Volume 4, Issue 10, October – 2026 **ISSN (E):** 2938-379X

NARRATIVE FUNCTION AND GENDER CODING OF THE WATER-MAIDEN IN ENGLISH AND UZBEK FOLKTALES

Pulatova Shaxzoda Xaydarovna
Teacher of Interfaculty Department of Foreign Languages,
Bukhara State University

Abstract
The supernatural water-maiden is usually read through the European figure of the siren or mermaid, whose defining act is to lure men to their deaths. Whether that reading describes the figure as such, or only its European instantiation, has not been tested against material from a tradition with a different value system.

Keywords: Folktale; Propp; narrative function; gender; water-maiden; Uzbek folklore; comparative folkloristics.

Introduction

When the water-maiden enters European literary consciousness she arrives already condemned. The sirens of the Odyssey sing sailors onto the rocks; the medieval bestiary sets the mermaid beside the figure of worldly temptation; Andersen's little mermaid dissolves into foam. By the time the figure reaches the twentieth century she has become a byword for beauty that destroys, and scholarship has read her accordingly, as a projection of male anxiety about female autonomy.

That reading is well founded for the material it was built on. The question this article raises is whether it generalises. If the water-maiden is a near-universal figure, and if in one tradition she is overwhelmingly destructive, is destructiveness intrinsic to the figure or is it one tradition's decision about her? The question cannot be settled by adding more European examples. It requires a tradition whose value system is organised differently.

The Uzbek folktale corpus offers such a case. The pari of springs and canals is a supernatural woman of extraordinary beauty who appears to a male hero at water, and in that bare description she is indistinguishable from her European counterpart. What she then does in the narrative is largely the opposite. She tests, assists, rewards and marries; her stories end in households rather than in drownings.

This article sets the two bodies of narrative against each other along two axes. The first is functional: what roles does the figure occupy in the structure of the tale? The second is evaluative: how is her femininity coded, and what does the tale appear to think of it? The analysis is deliberately kept at the level of function and coding rather than of individual texts, because the claim concerns distributions across corpora rather than readings of particular tales.

Web of Teachers: Inderscience Research
webofjournals.com/index.php/1
Licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License.

2. Previous research

2.1 The figure as danger

The dominant scholarly frame treats the water-maiden as an expression of unease about female sexuality and independence. In this reading her habitat does the symbolic work: water is outside human settlement, ungoverned, and the woman who lives there is likewise beyond social control. Her beauty is the lure and her element is the trap. The frame has been productive and accounts well for the English and broader Western European material.

Its limitation is that it has been applied almost exclusively within the tradition that generated it. Where non-European material appears in this literature it tends to be adduced as corroboration rather than examined for counter-evidence, with the result that the frame has rarely been placed at risk.

2.2 Structural approaches

Propp's analysis of the wondertale provides the instrument used here. His central insight — that the stable element of the tale is the function a character performs rather than the character's identity — is what makes cross-traditional comparison possible at all. Two beings that share no attributes may occupy the same slot in the narrative grammar, and two beings that look alike may occupy different slots. The second case is precisely what this study finds.

2.3 The gap

Uzbek folklore has been collected and published domestically but has entered international comparative discussion only marginally, and the pari in particular has not been subjected to functional analysis in the Proppian sense alongside her European counterpart. The present study addresses that gap.

3. Corpus and method

The English corpus comprises ballad and legend material in which a water-dwelling female or shape-shifting being interacts with a human protagonist, together with the literary adaptations that have shaped the figure's modern reception. The Uzbek corpus comprises published folktales and the pari episodes of the oral epic tradition, where the figure is a recurrent and structurally important presence.

Eight functions were identified as recurrent across the combined material. Each was assigned to the Proppian role that performs it and coded for dominance: English, Uzbek, or shared. Dominance was assigned where the function is both more frequent and more structurally central in one corpus; the category "shared" was used where neither corpus showed a clear advantage. Coding decisions rest on the published collections and are reported in full in Table 1 so that they can be contested.

The method has an evident weakness, which is that corpus boundaries in folklore are soft and frequency counts across differently edited collections are not strictly comparable. The findings are therefore stated as a difference in profile rather than as a measured effect.

Web of Teachers: Inderscience Research
webofjournals.com/index.php/1
Licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License.

4. Functional analysis

Table 1. Narrative functions of the water-maiden across the two traditions

Function	Proppian role	English material	Uzbek material	Dominant
Luring to destruction	Villain	Mermaid of Zennor; kelpie; siren; Jenny Greenteeth; the mermaid ballads	Rare; occasional malevolent pari or water demon	English
Prophecy and warning	Donor (tester)	Seafaring legend: the mermaid announces the storm	Partially present; the pari warns the hero of danger	English
Reward; granting a magic object	Magical helper	The selkie wife; the mermaid's gift to a child	The pari bestows a golden bird or magic object	Shared
Moral testing	Donor (tester)	The selkie wife and the household task; the trials in Andersen	Bulbuligo‘yo; Olmos botir; the three brothers	Uzbek
Call to marriage; the ideal union	Sought-for person	Rare, and inverted in Andersen	Tohir and Zuhra; Rustamxon; central in the epic tales	Uzbek
Bestowing wealth; sustaining life	Magical helper	Rare	Yarim taqi: the pari gives a magic object	Uzbek
Punishing the breaker of a taboo	Villain	Kelpie; Jenny Greenteeth; punishment for disrespect to water	Suv onasi punishes the one who fouls the water	Shared
Protection and lasting aid	Magical helper	Rare or temporary	Yunus pari as permanent support to G‘o‘ro‘g‘li; Alpomish	Uzbek

The distribution is close to inverse. Of the eight functions, two are dominant in the English material, four in the Uzbek, and two are shared. More revealing than the counts is which functions fall where. Both English-dominant functions sit at the hostile end of the range: outright destruction, and the ominous warning that marks the figure as a herald of disaster. All four Uzbek-dominant functions sit at the constructive end: testing, marriage, enrichment, sustained assistance.

The two shared functions are instructive in a different way. Both the gift-giving helper and the punisher of taboo-breakers occur in both traditions with comparable weight. These are also the two functions least dependent on how the figure's femininity is evaluated: a spirit that rewards the courteous and punishes the polluter is a straightforward enforcement mechanism attached to a resource, and it appears wherever the resource matters.

Web of Teachers: Inderscience Research
webofjournals.com/index.php/1
Licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License.

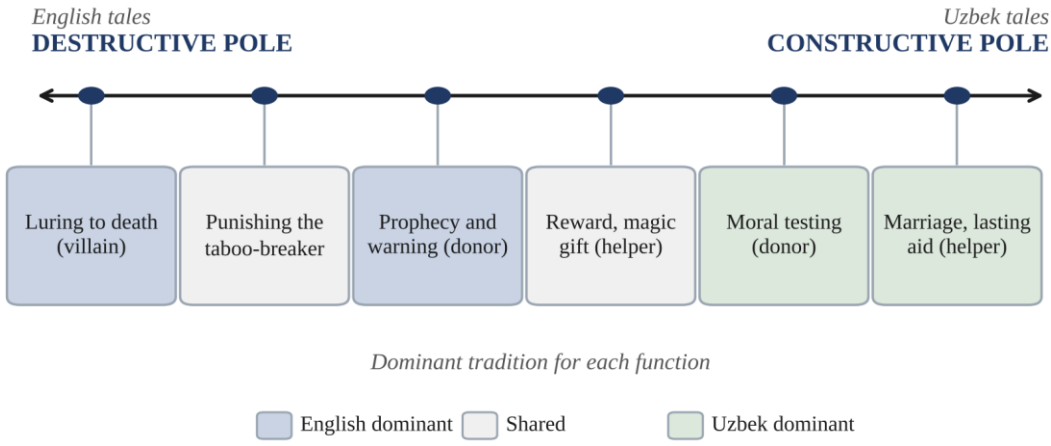


Figure 1. Distribution of the eight functions along the destructive–constructive axis, with the dominant tradition indicated.

Figure 1 arranges the functions along a single axis from destructive to constructive. The English-dominant functions occupy the left of the range, the Uzbek-dominant functions the right, and the shared functions fall between. The picture is not a continuum with two traditions distributed across it; it is two clusters with a thin shared middle.

4.1 The testing function

The function that most sharply separates the traditions is moral testing. In the Uzbek material the pari routinely sets the hero a task or a prohibition and the narrative turns on whether he meets it. The structure is pedagogical: the supernatural woman is the instrument by which the hero is measured and, if he passes, elevated. She is not an obstacle to the hero's progress but the mechanism of it.

English analogues exist — the selkie wife who must be served, the trials imposed in Andersen — but they are comparatively rare, and in the most famous case the testing is inverted: it is the mermaid who undergoes the trial, and she fails to obtain what she sought. The English tradition can imagine the water-maiden as the object of a test far more readily than as its administrator.

4.2 The marriage function

The second decisive difference concerns marriage. In the Uzbek corpus union with the pari is frequently the goal of the narrative and its achievement is the resolution; the resulting household is presented as legitimate and durable. In the English corpus union with the water being is possible but is structurally unstable, held together by a withheld object — the selkie's

Web of Teachers: Inderscience Research
webofjournals.com/index.php/1
Licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License.

skin, the merrow's cap — whose recovery dissolves it. The English marriage is a detention; the Uzbek marriage is a settlement.

5. Gender coding

The functional split is accompanied by a difference in how the figure's femininity is constructed, and the two are plainly related.

The English water-maiden is coded as femme fatale. Her beauty is dangerous precisely because it is unattached to any social role: she belongs to no household, answers to no man, and the encounter with her removes the hero from the human order rather than integrating him into it. Her freedom is the source of both her attraction and her threat, and the narrative resolves the tension by destroying one party or by separating them.

The Uzbek pari is coded as an idealised woman. Her beauty is explicitly linked to chastity and fidelity; she is marriageable, and the narrative's work is to make the hero worthy of her rather than to warn him away. Her supernatural status elevates the union rather than contaminating it. Where the English figure represents what a man should resist, the Uzbek figure represents what he should deserve.

It would be a mistake to read the second coding as straightforwardly more favourable to women. The idealised pari is defined by her value to a male protagonist as thoroughly as the femme fatale is defined by her danger to him; both are constructions within patriarchal narrative economies, and the Uzbek figure purchases her positive valence by accepting domestication. What differs is not whether the figure is subordinated to a male perspective but which of two subordinate positions she is assigned.

The age dimension supports this reading. The Uzbek tradition distinguishes lexically between the young marriageable pari and the older suv onasi, the "water mother", who guards and punishes. Female supernatural power in this system is distributed by life stage: the young figure is desirable and testing, the old figure is authoritative and sanctioning. The English tradition makes no comparable distinction; its water-maidens are young by default, and the authority that the suv onasi exercises has no English counterpart in the same figure.

6. The symbolic register in written literature

The folktale findings are corroborated by the use of the figure in written literature, where the two traditions assign her to different symbolic fields. Table 2 summarises.

Table 2. Symbolic content attached to the figure in written literature

Symbolic content	English literature	Uzbek literature	Comparative outcome
Life	Coleridge, The Ancient Mariner (the coming of rain); the sea as horizon in Romantic verse	Navoiy, Farhod va Shirin (cutting the channel through the mountain); the spring as source in the epics	Dominant in the Uzbek tradition, secondary in the English

Web of Teachers: Inderscience Research
webofjournals.com/index.php/1
Licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License.

Symbolic content	English literature	Uzbek literature	Comparative outcome
Death	Shakespeare (Ophelia); Tennyson, The Lady of Shalott; Arnold; Wilde, The Fisherman and His Soul	An episodic motif in the epics; in Sufi usage a figure of fanā, annihilation in the divine	Central in the English tradition; secondary and constructive in the Uzbek
Purification	Coleridge (the washing away of guilt); baptismal imagery	The Sufi "spring of meaning"; the motif of ablution; the cleansing tear in Navoiy's ghazals	Present in both; religiously weighted in the Uzbek
Mystery and the other world	Yeats, The Stolen Child and The Song of Wandering Aengus; the Celtic otherworld	The land of the pari in the epics (G'o'ro'g'li, Rustamxon); enchanted springs	Present in both, but as escape in the English and as attainment in the Uzbek

The pattern is consistent with the folktale analysis. Where the English tradition assigns the figure to death and escape, the Uzbek assigns her to life and attainment. The one symbolic field both traditions develop strongly — purification — is again the field least dependent on an evaluation of the woman herself.

7. Discussion

7.1 What is shared and what is assigned

Table 3 separates the parameters on which the traditions agree from those on which they diverge.

Table 3. Shared and divergent parameters

Parameter	English mermaid	Uzbek suv parisi / pari	Status
Outward form	Half fish; scaled tail; green or golden hair	Fully human form; supernaturally beautiful woman	Divergent
Habitat	Sea, ocean, lake; chiefly salt water	Spring, river, pool, canal; fresh water	Divergent
Functional dominant	Luring and destroying; ambivalent	Testing, marriage, protection; constructive	Divergent
Gender model	Femme fatale: beautiful, free, uncontrolled	Ideal woman: beautiful, chaste, constructive	Divergent
Religious frame	Christian: demonic, the bestiary tradition	Islamic–Zoroastrian syncretism: jinn, parizod, Sufi symbol	Divergent
Narrative outcome	Tragic (Ophelia, the Lady of Shalott, Andersen, Wilde)	Matrimonial (the epics and tales: marriage, household)	Divergent
Supernatural beauty	Beauty at its highest degree	Beauty at its highest degree	Shared

Web of Teachers: Inderscience Research
webofjournals.com/index.php/1
Licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License.

Parameter	English mermaid	Uzbek suv parisi / pari	Status
Liminality	A being on the boundary of the human and the other world	A being on the boundary of the human and the other world	Shared
Governing prohibition	Selkie, mermaid wife: breach returns her to the water	The land of the pari: prohibitions must be kept	Shared
Element of danger	Strong and lethal	Mild and pedagogical	Shared in kind, divergent in degree

The division is clean. What the two traditions share is structural: the figure is supernaturally beautiful, stands at a boundary, and is approached under a prohibition whose breach has consequences. These are the conditions that make her narratively useful. What they do not share is any part of the moral evaluation: form, function, gender model, religious framing and outcome all diverge.

This supports a specific conclusion about the European reading. Danger is not entailed by the structural features. A being who is beautiful, liminal and surrounded by prohibitions can be narrated as a lethal temptation or as a bride worth earning, and both narrations are stable over long periods. The destructive reading describes what one tradition did with the material, not what the material requires.

7.2 Why the traditions diverge

Two factors plausibly account for the divergence, and both were operative over centuries. The first is the relationship to water itself. A tradition formed around a cold and genuinely lethal sea has reason to narrate its water beings as agents of death; a tradition formed around scarce irrigation water has reason to narrate them as guardians of a resource and as rewards for proper conduct. The second is the religious frame. Christian demonology supplied a ready category for the beautiful female tempter, into which the mermaid was absorbed; Islamic and Sufi tradition in Central Asia could place the pari among the jinn without moral condemnation and could read inaccessible beauty as a figure of the divine.

Neither factor determines the outcome, and it would overreach to present them as causes. They are better understood as conditions that made one elaboration easier than the other in each setting.

7.3 Limitations

Three limitations qualify the findings. Corpus comparability is imperfect, since the two bodies of material were collected under different conditions and edited to different conventions. Dominance was assigned qualitatively rather than by counts, and a different coder might distribute two or three of the eight functions differently. And the literary material in Section 6 is drawn from canonical authors in both traditions, which risks mistaking an elite selection for a tradition.

Web of Teachers: Inderscience Research
webofjournals.com/index.php/1
Licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License.

8. Conclusion

The water-maiden of English folktale and the water-maiden of Uzbek folktale share the features that make the figure narratively possible and share almost nothing else. Both are supernaturally beautiful women standing at the boundary of the human world, approached under prohibition. From that common structure the two traditions built opposite figures: one that lures the hero to his death, and one that tests him and marries him.

The finding has a consequence for how the figure is discussed comparatively. The destructive, femme fatale reading that dominates the scholarship is an accurate account of a regional development, not of an archetype. Where the archetype is invoked in future work, the evidential base should be stated, and material from traditions with different value systems should be admitted as potential counter-evidence rather than as illustration.

The obvious next step is to widen the comparison. If the account offered here is correct, other irrigation-based societies should show functional profiles closer to the Uzbek than to the English, and other maritime societies the reverse. That prediction is testable, and testing it would convert a two-case contrast into a genuine typology.

References

1. Briggs, K. M. (1976). A dictionary of fairies: Hobgoblins, brownies, bogies and other supernatural creatures. London: Allen Lane.
2. Campbell, J. F. (1860–1862). Popular tales of the West Highlands (Vols. 1–4). Edinburgh: Edmonston and Douglas.
3. Child, F. J. (1882–1898). The English and Scottish popular ballads (Vols. 1–5). Boston: Houghton Mifflin.
4. Croker, T. C. (1825–1828). Fairy legends and traditions of the south of Ireland. London: John Murray.
5. Dundes, A. (1980). Interpreting folklore. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.
6. Jung, C. G. (1959). The archetypes and the collective unconscious (R. F. C. Hull, Trans.). Princeton: Princeton University Press.
7. Keightley, T. (1850). The fairy mythology: Illustrative of the romance and superstition of various countries. London: H. G. Bohn.

Web of Teachers: Inderscience Research
webofjournals.com/index.php/1

Licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License.