’s death is not an ending but a beginning—the point at which history yields to myth and the individual enters the collective memory of the nation.

Discussion

The results presented above reveal a pattern of convergence that is striking in its consistency. Across all seven parameters of the typological grid, Shukshin’s Razin and Tukhtabaev’s Namaz exhibit structural homologies that cannot be explained by direct literary influence—there is no evidence that Tukhtabaev modeled his novel on Shukshin’s—but are best understood as products of analogous social conditions and shared narrative archetypes. This finding is consistent with Zhirmunsky’s theory of typological convergence, which holds that similar literary phenomena arise independently when cultures pass through comparable stages of historical development [13].

At the same time, the divergences are no less significant. Three principal areas of difference merit sustained discussion. First, the ideological context in which each novel was produced shaped its treatment of the hero in decisive ways. Shukshin wrote under Soviet conditions, where the peasant rebel was an officially sanctioned heroic type. Yet Shukshin subtly complicated this ideological frame by emphasizing Razin’s anarchic individualism, his distrust of all forms of centralized authority—a characterization that could be read as an oblique critique of the Soviet state itself. As scholars have noted, Shukshin’s Razin is not the proto-Bolshevik of Stalinist historiography but a deeply ambivalent figure whose rebellion carries overtones of existential protest.



Tukhtabaev, by contrast, wrote in the early years of Uzbek independence, when the construction of a national literary canon was an urgent cultural priority. His *Namaz* is explicitly framed as a national hero—a precursor of the independent Uzbek state—and the novel participates in the broader post-Soviet project of recovering historical narratives that had been suppressed or marginalized during the colonial and Soviet periods. This difference in ideological orientation does not invalidate the comparison; rather, it enriches it by demonstrating how the same folk hero archetype can be mobilized for divergent political purposes.

Second, the role of religion constitutes a major point of divergence. Shukshin's novel, produced within a secularist Soviet framework, treats the Orthodox Church primarily as an instrument of state power and gives Razin no significant religious interiority. Tukhtabaev's *Namaz*, on the other hand, is embedded in a richly Islamic cultural world where faith, morality, and political action are inseparable. The Sufi dimensions of *Namaz*'s characterization—his emphasis on inner purification, his consultations with spiritual teachers, his appeal to the principle of justice (*adolat*) as a divine imperative—have no analogue in Shukshin's novel and connect Tukhtabaev's work to a specifically Central Asian tradition of heroic-spiritual narrative that extends back through Alisher Navoi to the earliest Turkic literary monuments.

Third, the narrative techniques employed by the two authors reflect their respective literary traditions in illuminating ways. Shukshin's compressed, elliptical prose—with its abrupt shifts of perspective, its restless narrative tempo, and its reliance on dialogue over description—has deep roots in the Russian *skaz* tradition (Leskov, Zoshchenko) and in the oral storytelling of the Altai region where Shukshin grew up. Tukhtabaev's more expansive, discursive narrative—with its embedded digressions, its lyrical nature descriptions, and its periodic elevation into quasi-verse—belongs to a Central Asian prosimetric tradition that blends the novel form with the structural logic of the *doston*.

These differences notwithstanding, the fundamental structural logic of the folk hero archetype operates with remarkable consistency across both novels. In the terms proposed by Hobsbawm, both Razin and *Namaz* qualify as “social bandits”: peasant outlaws whom the lord and state regard as criminals, but who remain within peasant society, are considered by their people as heroes and champions, and whose careers are idealized and turned into legend [15]. What the present



study adds to Hobsbawm's model is a literary dimension: the demonstration that the process of idealization and mythologization does not end with oral tradition but continues—and is given its most complex and nuanced expression—in the historical novel.

The implications of this finding extend beyond the two specific texts under examination. If the folk hero archetype operates with such structural consistency across two as culturally distant literatures 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, the Georgian portrayal of Dato Tutashkhia, the Armenian literary reimagining of David Bek. The typological grid developed in this study can serve as a heuristic tool for future comparative investigations of this kind [9].

Certain limitations of the present study should be acknowledged. The analysis is restricted to two novels and two literary traditions; broader generalization requires a wider corpus. Furthermore, the study focuses on the novels as published texts and does not systematically address the reception history of these works or their adaptation into other media (notably, Shukshin's unrealized film project on Razin). Future research might profitably extend the comparison in these directions, as well as incorporating additional theoretical perspectives such as postcolonial criticism, gender studies, and trauma theory.

Conclusion

This study has undertaken the first systematic comparative analysis of the folk hero archetype in Russian and Uzbek historical prose, using Vasiliy Shukshin's *I Have Come to Give You Freedom* and Khudoyberdi Tukhtabaev's *Namaz* as its primary sources. The analysis has demonstrated that both novelists construct their rebel-heroes according to a common typological logic: the hero emerges from the lower social strata, is propelled into rebellion by a combination of personal injustice and collective suffering, maintains an organic bond with the common people, enters into tragic conflict with centralized authority, is granted psychological depth and moral complexity, and undergoes posthumous transformation from historical person into mythic symbol. These convergences are best explained by the theory of typological parallelism and by the universal properties of the social bandit archetype as identified by comparative scholarship.



At the same time, the study has identified significant divergences rooted in the cultural, religious, and ideological specificities of the Russian and Uzbek literary traditions. Shukshin's Razin is a secular, existentially tormented rebel whose anarchic individualism strains against the framework of Soviet ideology; Tukhtabaev's Namaz is an Islamic champion of justice whose struggle is inseparable from the spiritual and communal values of Central Asian civilization. The narrative techniques of the two novels reflect, respectively, the Russian *skaz* tradition and the Central Asian *doston* heritage, demonstrating that the folk hero archetype is always mediated by culturally specific aesthetic forms.

The broader theoretical contribution of this study lies in the demonstration that the folk hero narrative functions as a universal mechanism for the articulation of national identity through historical fiction. In constructing Razin and Namaz, Shukshin and Tukhtabaev were engaged in fundamentally the same creative project: the literary recovery and reimagining of a popular past that could serve as a source of collective meaning in the present. The typological model proposed here offers a framework for extending this comparison to other literatures of the post-Soviet space and, potentially, to folk hero narratives worldwide.

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