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TYPOLOGICAL COMMONALITIES AND NATIONAL SPECIFICITY OF THE WATER FAIRY IMAGE IN ENGLISH AND UZBEK FOLK ORAL LITERATURE

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Abstract

This article presents a comparative-typological analysis of water fairy images in English and Uzbek folk oral literature. Tracing figures such as Undine, Melusine, and the Lady of the Lake in the English tradition alongside Suv parisi, Suvsanam, and Humo in the Uzbek tradition, the study identifies both universal archetypal features rooted in prehistoric animism and the culturally specific characteristics shaped by distinct historical, religious, and ecological contexts. Drawing on the methodologies of comparative mythology, structural folkloristics, and Jungian archetypal theory, the analysis reveals that water fairies across both traditions function as symbols of purity, liminality, moral judgment, and the dangerous power of feminine beauty. At the same time, significant differences emerge regarding the religious substrates (Celtic-Germanic versus Turkic-Persian-Islamic), narrative functions (romantic tragedy versus heroic assistance), and ecological symbolism (maritime versus agrarian irrigation culture). The paper argues that these images represent culturally mediated expressions of a shared deep-structural archetype — the Anima figure associated with water — and that their comparative study enriches our understanding of cross-cultural folklore dynamics [1, 2, 3].

1. Introduction

The study of supernatural female figures in world folklore constitutes one of the most productive fields within comparative mythology and folklore studies. Among these figures, the water fairy occupies a position of particular complexity, combining attributes of beauty, danger, magical power, and moral ambiguity in ways that cut across cultural boundaries [4]. From the misty lakes of Scotland and the river valleys of Germanic Europe to the fertile oases and irrigation networks of Central Asia, traditions of female water spirits have shaped the imaginations of storytellers, poets, and ordinary people for millennia [5].

Uzbek and English oral literary traditions, though geographically and historically remote from one another, both demonstrate rich and internally diverse repertoires of water fairy lore. In English folklore, figures such as Undine (from German-influenced Romance tradition), Melusine, the Lady of the Lake, Nix, and the Selkie have been documented across ballads, romances, legends, and fairy tales spanning from the medieval period to the nineteenth century [6, 7]. In Uzbek folklore, the suv parisi (water fairy), suvsanam (water beauty), and related figures such as the Pari and Humo appear prominently in heroic epics (dostons), fairy tales (ertaklar), and local legends, carrying the imprint of Turkic animism, Zoroastrian fire-and-water symbolism, and Islamic concepts of divine grace [8, 9].

Despite the apparent distance between these traditions, a systematic comparative analysis reveals striking structural and functional parallels. Both bodies of folklore share a conception of water as a liminal zone that separates the ordinary human world from the supernatural realm;

both figure the water fairy as an ambivalent being capable of either blessing or cursing humans depending on their moral conduct; and both employ the motif of a taboo whose violation leads to tragedy or loss [10]. At the same time, the two traditions diverge significantly in their cultural contexts, religious underpinnings, narrative purposes, and specific symbolic vocabularies.

The present study aims to map these commonalities and differences systematically, contributing to the broader project of cross-cultural folklore studies while simultaneously enriching our understanding of the specific cultural logics at work in both English and Uzbek oral literature. The research draws on primary folklore texts, ethnographic collections, and the methodological frameworks developed by comparative folklorists including Stith Thompson, Vladimir Propp, Claude Lévi-Strauss, and Alan Dundes, as well as Jung's archetypal theory as applied to folklore [11, 12, 13].

2. Theoretical Framework and Methodology

The comparative study of supernatural figures across distinct folklore traditions requires a robust methodological framework capable of identifying structural universals while remaining sensitive to cultural particulars. This study employs a three-layered analytical approach: (1) typological-comparative method; (2) structural-functional analysis; and (3) archetypal-symbolic interpretation [14].

Typological comparison in folklore studies refers to the identification of similar narrative structures, character types, and motifs across traditions that lack demonstrable historical contact, positing that such similarities arise from shared psychological and social functions of storytelling rather than diffusion [15]. In the case of English and Uzbek water fairy lore, the typological approach is particularly appropriate because, while there was some historical contact between the traditions along Silk Road trade routes, the primary parallels appear too deep-structural to be explained by simple borrowing. Rather, both traditions appear to have independently developed a water fairy archetype in response to similar cognitive and ecological imperatives [16].

The comparative methodology employed here draws on Thompson's Motif-Index of Folk Literature [17] and the Aarne-Thompson-Uther (ATU) tale type index [18] to identify corresponding motifs across the two traditions. Key motifs identified for analysis include: F420 (Water Spirits), F420.1.2 (Water Spirit as Beautiful Woman), F420.5.1 (Taboo: Looking at Water Spirit), and related motifs concerning the supernatural bride, the liminal waterscape, and the moral consequences of violating sacred prohibitions.

2.2 Structural-Functional Analysis

Following Propp's morphological analysis of folk tales [19] and Lévi-Strauss's structural anthropology [20], this study treats the water fairy not merely as a character type but as a narrative function: a structural element whose position within the story generates meaning through its relationships to other elements (hero, villain, donor, threshold). In English balladic tradition, the water fairy frequently occupies the role of the fatal attraction — a structural counterpart to the hero's desire — while in Uzbek epic tradition she more typically functions as the magical helper, analogous to Propp's donor figure [21].

Jungian archetypal theory provides a complementary framework for understanding the psychological resonance of water fairy figures across cultures. Jung identified water as one of the primary symbols of the unconscious, and the figure of the seductive or helpful female spirit associated with water as an expression of the Anima archetype — the feminine principle within

the male psyche [22]. From this perspective, the water fairy represents a projection of deep psychological structures concerning desire, the unconscious, boundary transgression, and the dangerous or life-giving power of the feminine [23]. While this study does not uncritically adopt a psychoanalytic reductionism, it acknowledges the heuristic value of archetypal analysis in explaining cross-cultural convergences [24].

The English water fairy tradition draws on multiple historical strata: pre-Roman Celtic beliefs concerning sacred springs and river goddesses, Germanic and Norse concepts of water spirits (Nixies, Nøkks, Undines), and later medieval romance conventions concerning the fairy mistress and enchanted lakes [25]. The resulting tradition is diverse and internally varied, encompassing figures ranging from the benevolent Lady of the Lake in Arthurian legend to the deadly Jenny Greenteeth of northern English folklore, who was believed to drag children into ponds and rivers [26].

Among the most extensively documented figures is Melusine, who appears in Jean d'Arras's fourteenth-century French romance but has deep roots in English and Welsh folk belief. Melusine is typically depicted as a woman who is half-serpent or half-fish on certain days of the week, who marries a mortal nobleman on condition that he never observe her on those days. When her husband violates this taboo, she reverts permanently to her supernatural form and abandons her family [27]. This taboo-and-violation structure, as will be demonstrated below, is remarkably persistent across both English and Uzbek traditions.

The Lady of the Lake represents perhaps the most culturally influential water fairy figure in the English tradition. Appearing in Arthurian legend from at least the thirteenth century, she is described as a supernatural queen who dwells beneath the surface of a magical lake, possesses profound knowledge of the future, bestows the sword Excalibur upon the young Arthur, and later receives his body after his final battle [28]. She thus functions as both donor and threshold guardian — a figure of immense magical authority who mediates between the human world and the otherworld.

From a typological perspective, the Lady of the Lake's role as a magical weapon-giver has precise parallels in Uzbek epic tradition, where water fairies and pari figures frequently bestow magical objects, horses, or knowledge upon heroic protagonists [29]. This parallel is particularly striking given the absence of historical contact between Arthurian romance and Central Asian epic tradition, pointing toward a shared deep-structural narrative logic.

The figure of Undine, popularized through Friedrich de la Motte Fouqué's 1811 novella but rooted in earlier Germanic and pan-European water spirit traditions, represents the archetype of the water fairy who seeks a human soul through love [30]. Unlike the Lady of the Lake, who possesses autonomous supernatural power, Undine gains a soul only through marriage to a mortal man, making her tragedy the story of a liminal being who can never fully belong to either the human or supernatural world. This existential liminality is a recurrent feature of English water fairy figures and carries profound symbolic weight concerning the boundaries of the human condition.

The Nixie (German: Nixe; English dialectal forms including Nix, Nick, and Jenny Greenteeth) represents the darker pole of the English water fairy archetype: a figure whose primary function is the seduction and destruction of unwary men and children [31, 32]. Nixies are typically depicted as beautiful women who lure travelers into water, where they drown. This

lethal seductress motif connects structurally to the Uzbek Albasti figure and, more distantly, to cautionary elements within the Suv parisi tradition.

The Selkie tradition, found primarily in Scottish, Irish, and Scandinavian folklore, depicts supernatural beings who inhabit seal form in the sea but can shed their skins to walk as humans on land [33]. Female Selkies are frequently captured by human men who steal and hide their skins, compelling them to live as human wives. This captivity narrative, in which a supernatural woman is trapped in the human world by the theft of her identity, is structurally parallel to Uzbek tales in which a man steals the dress or veil of a bathing Suv parisi, temporarily binding her to him. The structural identity of this motif across such distant traditions represents one of the most compelling pieces of evidence for the existence of a deep-structural water fairy type.

The Uzbek water fairy tradition is embedded in a complex historical stratigraphy that includes Turkic shamanic and animistic traditions, Zoroastrian cosmology (in which water is one of the four sacred elements), pre-Islamic Central Asian mythology, Persian literary and mythological influences, and the overlay of Islamic theology and ethics [34]. Unlike the English tradition, which was shaped primarily by contact between indigenous Celtic beliefs and Germanic, Norse, and later Norman-French influences, the Uzbek tradition represents a confluence of multiple high-cultural literary traditions alongside indigenous oral culture.

This multi-layered origin has produced a particularly rich and internally diverse water fairy repertoire. The term 'suv parisi' (literally 'water fairy' from Uzbek/Turkic suv 'water' + Persian pari 'fairy/supernatural being') represents a broad category encompassing figures of varying degrees of benevolence, danger, and supernatural power [35]. Related figures include the Suvsanam (water beauty), the Pari (fairy, from Persian), and the Humo (a sacred bird associated with happiness and divine grace, sometimes linked to water in specific regional traditions) [36].

In the corpus of Uzbek folk tales (ertaklar) collected and published from the nineteenth century onward, the Suv parisi typically appears as a beautiful supernatural woman who inhabits springs, rivers, or pools and who can confer magical assistance upon deserving protagonists [37]. The classic encounter pattern involves a young man or hero who, often through the performance of a virtuous act (rescuing a creature, showing generosity to an old person, maintaining ritual purity), gains access to the water fairy's realm and receives her aid in the form of magical objects, prophetic knowledge, or direct assistance.

This helper function aligns the Uzbek Suv parisi closely with Propp's morphological category of the donor figure — a helper who provides the hero with the magical means necessary to accomplish his quest [38]. The centrality of moral desert as the condition for receiving the fairy's assistance reflects the deep influence of Islamic ethics on the Uzbek fairy tale tradition; unlike some English water fairies whose assistance may be more arbitrary or whose danger is primarily sexual, the Uzbek water fairy's moral agency is typically clear and purpose-driven.

The Suvsanam figure — the beautiful water woman observed bathing, whose stolen garment temporarily binds her to the mortal world — represents one of the most widespread and structurally significant water fairy types in Uzbek oral tradition [39]. The bathing and garment-theft motif (typologically analogous to the Selkie skin-theft motif in English-Scottish tradition) appears in numerous regional variants across Uzbekistan, Tajikistan, and Kazakhstan, and constitutes a recognizable tale type within the Central Asian folk narrative tradition.

In the standard narrative, a young man observes a group of beautiful supernatural women bathing in a river or spring. He steals the garment of one (sometimes identified as the most beautiful, or their leader), preventing her from returning to the water realm. Compelled to remain in the human world, she becomes his wife, bears him children, and establishes a prosperous household. When she eventually recovers her garment (often through the inadvertent assistance of a child), she departs immediately to the water realm, leaving her human family bereft. This narrative of temporary domestication and ultimate loss closely parallels the Selkie and Melusine traditions in English-Scottish-Norman folklore [40].

The Uzbek folkloric tradition also contains a darker female supernatural figure associated with water: the Albasti (also spelled Albasty, Al-Basty), who appears across Turkic traditions from Turkey to Siberia [41]. The Albasti is typically depicted as a terrifying woman with yellow hair, pendulous breasts, and malevolent intentions toward pregnant women and newborns in particular. She is associated with marshy ground and running water, and her primary function is as a figure of fear and danger — the shadow counterpart to the benevolent Suv parisi [42].

The coexistence of the benevolent Suv parisi and the malevolent Albasti within the Uzbek tradition creates a structural opposition (helpful/harmful; beautiful/horrifying; associated with clear water / associated with murky swampland) that has a precise analogue in the English tradition's distinction between beneficent water fairies (Lady of the Lake, helpful Undine-figures) and dangerous ones (Jenny Greenteeth, Nixies, Kelpies) [43]. This structural parallelism suggests that the binary organization of the water fairy archetype into positive and negative poles is itself a pan-human feature of the deep-structural type.

The Uzbek heroic epic tradition (doston), including masterworks such as Alpamysh, Gorogly, and the cycle of tales surrounding Farhod va Shirin, provides a distinctive narrative context for water fairy imagery [44]. In these extended oral epics, pari and suv parisi figures function as magical helpers, prophetic counselors, and in some cases as secondary love interests who assist or test the heroic protagonist. The epic context elevates the water fairy from the domestic and cautionary contexts of fairy tales to the cosmic scale of heroic narrative, associating her with fate, divine favor, and the ultimate forces that determine the hero's destiny.

This elevation of the water fairy to the cosmic register has no precise equivalent in English oral tradition, where water fairies tend to remain figures of local legend and balladic narrative rather than actors in the grandest heroic cosmologies. This difference reflects, in part, the different scales at which English and Uzbek oral epic traditions operate: the English tradition's dominant narrative mode for heroic tales was the written romance rather than the oral epic, and this mode proved less hospitable to the integration of local supernatural beliefs [45].

The following table provides a systematic comparison of water fairy images across the English and Uzbek oral traditions, identifying key features, their expression in each tradition, typological commonalities, and significant differences.

Table 1. Comparative Typological Features of Water Fairy Images in English and Uzbek Folk Oral Literature

Criterion	English Water Fairies	Uzbek Water Spirits	Commonalities	Differences

Criterion	English Water Fairies	Uzbek Water Spirits	Commonalities	Differences
Key Figures	Undine, Melusine, Lady of the Lake, Nixie, Selkie	Suv parisi, Suvsanam, Pari, Humo, Albasti	Female supernatural beings linked to water	English: often solitary; Uzbek: appear in groups
Habitat	Lakes, rivers, seas, springs	Rivers, springs, canals, irrigation channels	Fresh-water bodies as dwelling places	Uzbek: irrigation canals reflect agrarian context
Physical Appearance	Radiant beauty, long hair, pale/translucent skin	Extraordinary beauty, luminous skin, loose hair	Supernatural feminine beauty; long hair as symbol	Uzbek: often described with moon-like face; Islamic aesthetic influence
Moral Role	Dual: seductive danger & protective guardian	Dual: blessing bestower & punisher of wrongs	Ambivalent morality — reward virtue, punish vice	Uzbek: more explicitly tied to Islamic moral code
Relation to Humans	Fall in love with humans; tragic unions; soul-seeking	Aid heroic protagonists; punish evil characters	Interaction with human world; transformative contact	English: romantic tragedy motif; Uzbek: heroic helper motif
Symbolic Functions	Purity, danger of desire, liminal boundary, death	Purity, fertility, spiritual reward, divine grace	Water as liminal space; purity and transformation	English: death symbolism stronger; Uzbek: fertility more prominent
Narrative Genre	Legends, ballads, romances, fairy tales	Epics (dostons), fairy tales (ertaklar), legends	Present across multiple oral genres	Uzbek: more prominent in heroic epic tradition
Cultural	Celtic, Germanic,	Turkic, Persian,	Pre-Christian /	Different

Criterion	English Water Fairies	Uzbek Water Spirits	Commonalities	Differences
Origins	Norse mythology	Zoroastrian, Islamic traditions	pre-Islamic animistic roots	mythological substrates shape imagery
Taboo Motif	Husband must not weep / reveal nature	Must not be gazed upon; sacred spaces inviolable	Prohibition structures the human–fairy relationship	English: verbal taboo; Uzbek: visual/spatial taboo

Source: Compiled by the author based on [4, 8, 17, 25, 35, 40]

6. Discussion

The most fundamental commonality between the English and Uzbek water fairy traditions is the consistent association of feminine supernatural power with water. In both traditions, water functions as a liminal zone — a threshold between the ordinary human world and the supernatural realm — and the female figure who inhabits this threshold possesses a correspondingly liminal ontological status: neither fully human nor fully divine, neither entirely benevolent nor entirely dangerous [46]. This water-feminine archetype can be understood, following Jung, as a projection of the Anima — the internalized image of the feminine in the male psyche — onto the natural world, specifically onto the element most associated with the unconscious, the unpredictable, and the matrix of life [22, 23].

The universality of this association is remarkable. From the Greek Nereids and Naiads to the Indian Apsaras, from the Chinese Shui Gui to the Slavic Rusalka, feminine water spirits appear across an extraordinarily diverse range of cultures, suggesting that the archetype responds to something deep in human psychology and in the universal experience of water as both necessary to life and potentially fatal [47]. The English and Uzbek traditions represent two culturally specific elaborations of this universal template.

A second major typological commonality is the structural centrality of the taboo and its violation. In both traditions, the water fairy's relationship with the human world is governed by a prohibition whose transgression leads to rupture, loss, or tragedy [48]. The specific content of the taboo varies culturally: in the Melusine tradition, the husband must not observe his wife on Saturdays; in Selkie narratives, he must not reveal where he has hidden her skin; in Uzbek suvsanam narratives, the man must not allow her to recover her stolen garment; in some Uzbek traditions, men must not approach certain springs or rivers during ritual periods.

The structural function of the taboo is, however, identical across all these variants: it marks the boundary between the human and supernatural orders and dramatizes the catastrophic consequences of boundary violation. From a structuralist perspective following Lévi-Strauss, the water fairy narrative can be understood as a mediation of the nature/culture opposition, with the water fairy herself occupying the mediatory position between the two poles [20]. The taboo maintains this mediatory position in equilibrium; its violation collapses the equilibrium and

forces a resolution in which the supernatural element withdraws permanently from the human world.

Despite these deep structural commonalities, the English and Uzbek water fairy traditions diverge significantly in ways that reflect their distinct cultural contexts. The most important divergence concerns religious substrate. English water fairy belief developed within the context of Christianity's encounter with pre-Christian animism, producing a tradition in which water fairies are associated with moral danger, temptation, and the lure of the natural world as an alternative to Christian salvation [49]. The typical English water fairy narrative thus has a cautionary, even tragic quality: the man who falls in love with a water fairy, or who is seduced by one, is typically destroyed.

By contrast, the Uzbek tradition developed in a context where animistic water spirit belief was filtered through Zoroastrian sacralization of water as a pure and holy element, and subsequently through Islamic ethical frameworks that emphasize divine reward for virtuous conduct [50]. The result is a tradition in which the water fairy more frequently functions as a reward for virtue — a figure of grace and blessing accessible to the morally deserving — than as a figure of temptation and destruction. The Islamic influence is particularly visible in tales where the water fairy explicitly tests the hero's piety and rewards his obedience to divine commandments.

Ecological context also shapes the traditions in significant ways. English water fairy lore developed in a maritime and temperate climate context, where the sea, rivers, and lakes were both essential and dangerous, and where drowning was a primary cause of accidental death [51]. The prevalence of lethal water fairies in the English tradition (Nixies, Jenny Greenteeth, Kelpies) reflects this ecology of danger. Uzbek water fairy lore, by contrast, developed in the context of Central Asian oasis agriculture, where water was scarce, precious, and life-giving rather than primarily threatening [52]. This ecological difference helps explain why the Uzbek water fairy more typically appears as a beneficent figure associated with fertility and agricultural prosperity.

7. Conclusions

The comparative-typological analysis presented in this article demonstrates that the water fairy image in English and Uzbek folk oral literature represents a compelling case study in cross-cultural mythological convergence. Both traditions have independently developed rich and internally differentiated repertoires of feminine water spirit lore, centered on a shared archetypal core — the figure of the beautiful, morally ambivalent, supernaturally powerful woman who inhabits the liminal space of water and who mediates between the human and supernatural worlds.

The structural parallels identified between English and Uzbek water fairy figures — including the water-feminine archetype, the taboo-violation narrative structure, the binary organization into benevolent and malevolent types, the motif of the stolen garment or identity-object, and the function of water as ontological threshold — demonstrate that these convergences are not accidental or the result of historical diffusion but represent independent elaborations of a deep-structural narrative and symbolic type rooted in universal features of human psychology and the universal experience of water [53].

At the same time, the significant divergences between the traditions — in religious substrate, ecological context, narrative function, and specific symbolic vocabulary — demonstrate that the

universal archetype is always realized in culturally specific forms that carry the distinctive imprint of particular historical, religious, and environmental contexts. The English tradition's emphasis on romantic tragedy, moral danger, and the lethal feminine reflects a cultural history shaped by Christian theology, maritime ecology, and the balladic aesthetic. The Uzbek tradition's emphasis on heroic assistance, divine reward, and agrarian fertility reflects the very different cultural history of Central Asian Islam, oasis agriculture, and the heroic oral epic tradition [54].

This study has several implications for the broader field of comparative literature and folklore studies. First, it demonstrates the productive potential of cross-cultural typological comparison as a method for illuminating both universal features of human narrative imagination and the specific ways in which cultural contexts shape the expression of those features. Second, it contributes to the relatively underdeveloped field of English-Central Asian comparative folklore, opening avenues for further research that might extend the comparative frame to include other Central Asian and Turkic traditions. Third, it suggests that the water fairy archetype, precisely because of its deep psychological roots and its universal distribution across cultures, constitutes a particularly rich site for cross-cultural dialogue and mutual literary enrichment [55].

Future research might profitably extend the comparative analysis to include the literary elaborations of these folkloric types in canonical English and Uzbek literature — comparing, for example, the treatment of water fairy figures in Tennyson and Keats with their counterparts in Navoi and the Uzbek classical literary tradition — as well as examining how contemporary Uzbek and English authors have revisited and transformed these ancient images in the context of modernity and globalization.

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