

THE CONCEPT OF ECOLOGICAL CONSCIOUSNESS IN FOLK EPICS: POETIC MECHANISMS OF MODELING THE UNITY OF NATURE AND MAN

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Abstract

This article analyzes the artistic modeling of nature-human unity in folk epics and explores the poetic mechanisms through which the idea of ecological consciousness is shaped. The research methodology includes the ecocritical approach, the semantics of motifs and imagery, as well as comparative and discourse analysis. The findings demonstrate that ecological norms in epics are primarily encoded as ethical and social standards rather than mere environmental descriptions.

Keywords: Folk epic, nature-human unity, ecological consciousness, ecocriticism, mythopoetics, motif, artistic model.

Introduction

Folk epics, as syncretic artistic systems that encapsulate layers of long-standing historical experience and collective memory, transmit not only aesthetic pleasure but also ancient codes of social norms, ethical viewpoints, and environmental attitudes. In recent decades, there has been an increasing emphasis within the humanities on the necessity of studying ecological thinking not merely through the lens of natural sciences or practical conservation, but through cultural texts and artistic heritage. This is because ecological consciousness is not simply a matter of resource knowledge; rather, it is a synthesis of ways in which nature is perceived not as "the other," but as a spiritual and ethical extension of human life.

From this perspective, how the idea of nature-human unity is presented through poetic constructions in folk epics, the motifs and symbols through which ecological norms are legitimized, and the degree to which nature appears as a "subject" within the epic worldview constitute a particularly relevant scientific problem. As noted by the pioneering ecocritic Cheryll Glotfelty, literature serves as a mirror reflecting not only social structures but also the ecological connections between humans and the physical environment. Therefore, interpreting the epic text as a semantic system that transmits ecological sensitivity allows for a deeper understanding of traditional environmental ethics.

Existing studies on folk epics have extensively covered their historical-ethnographic, genre-poetic, and typological aspects; however, the artistic mechanisms that shape ecological consciousness have often remained a secondary issue. This problem manifests in two ways: first, the depiction of nature in epics is frequently interpreted merely as a "background" (setting); second, the relationship with nature is often limited to economic practices or customs. In reality, within the epic text, nature often becomes an internal semantic driver of the narrative: the hero's trials, the restoration of social order, the continuity of generations, and the mechanisms of moral punishment and reward are all artisticized through natural imagery and spaces.

As noted by folklorist B. Sarimsoqov, nature in epic thinking is not merely "decoration" but a semantic driver linked to the hero's psyche and social destiny. Therefore, the scientific gap of this research lies in the fact that the artistic model of nature-human unity and the poetic-semantic codes of ecological consciousness have not been sufficiently generalized through a systematic, methodologically grounded ecocritical analysis. Indeed, as Cheryll Glotfelty, one of the founders of ecocritical theory, stated, studying the *"relationship between literature and the physical environment"* helps humanity understand the ways to overcome the global ecological crisis.

The aim of this article is to reveal the artistic modeling of the concept of nature-human unity in folk epics and the mechanisms of forming ecological consciousness. This aim is specified through the following tasks: To define the functional types and semantic fields of nature imagery in epics; To identify motifs that link human-nature relations with ethical norms; To determine the role of natural space and landscape in driving the plot; To demonstrate how artistic conclusions related to ecological consciousness function as "invisible rules" within the epic model. The research is conducted at the intersection of general literary studies, folkloristics, and ecocritical theory, interpreting the epic text as a semantic system that transmits ecological sensibility.

Methods

The research methodology relied on several complementary approaches. First of all, the ecocritical approach served to determine that nature is not only a descriptive element in the epic text, but also a "partner" in the production of meaning. Through this approach, it was observed how images of nature are connected with human values, through which moral criteria the attitude towards the environment is normalized, and through what poetic means the "voice" of nature is heard. Ecocritical analysis does not deny traditional folklore poetics when introducing a literary text into an ecological discourse, but on the contrary, allows for a rereading of its ancient codes in a modern conceptual language [8; 9].

As a second important method, mythopoetic and motif-semantic analysis were used. In epics, natural elements such as mountains, rivers, deserts, forests, wind, rain, animals and plants are often imbued with archaic images, and their meaning goes back to deeper layers

than the action in the plot. Motive-semantic analysis served to identify the order of repetition of these elements, their change depending on the context, the mechanisms of their connection with the character and test of the hero. The third direction is comparative-typological analysis: similar natural places and motifs of attitude to nature found in different epics were compared, and the general model and local differences were systematized. This method, taking into account the variant nature of the folklore phenomenon, made it possible to identify stable semantic structures within the framework of a “single tradition” rather than a “single text” [2; 6]. In epics, “Desert and wilderness” or “Rocky Mountains” are not just geographical places, but also places of spiritual purification of the hero. For example, Alpomish’s communication with nature during his journey to the Kalmyk people (talking to water, asking for help from the mountains) is a process of obtaining an “ecological permit” to restore his social rights.

Also, using elements of discourse analysis, the naming of nature in epic speech, the selection of verbs and adjectives for it, and the pragmatic functions of communication with nature (request, warning, test, blessing) were observed. As empirical material, popular plots included in the corpus of Uzbek folk epics and episodes encoding images of nature and ecological norms in their published versions were selected; the criteria for the selection were the prevalence of texts, poetic stability, and diversity of motifs [1; 4]. This combination of methods corresponds to the purpose of the study: ecocriticism provides a general conceptual framework, mythopoetics and motif analysis reveal internal artistic mechanisms, and a comparative approach brings the results to a systematic level.

Results

The results of the analysis showed that the idea of the unity of nature and man in folk epics is expressed through several stable poetic models. In the first model, nature acts as a “moral resonator”, that is, the inner state, intentions and actions of the hero are depicted in parallel with the state of the natural environment. For example, if the intentions of the hero setting out are pure, the path is open, water is abundant, the wind is light; if treachery or violence prevails in his intentions, signs such as the difficulty of the path, dust, drought, and loss of the path increase. Here, nature acts not as a “punishing” or “rewarding” force, but as a visible sign of the moral order. As a result, the idea of ecological consciousness is embodied not in a direct didactic form in the form of “save nature”, but in an indirect rule, such as harmony with nature is a condition for moral correctness.

The second model constructs nature as a “partner space”. Epic space is not a simple geography, it is a system of trials, and each natural landscape corresponds to the stage of spiritual maturity of the hero. The mountain is often associated with the semantics of a test of will and endurance, the desert with the problem of patience and pathfinding, the river with the crossing of the border and renewal, the forest with the semantics of the unknown and overcoming inner fear. These spaces are not “enemies” set against the hero, but “partners” who shape the hero, test his standards. Therefore, the idea of achieving the goal

by adapting to the requirements of nature and understanding it is not the priority. This result shows that epic anthropocentrism is not absolute: although man is at the center, he cannot deny the laws of nature, but, on the contrary, must read them and act in accordance with them. In the third model, the animal and plant world appears as a “communication channel”. In many epics, animals such as horses, birds, and dogs not only become companions of the hero, but also become semantic means of communication between nature and man. In epics, nature is not represented as a "servant to man" (Anthropocentrism), but as an "equal partner with man" (Ecocentrism). For example, the loyalty of the hero's horse (Boychibor, Ghirot) or the coming to the aid of wild animals to the hero is the main poetic construction that shows the subjectivity of nature. These symbols are used to anticipate the danger or opportunity of the environment, show the way, and sometimes warn the hero of his mistake. Plants, especially trees and herbs, embody meanings such as healing, restoration, and life expectancy. As a result, another layer of ecological consciousness appears: nature is not just a "resource", it is a carrier of knowledge and experience. In epic thought, the violation of the relationship with animals and plants is often accompanied by moral violation, that is, the ecological consequences of violence are artistically shown.

The fourth result is that in epics, the images of water, especially springs and rivers, are one of the central codes of the ecological norm. Water, along with being a symbol of vitality and purification, is also seen as a sign of social justice: the blockage, pollution or shortage of water often goes hand in hand with the breakdown of order, the increase in arrogance or oppression; the return of water indicates the restoration of balance. This situation takes ecological consciousness out of the scope of resource management and into the scope of moral responsibility. The epic text does not directly advocate water protection, but it forms ecological sensitivity by showing that if the balance related to water is disturbed, the entire order of life is disrupted.

The fifth result is that in epics, the “language” of nature is often presented in symbolic and ironic form. Even if nature does not speak directly, a semantic signal is transmitted through its signs, “hints,” and rhythmic repetitions. For example, the reappearance of details such as the direction of the wind, the flight of birds, the appearance of stars, the dryness or dampness of the earth at certain points in the text becomes a system that “evaluates” the correctness or incorrectness of the hero’s decisions. As a result, ecological consciousness is formed in epic artistic perception as a culture of reading signs: a person must listen to nature, understand its signals, and act accordingly.

Discussion

The observations show that the interpretation of folk epics as a cultural mechanism for transmitting ecological consciousness increases, but this interpretation should be based on the historical-poetic nature of the text, without succumbing to romanticization. In folklore studies, epics are often interpreted within the framework of heroism, social ideals, and

ethnic memory; such an approach, although effective in itself, can lead to the perception of images of nature as only “decorative”. Studies that analyze Uzbek epics as a poetic system have shown that elements of space and landscape serve the plot, but the issue of the functioning of the ecological norm as a moral code requires a separate conceptual framework [1]. Our results suggest just such a framework: the natural landscape is an indicator of the moral order in epic reality, so ecological consciousness here is not a sentimentalism of “loving nature”, but a manifestation of socio-moral responsibility aimed at maintaining balance.

In the Russian folklore tradition, the mythological layers of epic texts and the semantics of space have been widely studied, and natural elements are often interpreted in an inextricable link with archaic representations [6]. This position can serve as an important theoretical basis for explaining our second result, the model of “partner space”: the transformation of landscapes such as mountains, rivers, and deserts into a system of trials in epic space is a stable feature of mythopoetic thinking. At the same time, limiting oneself to only mythological reconstruction can lead to the issue of ecological consciousness being absorbed into a general archaic symbolism. Our analysis, while preserving the mythopoetic layer, reveals the practical norms underlying it: “reading” the signals of nature and acting in accordance with them is an artistic form of ancient knowledge. This approach helps to see ecological consciousness as a continuous component of cultural memory, regardless of historical periods.

Within ecocritical theory, the contradictions between anthropocentrism and ecocentrism are often discussed in the analysis of the relationship between literary text and environment [8]. In the material of folk epics, this contradiction appears not in a purely theoretical form, but as a poetic equilibrium: the hero is the central figure, but his success is conditioned by the recognition of and adaptation to the laws of nature. This allows us to carefully apply the idea of “subjectification of nature” in ecocriticism to the folk text. Our fifth result shows that the “voice” of nature is often expressed through a system of symbolic signs; therefore, in epics, the agency of nature is manifested more through semantic signals and plot functions than through direct personification. This conclusion is also supported by the poetic economy of the oral tradition: a lot of meaning is conveyed with few means, and the symbol serves as the main carrier.

Our results emphasize the centrality of the image of water, which is consistent with the role of water as a vital resource in the cultural-landscape context of Central Asia. However, a purely deterministic interpretation is not enough. The parallelism of the image of water in epics with moral justice indicates that the attitude towards the resource is artistically constructed as a model of social relations. In works analyzing epic ideals and moral values in Uzbek literary criticism, images of nature are often interpreted against the background of heroism [4; 5]. Our approach, on the contrary, shows images of nature as an internal condition of heroism: the hero does not “overcome” nature, but rather harmonizes with it. This interpretation can also serve as a methodological basis for modern educational and

cultural strategies of ecological consciousness, since it connects ecology with personal morality and collective responsibility.

There are also various views in Russian and international research on the possibility of connecting the role of animal and plant symbols as a “communication channel” with animistic or totemic remnants in folk folklore [6; 9]. However, our results do not reduce these symbols to a mere religious layer: they are also seen as poetic forms of practical ecological knowledge. For example, the knowledge of the horse or the warning of a bird aestheticize the ability to observe nature and draw conclusions from signs in the epic imagination. Thus, the epic text transmits ecological consciousness not in the form of “theoretical education”, but through artistic experience and identification mechanisms. At this point, the educational function of folklore coincides with modern ecological humanitarian research [8].

Conclusion

The article substantiates the fact that the idea of the unity of nature and man and ecological consciousness in folk epics is formed not through direct didactic appeals, but through a system of stable poetic models. The functioning of images of nature in the epic text as a moral resonator, a common space, a channel of communication and an indicator of balance, especially the combination of the symbol of water with the meanings of social justice, is an ecological imperative that governs the epic universe. This mechanism demonstrates that in the folk imagination, the health of the natural environment is inextricably linked to the moral integrity of society. Consequently, the epic model suggests that a violation of ecological harmony inevitably leads to a crisis of social justice, thereby establishing a sustainable code of conduct for future generations."

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