

UDC: 821.111+821.512.133

FAIRY-TALE STUDIES – COMPARATIVE LITERATURE

THE ENIGMATIC GUIDE AND THE FORMING OF THE SOUL: A COMPARATIVE-TYPOLOGICAL STUDY OF FAIRY-TALE ARCHETYPES IN LUQMON BO'RIXON'S "SIRLI MUALLIM" AND PATRICK NESS'S "A MONSTER CALLS"**Yo'ldosheva Go'zal Nasrullayevna**

Asia International University

Master's student, Foreign Language and Literature (English)

Abstract. This article offers a comparative-typological reading of two works of modern children's and young-adult prose – the Uzbek writer Luqmon Bo'rixon's novella *Sirli muallim* ("The Mysterious Teacher," 1991; collected 2006) and the English-language writer Patrick Ness's *A Monster Calls* (2011) – in order to show how inherited fairy-tale archetypes are reactivated in contemporary literature as instruments of spiritual and moral formation. Drawing on the morphological tradition of Vladimir Propp, the archetypal psychology of Carl Gustav Jung, Joseph Campbell's account of the mentor and the "supernatural aid," and Bruno Bettelheim's psychology of the fairy tale, the study argues that both texts are organised around a single deep structure: the arrival of an enigmatic guide who subjects a younger protagonist – or a whole community of learners – to a symbolic trial and thereby precipitates an inner awakening. The analysis identifies the convergent core of this structure (the wise or supernatural mentor, the motif of the test, and the function of story as a healing and educative force) while foregrounding the national-cultural specifics that distinguish Bo'rixon's Eastern, classroom-centred ethical didacticism from Ness's Western, grief-centred therapeutic individualism. The article concludes that comparative archetypal reading is a productive framework for understanding how children's literature across traditions performs the shared work of spiritual education.

Keywords: fairy-tale motif; archetype; mentor figure; spiritual education; comparative literature; children's literature; Luqmon Bo'rixon; Patrick Ness; *Sirli muallim*; *A Monster Calls*.

1. Introduction

Children's literature has never been a merely entertaining margin of the literary system. From the earliest oral fairy tales to the most recent young-adult fiction, narratives addressed to the young have carried a formative charge: they model the world, dramatise the encounter between good and evil, and rehearse the reader in the inner movements that the surrounding culture regards as growth. It is precisely because of this formative charge that the fairy tale – with its stable repertoire of motifs and figures – has proved astonishingly durable, surviving the transition from folklore to the printed book and from the printed book to the contemporary realist or fantastic novel. The present study takes that survival as its point of departure and asks how two geographically and culturally distant works – one Uzbek, one English – reuse the same inherited fairy-tale architecture to address what may be called the problem of spiritual education.

The relevance of the question is twofold. First, in an age of accelerated cultural exchange, the comparative study of how different national literatures shape the moral imagination of the young has acquired a new urgency: it allows us to see both what is shared across humanity and what remains distinctively national. Second, the two works chosen here are unusually well suited

to such a comparison. Luqmon Bo'rixon's *Sirli muallim* and Patrick Ness's *A Monster Calls* were written in different decades, in different languages, and in entirely different generic registers – one a realist, lightly satirical novella set in a remote desert school, the other an overt fantasy set in present-day England – and yet both are built around the same nucleus: a mysterious guide who arrives in the life of the young, sets a trial, and through that trial works a transformation of the soul.

The aim of the article is to reconstruct and compare this shared deep structure and to determine how each text adapts it to a particular cultural model of spiritual education. The tasks that follow from this aim are: (1) to define the working concepts of “fairy-tale motif,” “archetype,” and “spiritual education” as they are used here; (2) to analyse the figure of the enigmatic guide and the motif of the trial in each work separately; (3) to construct a comparative typology of the common and the distinctive elements; and (4) to characterise the two underlying models of spiritual education that the texts propose. The material of the study is the primary texts themselves, read in the light of established archetypal and folkloristic theory; the methods are comparative-typological, archetypal-hermeneutic, and culturally contextual.

2. Fairy-tale motif, archetype, and spiritual education: a working framework

The term fairy-tale motif is understood here in the morphological sense established by Vladimir Propp. In his analysis of the wonder tale, Propp showed that beneath the surface variety of characters and events lies a limited set of recurring functions – acts of the *dramatis personae* defined by their significance for the course of the plot [6]. Among these functions, the appearance of a donor or helper who tests the hero and, after the test is passed, equips the hero with the means of success is of central importance for the present argument. The “mysterious teacher” and the “monster” examined below can both be read as modern incarnations of this donor-helper function: each enters the protagonist's world from outside, sets a test, and bestows a gift that is no longer a magical object but an inner, moral one.

To the morphological account this study adds the archetypal psychology of Carl Gustav Jung. For Jung, the figure who arrives bearing superior knowledge and the power to direct the protagonist toward maturity belongs to the archetype he variously called the Wise Old Man or the *mana-personality* – a personification of meaning and spirit that surfaces precisely when the conscious self is at an impasse [4]. Joseph Campbell, drawing on the same materials, gave this figure its best-known narrative name: the mentor, or “supernatural aid,” who meets the hero at the threshold of the adventure and supplies guidance for the ordeal to come [3]. Read through Jung and Campbell, both Najot G'aybulla and the yew-tree monster appear as variants of a single transcultural archetype – the guide who personifies a wisdom the protagonist does not yet possess.

Finally, the educative dimension of the fairy tale is theorised most fully by Bruno Bettelheim, whose psychoanalytic study argued that fairy tales matter to the child precisely because they allow inner conflicts – fear, guilt, the wish for and dread of separation – to be externalised, confronted, and resolved in symbolic form [1]. Jack Zipes has extended this insight in a sociological direction, showing how fairy-tale patterns “stick” because they carry, and transmit across generations, a culture's working assumptions about how a person ought to become good [8]. It is in the convergence of these traditions – morphological, archetypal, and psycho-pedagogical – that the notion of spiritual education used in this article is grounded. By spiritual education we mean the literary modelling of the process through which a young consciousness is led, by an encounter with a wiser other and through an ordeal, toward a deeper moral self-awareness. The two literary cultures compared here name this process differently – the Uzbek tradition through the closely linked ideas of *tarbiya* (upbringing) and *ma'naviyat* (spirituality), the Western tradition through the

vocabulary of moral development and emotional healing – but the underlying literary work is recognisably the same.

3. The mysterious mentor: archetype and trial in Sirli muallim

Luqmon Bo'rixon (1965–2024), one of the significant prose writers of independence-era Uzbekistan, set his novella *Sirli muallim* in a poor, remote settlement on the steppe – a landscape shadowed, in his wider work, by the forced resettlement of mountain communities onto the desert plain. The text opens under the sign of the teacher's dignity: its epigraph, taken from the poet Abdulla Oripov, declares that the teacher is a mirror (ko'zgu) within human perfection. This image of the teacher as a reflecting surface in which the pupil sees what he may become governs everything that follows.

The novella's architecture is itself a kind of riddle. The story reaches the reader not as straightforward narration but through an investigation: a journalist is dispatched to find out the truth behind the rumours (mish-mish) circulating about a certain Najot G'aybulla, and much of the text is assembled from the explanatory statements that members of the school staff have been required to submit to an investigator, because a criminal case has been opened. This frame is decisive. By presenting the mysterious teacher through the partial, anxious, often self-justifying testimony of others, Bo'rixon reproduces in narrative form the very structure of the fairy-tale donor, who is always approached indirectly and whose true nature must be deciphered. The reader, like the journalist, is set the Proppian task of recognising the helper for what he is.

Najot G'aybulla himself fulfils the donor-mentor archetype with remarkable precision. He is a teacher of geography whose lessons fall on the classroom like a spell: his calm, enchanting voice (sokin, sohir ovoz) carries through the room until the pupils are, in the narrator's phrase, immersed as if in the very ocean he describes. The marvellous here is not magical but pedagogical – the ordinary act of teaching is raised to the level of enchantment, and it is this that makes the teacher "mysterious." At the same time he is, by the world's standards, a holy fool: he neither knows nor cares how to compose the reports and lesson-plans that the bureaucratic inspector demands, and his refusal of paperwork is precisely what exposes him to the "trial." The conflict of the novella is therefore the conflict between authentic vocation and administrative formalism, and the teacher's inability to defend himself in the language of officialdom is the mark, not of his weakness, but of his belonging to a different and higher order of value.

The motif of the trial is thus doubled. On the surface, it is a social and legal ordeal – the investigation, the explanatory statements, the looming criminal case – to which the teacher is subjected by a community that has lost the capacity to recognise the good when it appears. Beneath the surface, the real subjects on trial are that community and its children, whose corrupted aspirations – to become a feared prosecutor, even a "mafia" boss – the novella exposes with quiet, painful irony. The spiritual awakening the text works toward is the recovery of the sense that knowledge and the teacher's vocation are sacred; the mysterious teacher functions as the donor who, simply by being what he is, returns to those around him the lost measure of conscience. Recent Uzbek scholarship has likewise read the work as a meditation on the responsibility and sanctity of the teaching profession, conveyed through Bo'rixon's characteristically "mysterious", suspended mode of narration [7].

4. The supernatural guide: archetype and trial in A Monster Calls

Patrick Ness's *A Monster Calls* (2011), developed from a final idea of the writer Siobhan Dowd, who died of cancer before she could write it, transposes the same archetype into the register of overt fantasy. Its protagonist, thirteen-year-old Conor O'Malley, lives in present-day England

with a mother whose cancer is no longer responding to treatment; his father is distant, his grandmother difficult, and at school he is isolated and bullied. Into this constricted world the marvellous erupts: shortly after midnight – always at seven minutes past midnight, 12:07 – the ancient yew tree in the churchyard rises, gathers itself into a vast face and limbs, and walks to Conor’s window. The recurrence of the exact hour functions, like the riddling frame of Sirli muallim, as a signal that the everyday has been suspended and the time of the fairy tale has begun.

The monster announces the terms of the encounter at once, and they are the terms of the fairy tale: it will tell Conor three stories, and in return Conor must tell a fourth – the true story, the recurring nightmare he has hidden from everyone. The three tales the monster narrates – of a prince and a witch, of an apothecary and a parson, of an invisible man – are deliberately unsettling: each refuses the simple moral the listener expects, insisting instead that human beings and their motives are mixed, that the apparently good may do harm and the apparently wicked may be wronged. In Bettelheim’s terms, the monster is doing the work of the fairy tale in its purest form, using story to give shape to feelings too dangerous to be approached directly [1]. The yew is itself a charged symbol: a tree of churchyards and of death, but also the literal source of compounds used in the treatment of cancer – a living emblem of the book’s refusal to separate destruction from healing.

Here too the trial is the heart of the matter, and here too it is finally an inner one. The fourth story the monster demands is the truth Conor cannot bear to speak: that, in part of himself, he wishes the unbearable waiting would end – that he wants his mother to die so that the pain may stop – and that he is consumed by guilt for the wish. The monster’s function as donor is to compel the utterance of this truth and then to reframe it: the wish does not make Conor monstrous; it makes him human, and the truth, once spoken, releases him into genuine grief. The supernatural guide thus performs an unmistakably therapeutic and educative office. The gift it bestows is not power but permission – permission to feel, to mourn, and to forgive oneself – and the moral growth it occasions is Conor’s movement from denial through honesty to acceptance.

5. Comparative typology: shared archetypes and national specifics

Set side by side, the two works reveal a striking convergence at the level of deep structure and an equally striking divergence at the level of cultural realisation. The convergence can be stated as a single sequence of fairy-tale functions: an enigmatic guide crosses from another order of reality into the world of the young; this guide sets a trial centred on the telling, or the recognition, of a hidden truth; and the passing of the trial brings about an awakening that is spiritual rather than material. In both texts, moreover, story itself is the decisive instrument – teaching-as-enchchantment in Bo’rixon, the parable-stories of the monster in Ness – so that each work is, at one level, a fairy tale about the educative power of fairy tales. The following table summarises the parallel structure and the points at which the two traditions diverge.

Parameter of comparison	Sirli muallim (L. Bo’rixon)	A Monster Calls (P. Ness)
Figure of the guide	Najot G’aybulla – an enigmatic human teacher; the “mysterious mentor”	The yew-tree monster – a supernatural, primal guide
Mode of the marvellous	Realist narration in which the teacher becomes legend; the “miraculous” is moral, not magical	Overt fantasy; an animate mythic creature crosses into the everyday

Central trial	A social-bureaucratic “trial”: investigation, explanatory statements, the threat of a criminal case	An inner trial: telling the fourth, truthful story – confronting buried guilt
Function of story	Teaching itself as enchantment; knowledge restored to its sacred dignity	Three parable-stories that heal by reframing the protagonist’s denial
Object of education	A community of pupils and adults; collective conscience (ma’naviyat)	A single grieving child; individual psychological reconciliation
Spiritual outcome	Awakening of moral awareness and respect for the teacher’s vocation	Acceptance of loss, release from guilt, the right to grieve
Cultural register	Eastern, communal, ethical-didactic; teacher as ko’zgu (mirror)	Western, individual, therapeutic-elegiac; monster as inner truth

The divergences clustered in the right-hand columns of the table are not incidental; they express two different cultural philosophies of formation. Bo’rixon’s marvellous is moral rather than magical: nothing supernatural occurs, and the “mystery” of the teacher is the mystery of integrity in a world that has forgotten how to read it. The ordeal is communal and outward – an investigation conducted by a society – and the awakening it seeks is collective, a restoration of shared *ma’naviyat* and of respect for the teacher’s vocation. Ness’s marvellous, by contrast, is openly fantastic, and his ordeal is private and inward – a single child’s reckoning with grief and guilt. Where the Eastern text moves outward, from the individual figure of the teacher to the conscience of the community, the Western text moves inward, from the social facts of illness and bullying to the buried truth of one boy’s heart.

These differences correspond to differences of genre and tone. *Sirli muallim* is realist and quietly satirical, exposing bureaucratic and moral failure through irony; *A Monster Calls* is fantastic and elegiac, dramatising loss through symbol and myth. Yet the comparison shows that genre is, in a sense, only the outer garment of the archetype. Beneath the satirical realism of the one and the mythic fantasy of the other lies the same ancient pattern – the wise stranger, the test, the transformed soul – which each culture has clothed in the materials closest to hand.

6. Two models of spiritual education

From this comparison two distinct, though not opposed, models of spiritual education emerge. The first, which we may call the *didactic-communal* model and which Bo’rixon embodies, conceives of moral formation as the restoration of a shared order of value. The teacher is a mirror (*ko’zgu*); his role is to reflect back to the community an image of what knowledge, conscience, and vocation ought to be, and the “education” the text performs is addressed as much to the corrupted adults and society as to the children. Its characteristic emotion is shame turning toward reverence, and its horizon is collective. The second, the *cathartic-individual* model embodied by Ness, conceives of moral formation as the healing of a wounded interior. The guide’s role is to make the hidden truth speakable, and the “education” the text performs is the licensing of honest feeling. Its characteristic emotion is guilt turning toward self-forgiveness, and its horizon is the single self.

The pedagogical implication of the comparison is that children's literature in both traditions performs spiritual education through the same essential mechanism – the symbolic encounter with a wiser other who imposes a trial – but calibrates it toward different ends: the cultivation of communal conscience in one case, the integration of individual emotion in the other. For the contemporary reader and educator, the two models are complementary rather than rival. The Eastern model reminds the Western that the formation of the self is never purely private, that conscience is owed to a community; the Western model reminds the Eastern that no communal ideal is achieved without attending to the truth of the single suffering heart. Their convergence on the archetype of the enigmatic guide suggests that the deep grammar of moral storytelling is shared across the human family, even where its accent is unmistakably national.

7. Conclusion

This comparative-typological reading of *Sirli muallim* and *A Monster Calls* has shown that two works as distant in language, genre, and tone as a realist Uzbek school-novella and an English fantasy of grief are nonetheless built from the same fairy-tale materials. Both reactivate the archetype of the enigmatic guide – the Proppian donor, the Jungian Wise Old Man, the Campbellian mentor – and both organise their action around a trial whose true content is the recognition or confession of a hidden truth, and whose reward is an awakening of the soul. The divergence between them is the divergence of two cultural models of spiritual education: Bo'rixon's didactic-communal model, in which the teacher restores a shared moral order, and Ness's cathartic-individual model, in which the supernatural guide heals a private wound. The persistence of the same archetype across so wide a cultural distance confirms the value of comparative archetypal analysis for the study of children's literature: it lets us see at once the universality of the forms through which the human imagination educates the young and the irreducible particularity of the cultures that fill those forms with life. Further research might extend the comparison to a broader corpus of Uzbek and English children's prose, testing whether the two models identified here recur as stable national tendencies or shade into one another under the pressure of a globalising literary culture.

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