

CHILDHOOD AS CULTURAL IDENTITY: COMPARATIVE SYMBOLISM IN MODERN UZBEK AND ENGLISH NARRATIVES

Xidoyatova Robiya Qilichovna,

Tashkent branch of the University of Business and Science

Lecturer, Department of Languages

robiyakhidoyatova22@gmail.com

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Abstract. This article examines the symbolic function of childhood as a marker of cultural identity in modern Uzbek and English literature. Using a comparative qualitative approach, the study analyzes selected works from contemporary Uzbek prose and English fiction, focusing on how child figures embody social memory, moral values, trauma, and transformation. Texts by O'tkir Hoshimov, Hamid Ismailov, Charles Dickens, and Ian McEwan are comparatively examined to reveal how childhood operates as a cultural metaphor. The findings demonstrate that while Uzbek narratives often portray childhood as a vessel of collective memory and moral continuity, English narratives more frequently depict it as a site of psychological complexity and social critique. The study concludes that childhood symbolism reflects broader cultural frameworks, historical experiences, and narrative traditions in both literatures.

Keywords: childhood symbolism, cultural identity, comparative literature, Uzbek literature, English literature, modern narratives.

Annotatsiya. Mazkur maqola zamonaviy o'zbek va ingliz adabiyotida bolalikning madaniy identifikatsiya belgisi sifatidagi ramziy funksiyasini tadqiq etadi. Qiyosiy-sifat tahlil usuliga tayangan holda, tadqiqot zamonaviy o'zbek nasri va ingliz badiiy adabiyotidan tanlangan asarlarni tahlil qiladi hamda bolalar obrazlari ijtimoiy xotira, axloqiy qadriyatlar, travma va transformatsiyani qanday ifodalashiga e'tibor qaratadi. O'tkir Hoshimov, Hamid Ismailov, Charles Dickens va Ian McEwan asarlari qiyosiy tahlil qilinib, bolalikning madaniy metafora sifatida qanday namoyon bo'lishi ochib beriladi. Tadqiqot natijalari shuni ko'rsatadiki, o'zbek adabiyotida bolalik ko'pincha jamoaviy xotira va axloqiy davomiylilik timsoli sifatida tasvirlanadi, ingliz adabiyotida esa u ko'proq psixologik murakkablik va ijtimoiy tanqid maydoni sifatida talqin qilinadi. Xulosa qilib aytganda, bolalik ramziyligi har ikki adabiyotda kengroq madaniy tizimlar, tarixiy tajriba va narrativ an'analarni aks ettiradi.

Kalit so'zlar: bolalik ramziyligi, madaniy identifikatsiya, qiyosiy adabiyotshunoslik, o'zbek adabiyoti, ingliz adabiyoti, zamonaviy narrativlar.

Аннотация. В данной статье рассматривается символическая функция детства как маркера культурной идентичности в современной узбекской и английской литературе. Используя сравнительно-качественный подход, исследование анализирует избранные произведения современной узбекской прозы и английской художественной литературы, уделяя внимание тому, как образы детей воплощают социальную память, нравственные ценности, травму и трансформацию. Произведения O'tkir Hoshimov, Hamid Ismailov, Charles Dickens и Ian McEwan рассматриваются в сравнительном аспекте с целью выявления того, как детство функционирует как культурная метафора. Результаты исследования показывают, что в узбекских повествованиях детство часто представляется как носитель коллективной памяти и нравственной преемственности, тогда как в английской литературе оно чаще выступает пространством психологической сложности и социальной критики. В заключение делается вывод о том, что символика детства отражает более широкие культурные модели, исторический опыт и повествовательные традиции в обеих литературах.

Ключевые слова: символика детства, культурная идентичность, сравнительное литературоведение, узбекская литература, английская литература, современные нарративы.

Introduction. Childhood has long served as a powerful literary symbol. Beyond representing innocence or vulnerability, the child figure often embodies a society's cultural memory, anxieties, and aspirations. In modern literature, childhood becomes a site where identity is negotiated between tradition and modernity, individual experience and collective history.

In Uzbek literature, particularly in works shaped by Soviet and post-independence contexts, childhood frequently symbolizes moral purity, communal values, and national resilience. In English literature, especially from the Victorian era to contemporary fiction, childhood often reflects social inequality, psychological development, and moral ambiguity.

This article explores how childhood functions as a symbol of cultural identity in selected modern Uzbek and English narratives. The central research question is: How does the literary representation of childhood reflect cultural identity in modern Uzbek and English contexts?

Literature analysis. Theoretical approaches to childhood in literary and cultural studies emphasize its historical and social constructedness. Philippe Ariès in *Centuries of Childhood* argues that childhood is not a fixed biological category but a concept shaped by historical consciousness, while Allison James and Alan Prout in *Constructing and Reconstructing Childhood* interpret childhood as a socio-cultural construct embedded in power relations and discourse.

In literary studies, representations of childhood in works by Charles Dickens and Ian McEwan demonstrate how child figures function as vehicles of social critique and psychological depth. Similarly, Uzbek prose by O'tkir Hoshimov and Hamid Ismailov reflects national memory and moral continuity, forming the comparative foundation of this study.

Research methodology. This study employs a qualitative comparative literary analysis based on close reading of selected primary texts. The works were chosen according to the following criteria:

Representation of childhood as a central narrative element.

Cultural and historical relevance within their literary traditions.

Influence within national or international literary discourse.

Uzbek texts include selected prose by O'tkir Hoshimov and the novel *The Railway* by Hamid Ismailov. English texts include *Oliver Twist* by Charles Dickens and *Atonement* by Ian McEwan. Although Dickens represents an earlier period, his influence on modern constructions of childhood in English literature justifies inclusion for comparative purposes.

The analysis focuses on symbolism, narrative voice, thematic development, and socio-cultural context.

Results and discussion.

1.1 Childhood as Moral Memory in Uzbek Narratives. In Uzbek prose, childhood often symbolizes continuity of cultural values. In works by O‘tkir Hoshimov, child characters frequently embody sincerity, loyalty, and respect for elders—qualities central to Uzbek cultural identity. Childhood is portrayed not merely as a biological stage but as a moral foundation shaped by family and community.

Similarly, in *The Railway*, Hamid Ismailov depicts childhood within a fragmented historical landscape. Here, childhood symbolizes cultural survival amid political upheaval. The child figure becomes a repository of memory, preserving identity in times of displacement and ideological change.

Thus, Uzbek narratives tend to frame childhood as collective and culturally rooted, emphasizing shared history and communal belonging.

1.2 Childhood as Social Critique in English Narratives. In English literature, childhood often functions as a lens for exposing social injustice. In *Oliver Twist*, Charles Dickens uses the orphaned child to criticize Victorian poverty, institutional cruelty, and class inequality. Oliver symbolizes innocence confronting corrupt social systems.

In *Atonement*, Ian McEwan presents childhood as psychologically complex and morally ambiguous. Briony’s youthful misunderstanding leads to irreversible consequences, suggesting that childhood is not merely innocent but capable of error shaped by imagination and social structure.

Modern English narratives frequently explore childhood as an interior psychological state rather than solely a communal identity marker. The focus shifts from collective morality to individual consciousness and ethical responsibility.

1.3 Comparative Analysis. The comparison reveals significant differences shaped by historical and cultural contexts.

Uzbek Literature	English Literature
Collective identity	Individual identity
Moral continuity	Psychological development
Cultural preservation	Social criticism
Community-centered childhood	Interior, self-aware childhood

Uzbek narratives often emerge from experiences of colonization, Soviet rule, and post-independence cultural reconstruction. Therefore, childhood becomes a symbolic safeguard of tradition and communal identity.

English narratives, shaped by industrialization, class stratification, and modern psychological theory, tend to foreground individual subjectivity and societal critique. Childhood is depicted as formative, unstable, and deeply psychological.

Despite these differences, both traditions share important similarities. In both literatures, childhood represents vulnerability, transformation, and the possibility of renewal. It also serves as a narrative strategy to question adult authority and expose hidden social tensions.

The symbolic representation of childhood reflects broader cultural paradigms. Uzbek literature, shaped by strong family structures and collective traditions, positions childhood as the moral heart of national identity. The child becomes a metaphor for cultural endurance.

In contrast, English literature, influenced by industrialization, individualism, and psychological realism, frames childhood as a formative stage marked by vulnerability and inner conflict. Here, the child symbolizes both innocence and instability.

These differences demonstrate how literary symbolism operates within cultural frameworks. Childhood is not a universal metaphor with fixed meaning; rather, it adapts to historical experience and narrative convention.

However, globalization and contemporary literary trends show increasing overlap. Modern writers in both traditions explore trauma, migration, and identity crises through child perspectives, suggesting evolving symbolic functions.

Conclusion. The symbolic construction of childhood reflects broader cultural paradigms. In collectivist-oriented cultural frameworks, such as those often depicted in Uzbek literature, childhood emphasizes belonging and ethical inheritance. In more individual-centered traditions, such as English fiction, childhood becomes a domain of self-exploration and critique of external structures.

These differences are not absolute but indicate dominant tendencies. Globalization and contemporary narrative experimentation increasingly blur these boundaries. Modern Uzbek prose sometimes explores psychological interiority, while contemporary English fiction may revisit communal memory and heritage.

The comparative study highlights how literary representations of childhood reveal deeper cultural values and historical conditions. Ultimately, the child figure serves not only as a narrative character but as a symbolic space where societies define who they are and who they aspire to become.

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