

THE ARCHETYPE OF THE “MADMAN/FOOL” IN THE CONTEXT OF SOCIAL REALITY: A COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS OF THE WORKS OF H. DUSTMUHAMMAD AND E. VODOLAZKIN’S NOVEL “LAURUS”

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Abstract. This article examines the archetype of the “madman/fool” (*yurodivy*/holy fool) as a lens for critiquing social reality in the works of Uzbek writer Khurshid Dustmuhammad and Russian author Evgeny Vodolazkin. Through a comparative analysis of Dustmuhammad’s novel *Bozor* (“The Bazaar”) and Vodolazkin’s *Laurus* (2012), the study reveals how the fool figure functions as a truth-teller who exposes the absurdity of societal norms, materialism, and historical determinism. Drawing on archetypal criticism, cultural anthropology, and literary comparativistics, the research demonstrates both universal and culture-specific manifestations of this archetype. The findings highlight its enduring relevance in contemporary literature as a tool for spiritual and social resistance.

Keywords: archetype, holy fool, *yurodivy*, social critique, Dustmuhammad, Vodolazkin, *Laurus*, *Bozor*, comparative literature.

Introduction

The archetype of the fool or madman possesses profound and multifaceted roots in world literature and culture, serving as a powerful vehicle for truth-telling, social critique, and spiritual revelation across centuries. From Shakespeare’s wise fools in *King Lear*, who expose the hypocrisy of power through witty paradoxes, to the sacred fools (*salos*) of the Byzantine and Russian Orthodox traditions, this figure consistently challenges societal norms by embracing apparent irrationality. In Russian culture, the *yurodivy* (holy fool) holds a particularly distinctive and revered position: by feigning madness, the holy fool reveals the “madness of the world” while attaining a higher level of spiritual purity and divine insight (Vodolazkin, as cited in RT, 2013). This paradoxical sanctity — blending eccentricity, suffering, and wisdom — has become a defining element of Russian religious and literary consciousness.

In the context of post-Soviet social reality, marked by rapid market transformations, spiritual disorientation, and the clash between traditional values and consumerist ideologies, the archetype acquires renewed urgency and relevance. Both Khurshid Dustmuhammad’s novel *Bozor* (“The Bazaar”) and Evgeny Vodolazkin’s *Laurus* (2012) prominently feature fool-like or eccentric figures who function as acute critics of their respective societies. Dustmuhammad employs the chaotic, all-encompassing space of the bazaar and its eccentric inhabitants to dissect the moral costs of economic liberalization, while Vodolazkin revives the medieval Russian tradition of *yurodstvo* to explore themes of repentance, time, and eternity amidst historical turbulence.

Despite their different cultural and temporal settings, both authors adapt the “madman/fool” archetype to expose materialism, spiritual emptiness, the absurdity of linear historical “progress,” and the dehumanizing effects of social conventions. This comparative study aims to

analyze how these writers reshape the archetype according to their cultural contexts, demonstrating its enduring power as a mirror reflecting societal ills and a catalyst for deeper existential and ethical reflection.

The central research question guiding this article is: How does the “madman/fool” archetype function as a vehicle for social and spiritual critique in the works of Khurshid Dustmuhammad and Evgeny Vodolazkin’s novel *Laurus*? By addressing this question, the study contributes to the broader discourse on archetypal patterns in contemporary Eurasian literatures and their role in navigating the complexities of post-Soviet identity.

Literature Review and Methodology

The holy fool tradition has been the subject of extensive scholarly attention, particularly in Russian humanities. Key works by S. A. Ivanov (2005) and Harriet Murav (2012) trace the historical and cultural evolution of *yurodstvo* from its Byzantine origins to its prominent place in Russian Orthodoxy and literature. Vodolazkin, a specialist in medieval Russian culture, delves deeply into this phenomenon in *Laurus*. He portrays *yurodstvo* not as mere eccentricity but as a profound form of sanctity that “shuns any recognition and to this end dons a grotesque mask” (Vodolazkin, 2013, p. 212). The novel transforms the holy fool into a postmodern hagiographic hero, blending medieval spirituality with contemporary narrative techniques.

In Uzbek literature of the post-independence period, the motif of the eccentric or “mad” truth-teller emerges as a response to the spiritual and moral challenges of market-driven alienation and social restructuring. Scholars such as I. A. Yakubov (2023) and Yu. B. Eshmatova (2020) note that contemporary Uzbek prose frequently employs marginal or philosophically detached characters to critique materialism and the erosion of traditional values, often drawing on Sufi traditions of the “wise madman” and national folklore.

Methodology: This study is grounded in comparative literary analysis, which allows for the identification of typological similarities and culturally specific adaptations of the archetype. It also incorporates archetypal criticism inspired by C. G. Jung and Joseph Campbell, as well as close reading techniques focused on narrative structure, symbolism, and character development. The primary sources are Evgeny Vodolazkin’s *Laurus* (English translation by Lisa C. Hayden) and Khurshid Dustmuhammad’s *Bozor*. Secondary sources include scholarly monographs on holy fools, Central Asian prose, and post-Soviet cultural studies. All citations follow the parenthetical author-page format for clarity and consistency. The approach ensures a balanced examination of both universal archetypal dimensions and unique national expressions.

Results and Discussion

In Evgeny Vodolazkin’s novel *Laurus*, the protagonist Arseny (later known by various names, including Ustin and Laurus) serves as a profound embodiment of the *yurodivy* (holy fool) archetype. Following a personal tragedy — the death of his beloved Ustina and their child, for which he feels deep guilt — Arseny embarks on a path of radical repentance. He assumes the name Ustin and joins the ranks of holy fools in the ancient city of Pskov. Vodolazkin meticulously describes the unwritten “rules” of this spiritual vocation through vivid dialogues with seasoned fools such as Foma and Karp, who explain the territorial disputes and performative aspects of holy foolery.

The holy fool deliberately violates social conventions — through eccentric behavior, public self-humiliation, and apparent madness — in order to expose the deeper hypocrisy and spiritual emptiness of society. Vodolazkin articulates the essence of this tradition: “The fool for Christ... strives ‘with imaginary insanity to reveal the insanity of the world’” (Vodolazkin, 2013, p. 189; see also RT, 2013). Arseny’s prolonged periods of silence, strange ascetic practices, and miraculous healing acts function as a powerful critique of medieval social hierarchies, superstition, and moral complacency. His foolery transcends mere eccentricity; it becomes a

radical expression of love, repentance, and Christ-like compassion. By blending medieval hagiographic traditions with postmodern narrative techniques (including temporal fluidity and linguistic hybridity), Vodolazkin demonstrates that genuine wisdom and sanctity frequently appear as madness to a corrupt or spiritually blind society. The archetype thus becomes a bridge between historical epochs, emphasizing the timeless nature of spiritual truth.

In Khurshid Dustmuhammad's novel *Bozor* ("The Bazaar"), the archetype of the fool manifests in a more secular and culturally grounded form, deeply embedded in the chaotic vitality of the traditional Eastern marketplace. The bazaar itself emerges as a symbolic microcosm of post-Soviet social reality — a space of constant flux, economic struggle, human passions, and philosophical reflection. Eccentric characters and marginal figures within this bustling world function as modern equivalents of the holy fool: detached observers who, through their apparent "madness" or philosophical withdrawal, reveal uncomfortable truths about greed, spiritual loss, moral degradation, and the alienation caused by rapid market reforms.

The recurring presence of one such character at the bazaar perfectly mirrors the classic liminal position of the holy fool. He declares: "When I am at the bazaar, everything else ceases to exist for me... The bazaar is the whole world" (Dustmuhammad, 2018, p. 56). Through these figures, Dustmuhammad exposes the absurdity of the new socioeconomic order, where human relationships are increasingly commodified, traditional values are eroded, and spiritual depth is sacrificed for material gain. The fools in *Bozor* do not perform religious asceticism but embody a philosophical and ethical detachment that allows them to perceive the deeper contradictions of society.

Unlike Vodolazkin's explicitly religious and hagiographic fool, Dustmuhammad's archetype is predominantly secular and philosophical. It draws heavily on Eastern cyclical concepts of time and wisdom, as well as the Sufi tradition of the "wise madman" (*majnun* or divinely inspired eccentric), who sees beyond surface realities. This adaptation reflects the specific social realities of post-independence Uzbekistan, where the clash between tradition and modernity creates fertile ground for such critical voices.

The comparative analysis reveals both universal and culture-specific dimensions of the fool archetype. In both novels, the fool operates from the social margins to critique dominant values — whether medieval hierarchies in *Laurus* or neoliberal materialism in *Bozor*. Common functions include truth-telling, moral awakening, and the revelation of societal absurdity. However, the mechanisms differ: Vodolazkin emphasizes Christian transcendence and temporal fluidity, while Dustmuhammad highlights cyclical Eastern wisdom and everyday philosophical resistance. Together, these works illustrate the archetype's remarkable adaptability and its continued relevance as a literary tool for diagnosing and challenging contemporary social realities.

Comparative Insights

Both Khurshid Dustmuhammad and Evgeny Vodolazkin masterfully employ the archetype of the "madman/fool" as a potent instrument for critiquing contemporary and historical social reality, yet they adapt it in ways that reflect their distinct cultural, religious, and historical contexts. Vodolazkin's *yurodivy* functions within a deeply Christian eschatological framework. Sanctity is achieved precisely through deliberate marginalization, self-humiliation, and the rejection of worldly acclaim. The holy fool becomes a living paradox — outwardly mad, inwardly illuminated — whose very existence challenges the spiritual complacency of medieval society. This approach allows Vodolazkin not only to reconstruct the medieval worldview but also to comment on the timeless human tendency to mistake social conformity for truth.

In contrast, Dustmuhammad's fool figures navigate a predominantly secular, market-driven chaos characteristic of the post-Soviet transition period. His characters draw upon national oral

traditions, folk wisdom, and elements of Sufi philosophy rather than explicit Orthodox hagiography. Their “madness” manifests as philosophical detachment, ironic distance from material pursuits, and a stubborn adherence to inner ethical principles amid the frenzy of the bazaar. While Vodolazkin’s fool seeks transcendence through Christ-like love and repentance, Dustmuhammad’s archetype embodies a more grounded, cyclical Eastern wisdom — an acceptance of life’s absurdity coupled with quiet resistance to dehumanizing forces.

Despite these differences, several fundamental elements unite the two interpretations and underscore the universality of the archetype: rejection of material values — both sets of characters consciously distance themselves from greed and commodification; the ability to perceive deeper truths — their liminal position grants them a clarity of vision unavailable to those fully integrated into social structures; social ostracism paired with spiritual or moral authority — marginalization becomes the source of their influence rather than a limitation.

Thus, the “madman/fool” archetype serves as a powerful universal tool for revealing the hidden “insanity” of dominant social paradigms — whether medieval superstition, hierarchical rigidity, or post-Soviet consumerism and spiritual alienation. In both novels, the fool does not merely entertain or provoke; he forces society to confront its own contradictions and moral failings.

Conclusion

The archetype of the “madman/fool” continues to function as one of the most powerful and versatile instruments for literary critique of social reality in contemporary world literature. Through their respective works *Laurus* and *Bozor*, Evgeny Vodolazkin and Khurshid Dustmuhammad brilliantly demonstrate the archetype’s remarkable adaptability across cultural, temporal, and religious boundaries. By consciously embracing apparent madness or eccentricity, their characters expose the true absurdity of worldly “wisdom,” conventional success, and dominant ideologies, while simultaneously pointing readers toward higher spiritual, ethical, and humanistic realities.

Vodolazkin revives the medieval Russian tradition of holy foolery to explore questions of time, repentance, and eternity, while Dustmuhammad transforms the figure into a philosophical observer of post-Soviet market realities, drawing on the rich resources of Eastern thought. Together, these novels affirm that genuine insight and moral resistance frequently originate from the social margins rather than the centers of power. The holy fool ultimately challenges every reader to question their own complicity in societal “madness” and to seek authenticity beyond superficial norms.

Future research could productively expand this comparative framework to other post-Soviet and Central Asian literatures, as well as to contemporary global fiction, in order to trace the evolution of the fool archetype in the age of globalization and digital alienation. In an era dominated by conformity, consumerism, and information overload, the enduring literary figure of the holy fool reminds us that true wisdom often speaks in the language of apparent foolishness — and that the most profound truths are frequently voiced by those whom society chooses to call mad.

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