THE ROLE OF METAPHOR AND SYMBOLISM IN REPRESENTING THE SUPERNATURAL IN FOLKLORE

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ABSTRACT

Metaphor and symbolism are central semiotic strategies through which vernacular communities articulate encounters with the supernatural. Drawing on a comparative corpus of British, Uzbek, and broader Eurasian narrative traditions, the present study investigates how figurative language structures collective perceptions of other-worldly beings, spaces, and events. Using conceptual metaphor theory, semiotic analysis, and hermeneutic close reading, the research reveals that metaphoric mappings—particularly those of liminality, embodiment, and transformation—provide cognitive scaffolding for supernatural motifs, while symbolic clusters rooted in natural, spatial, and chromatic codes stabilize communal cosmologies. The findings demonstrate that metaphors of boundary crossing and symbols of threshold objects (doors, bridges, crossroads) mediate social norms by locating the supernatural at the edge of everyday life, thereby reinforcing ethical frameworks and group identity. The discussion argues that sustained metaphor–symbol interaction functions as an adaptive cultural mechanism: it preserves archaic cosmological schemata yet continuously re-interprets them, allowing folklore to remain intelligible amid social change.

KEYWORDS

Folklore, supernatural, metaphor, symbolism, semiotics, conceptual metaphor theory, liminality, Uzbek folklore, British folklore, cultural cognition.

INTRODUCTION

Across cultures, tales of spirits, fairies, peri, and ajina stand at the heart of oral tradition, embodying anxieties and hopes that transcend empirical reality. Scholars from Propp to Dundes have shown that such narratives rely not only on plot but also on a dense fabric of figurative language. Metaphor structures cognition by projecting familiar bodily or environmental experience onto the unknown, while symbolism condenses meaning into culturally saturated images. When audiences speak of "the veil between worlds" or depict death as "the last door," they activate figurative frames that render the supernatural thinkable without stripping it of mystery. Yet the precise interaction of metaphor and symbol in folk discourse has rarely been examined through a systematic comparative lens, particularly between Western European and Central Asian contexts. Addressing this gap, the present article explores how metaphoric mappings and symbolic codes collaborate to represent the supernatural in British and Uzbek folklore, situating the analysis within current debates on cognitive poetics and semiotic anthropology.

The corpus comprises 120 narrative texts: forty English and Scottish ballads and wonder-tales edited by Francis James Child and Katharine Briggs; twenty Welsh and Cornish legends recorded by the Folklore Society; thirty Uzbek epics (doston) and fairy tales from the O'zbek Xalq Og'zaki Ijodi multivolume series; and thirty supplementary narratives from Russian,

Kazakh, and Tatar collections that share Turkic mythic motifs. Texts were selected for explicit references to other-worldly beings or journeys.

Methodologically, the study combines three complementary approaches. First, conceptual metaphor theory (Lakoff & Johnson) is employed to identify recurrent source-to-target mappings—such as BOUNDARY IS DOOR or DEATH IS JOURNEY—that structure supernatural episodes. Secondly, Peircean semiotic analysis isolates symbols (objects, colours, spatial coordinates) whose signified transcends immediate narrative function, tracing diachronic continuities within each culture. Finally, hermeneutic close reading contextualizes figurative patterns within performance settings, drawing on ethnographic descriptions when available. Analyses were conducted in the original languages; Uzbek texts were consulted in Cyrillic and Latin scripts to capture vernacular nuances. To ensure validity, coding reliability was tested through inter-coder agreement involving two independent folklorists for twenty per cent of the data, yielding a Cohen's kappa of 0.81.

The investigation revealed three dominant metaphorical domains governing supernatural representation. The first, Liminality, maps physical thresholds onto existential boundaries: caves, riverbanks, and city gates stand as metaphoric interfaces where humans negotiate passage to the other world. British tales of Tam Lin position the fairy realm beneath a well or at a stone circle; Uzbek stories locate peri kingdoms beyond the qir (desert edge). The second domain, Embodiment, uses bodily experience to render invisible forces tangible. Chill winds "touch" the protagonist as ghostly hands, while unearthly voices "pierce" the heart, extending somatic sensation into metaphoric perception. The third domain, Transformation, frames the supernatural as flux: metamorphosis metaphors describe spirits "pouring like smoke" or "blossoming into flame," emphasizing instability as an ontological marker.

Symbolic analysis corroborated these domains. Threshold symbols such as keys, bridges, and crossroads appeared in eighty-three per cent of the texts, often accompanied by liminal colours—gray, twilight blue, or liminal green—traditionally associated with ambiguity. Animal symbolism diverged cross-culturally: the British corpus favors hares and black dogs; Uzbek narratives foreground the mythical bird Humo and the serpent ajdaho, yet both sets converge on the owl as a nocturnal mediator. Crucially, symbolic objects rarely function in isolation; they cluster into constellations that guide the listener through metaphoric space. For instance, in the English ballad "Thomas the Rhymer," a silver branch, a single red fruit, and a narrow road conjointly frame the path to Elfland, while in the Uzbek epic "Alpomish," a withered tree and a ringing bell demarcate the hero's crossing into the land of dev (demons).

Cross-cultural comparison indicated that while specific iconography varies, deep metaphorical grammars show remarkable convergence. Both traditions encode the supernatural as marginal yet accessible, dangerous yet potentially beneficial—a pattern linguistically sustained by recurrent source domains of journey, boundary, and metamorphosis. Statistical frequency analysis confirmed that metaphors of passage outnumbered those of confrontation by a ratio of 3:1, underscoring movement rather than battle as the primary cognitive script.

The findings highlight metaphor and symbolism as intertwined semiotic channels that simultaneously veil and unveil the supernatural. By mapping abstract fears onto concrete experiences of crossing, touching, or traveling, metaphor renders the intangible graspable without collapsing mystery into mundanity. Symbolism, conversely, anchors these mappings in material culture, crystallizing shared associations through recurring images. Their interaction

produces what Turner termed a "liminoid process," wherein audiences rehearse boundary negotiation in aesthetic play, thereby reinforcing moral and social codes.

In British lore, the metaphor of FAIRY REALM AS PARALLEL COURT mirrors medieval hierarchies, sustaining feudal notions of allegiance beyond death. The silver branch, emblem of sovereignty, symbolizes both peril and prestige, cautioning listeners against transgressive ambition. Uzbek narratives, shaped by nomadic cosmology, privilege the steppe horizon as symbol: the open border underscores communal dependence on ecological thresholds. Here, metaphors of hospitable spirits reflect the cultural valuation of guest-friendship (mehmondo'stlik), tempering fear with ethical reciprocity.

The prevalence of transformation metaphors across the corpus suggests that folk communities conceive the supernatural less as static category than as mode of becoming. This insight aligns with current cognitive linguistic studies positing that metaphor facilitates conceptual blending, allowing speakers to integrate incompatible ontologies. By casting spirits as smoke or fire—elements both material and evanescent—narrators invite audiences to entertain fluid identity models, a cognitive flexibility that may have adaptive value amid socio-ecological change.

Methodologically, the high inter-coder reliability affirms the replicability of metaphor coding, yet limitations persist. Performance context remains under-documented for several Uzbek epic variants, constraining ethnopoetic interpretation. Future research might integrate audiovisual recordings and audience reception studies to triangulate semantic findings with pragmatic data.

Metaphor and symbolism constitute a holistic representational system through which folklore communities navigate the boundaries of the seen and unseen. The comparative analysis demonstrates that despite geographic and historical divergence, British and Uzbek traditions employ analogous figurative strategies: they situate the supernatural at liminal sites, encode its presence through tactile and visual metaphors, and stabilize these mappings with culturally resonant symbols. Far from ornamental, such figurative language performs essential cognitive and social work. It frames existential uncertainty, enforces communal ethics, and accommodates cultural renewal by permitting continuous reinterpretation. Recognizing this dynamic interplay enriches both folkloristic theory and broader inquiries into how human imagination negotiates the unknown.

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