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Narrative Substrata in an Albanian Poem: A Cross-Cultural Perspective on Shared Motifs

Ermira Alija¹, Denisa Hysaj²

¹Universiteti i Shkodrës “Luigj Gurakuqi, Qendra e Studimeve Albanologjike, Shkodër, Shqipëri, ²Professional Master’s Degree in Teaching Language and Literature

ermira.alija@unishk.edu.al, denisahysaj15@gmail.com

Abstract. This article examines the narrative core of the Albanian literary work *Erveheja* by Muhamet Kuçuku, written around 1820, which, according to the author himself, was influenced by an earlier Turkish source. The aim of the study is to trace the intertextual origins of this subject and to provide a comparative analysis focused on the narrative motifs of the shared subject, taking into account the *Tuti-nama* (12th century) and a Kazakh folktale (15th century). The methodology combines hermeneutic and structuralist analysis, with an emphasis on the meaning, function, and transmission of motifs, as well as their connection to the folkloric and cultural dimension. The analysis of motifs and their comparison highlight early narrative structures that have remained unchanged, as well as elements that have been transformed and acquired didactic-religious connotations. The findings suggest that the subject of *Erveheja* embodies elements of an intercultural narrative archetype. Furthermore, its mystical-religious approach, in which the extraordinary and miraculous are attributed to God and the heroine’s morality is identified with Divine morality, has contributed to shaping *Erveheja* as a cultural model and may have played a decisive role in preserving its subject intact over time.

Keywords. *Erveheja*, Albanian literature, narrative motifs, intercultural archetype, comparative literature

Introduction

This study is motivated by the interest in tracing the origins and parallels of the narrative core of the Albanian literary work *Erveheja* by Muhamet Kuçuku (ca. 1820).

Muhamet Kuçuku (1780–1843), born in Konispol and educated in Cairo, wrote *Erveheja* in verse form to facilitate oral transmission and moral instruction. The author himself states that the subject of his work was inspired by a Turkish prose text. The work consists of 856 verses.

Earlier scholarship has attempted to identify this source. Klara Kodra, in her comparative study of *Erveheja* and Boccaccio’s *Decameron*, suggested that its subject may derive from Oriental models such as *Tuti-nama* (The Tales of a Parrot) in Persian literature and *Shukasaptati* in Sanskrit literature, though without pursuing detailed analysis.

While its immediate Turkish source has not been definitively identified, previous scholars have suggested that it may itself have been a translation of earlier Arabic or Persian

texts, such as *Revza* or other Sufi collections. Regardless of the precise source, the cultural circulation of shared narrative motifs across the Eastern literary world supports the hypothesis of a transregional archetype.

Building upon these indications, the present research seeks to examine *Tuti-nama* and its possible influence on *Erveheja*, while also considering a Kazakh folktale, *The Tale of Marhuma and Yunis*, that exhibits striking similarities. The aim is to clarify intertextual relations and to explore how shared narrative motifs travel across languages, regions, and genres.

All the more so because the subject of *Erveheja* has also been identified in Albanian folklore. In a previous study, we compared this subject with two Albanian folktales (*Çika e pakund shoqe* and *Besa e kunorës*) and it remained unclear whether these similarities could be traced back to a common pre-text. The presence of parallel motifs in other Eastern literatures suggests that the subject belongs to a wider intercultural narrative archetype.

This comparative investigation contributes to the broader field of comparative literature, illustrating communicative relationships among literatures of different geographies and traditions.

Methods

The research methodology combines hermeneutic and structural analysis with a comparative literary approach. The primary aim has been to identify and analyze recurring motifs and to interpret their meanings within a cultural and folkloric framework.

The comparative sources were selected for their historical and cultural proximity to the narrative core of *Erveheja*. The *Tuti-nama* represents an early Persian-Turkish literary tradition closely aligned chronologically and thematically with the poem's presumed Turkish source, while the Kazakh folktale reflects the oral transmission of similar motifs in Central Asia. Examining both allows us to trace the narrative across different regions, languages, and modes of transmission, highlighting the subject's intercultural resilience and adaptability.

The study focused on two main comparative sources:

The story of Merhume in *Tuti-nama* (The Tales of a Parrot), translated into Turkish from Nakhşebi's Persian version by Behçet Necatigil. Special attention was given to the story of Merhume Hatun (*Merhûme'nin hikâyesi*), chosen because the Persian text is chronologically closer to the original Sanskrit *Shukasaptati* (12th century). Scholars note that the *Tuti-nama* was not confined solely to intellectual circles but spread widely among the general populace through professional storytellers, thereby becoming part of the folklore (Ağaoğlu, 2012). This widespread circulation underlines the text's accessibility and its potential influence on other narrative traditions.

The Tale of Marhuma and Yunis, a Kazakh folktale included in Sejit Kaskabasov's folklore collections and analyzed by Mustafa Nerkiz. These collections are generally dated to the 15th century, around the formation of the Kazakh state.

In addition, secondary sources such as Klara Kodra, Zef Skiroi, and Giuseppe Schirò were consulted to trace scholarly interpretations of *Erveheja*'s origins. Online databases (Google Scholar, Ulusal Tez Merkezi, Pamukkale University GCRIS) were used to access both primary texts and recent research.

Through comparative reading, the analysis examined: recurring motifs and their interpretation, the moral and didactic functions assigned to the heroines, the cultural layers embedded in the texts, including Islamic mystical and folkloric dimensions.

This multi-level approach enabled us to identify not only structural correspondences but also the ways in which motifs were reshaped into didactic-religious interpretations.

Results

The comparative analysis of *Tuti-nama* (the story of Merhume), the Kazakh folktale *The Tale of Marhuma and Yunis*, and the Albanian poem *Erveheja* reveals a sequence of shared narrative motifs that remain stable across different cultural and linguistic contexts. These motifs illustrate the persistence of a common narrative archetype while also reflecting contextual transformations.

First, the core storyline is preserved: a virtuous wife, wrongfully accused by her brother-in-law, suffers a series of trials and displacements but resists every attempt to compromise her chastity. Through divine or miraculous intervention, she is repeatedly saved, eventually restored to honor, and reunited with her husband. This narrative trajectory—fall, trial, vindication, and reward—forms the structural backbone of all three versions.

Within this shared framework, several key motifs recur consistently:

- False accusation and betrayal: the younger brother (or other male figures) falsely accuses the heroine, leading to her condemnation.
- Divine or providential rescue: the woman is saved from death, often through miraculous intervention or the timely appearance of a helper figure.
- Repeated ordeals: she faces threats from outsiders (slave, merchant, sailors), each of which she resists through steadfastness and faith.
- Miraculous punishment of wrongdoers: storms, lightning, or illness strike those who attempt to harm or dishonor her.
- Transformation and recognition: the woman survives disguised, becomes healer or ruler, and is ultimately reunited with her husband after the wrongdoers confess.

Despite these structural parallels, each version adapts the motifs to its own cultural horizon. *Tuti-nama* emphasizes the mystical-religious dimension, attributing the heroine's deliverance directly to God. The Kazakh folktale underlines the moral didacticism of loyalty and endurance within the family sphere. *Erveheja*, written in verse form, integrates both layers, presenting the heroine's resistance as a model of divine morality while also serving didactic purposes for an Albanian audience of the 19th century.

These findings confirm that *Erveheja* should not be regarded as an isolated creation, but as part of a broader intercultural narrative archetype. The recurrence of identical motifs across Persian, Turkic, and Albanian traditions demonstrates both the durability and the adaptability of this subject, underscoring its transmission along the continuum from oral folklore to written literature.

Discussion

The comparative analysis demonstrates that all three variants—*Erveheja*, the Tûtînâme story of Merhume, and the Kazakh tale of Marhuma and Yunis—share a common narrative core. This strongly supports the conclusion that *Erveheja* belongs to a transregional narrative tradition, even if the precise source used by M. Kuçuku cannot be determined. The long circulation and repeated rewriting of these narratives further reinforce their status as part of a durable archetypal subject. Kesler's study of the Tûtînâme highlights the theme of fidelity and shows how a common narrative can be adapted and reinterpreted across contexts, authors, and audiences.

A first key feature is the role of the extraordinary. While fairy tales often attribute the extraordinary to supernatural beings, in these variants the miraculous is consistently attributed to divine intervention. The heroine survives ordeals, storms destroy wrongdoers, and healing powers are granted—all framed as acts of God. This religious framing aligns the narratives with Islamic moral and mystical traditions, and likely contributed to their transmission and preservation.

Second, the female protagonist is repeatedly tested by antagonists—brother-in-law, Arab master, slave, thief, ship captain, and sailors. Despite her suffering, she does not retaliate but endures with patience and faith. Her extraordinariness lies less in superhuman powers and more in sanctity, drawing parallels with figures such as Joseph. The narrator of the *Tûtînâme* explicitly attributes her survival to her innocence and purity of heart.

In addition to *Tuti-nama* (The Tales of a Parrot), a 12th-century Persian poem, *Ilahi-Nama* (Persian: الهی نامه, “Book of God” or “Book of the Divine”) by the Sufi poet Farid ud-Din Attar (c. 1145–1221), contains a story corresponding to the plot of *Erveheja*, titled “The Story of the Virtuous Woman Whose Husband Had Gone on a Journey” (Attar, 1976). Since this story shares its core subject with the story of Merhume in *Tuti-nama*, and because both works originate from the 12th century, the comparative analysis focuses on the Merhume variant in *Tuti-nama* as representative of this early narrative archetype.

From a local folkloric perspective, as Donat Kurti observes in his preface, the folktale *E bukura e dheut dhe shtriga* (not directly compared in this study) resembles *Besa e kunorës*, the folktale whose subject closely parallels *Erveheja*. This similarity suggests that the underlying motifs predate the Albanian poem, pointing to a deeper narrative ancestry. Furthermore, Kurti notes that “in our country, a majority of folktales and legends remain unrecorded and unclassified. The motifs that develop among us appear to be very ancient, as we encounter them in the folktales of Indians, Arabs, and Celts” (Kurti, preface). This observation reinforces the notion of a transregional and intercultural narrative continuum, highlighting the enduring presence and adaptability of these motifs across time and geographic boundaries.

Third, the narratives employ Islamic terminology and intertextual references to sacred history, suggesting that even if the story’s origins were secular or folkloric, its later forms were deeply shaped by Islamic culture and Sufi interpretations. The miracle of the shipwreck, presented as a divine response to prayer, is particularly indicative of this religious layering.

Structurally, all three versions preserve a linear and chronological narrative. Despite differences in form (verse in *Erveheja*, prose in the other two), they share compositional features typical of folktales: limited dialogue, journey episodes with additional companions, the motif of incomparable beauty, and the discovery of wealth. These elements underscore the resilience of the folktale structure within literary adaptations.

From a socio-cultural perspective, the female figure emerges as a symbol of constancy and moral steadfastness. Comparable to Boccaccio’s tales of virtuous women, she embodies a cultural counterpart to Penelope, representing loyalty and endurance under trial. At the same time, the narrative occasionally introduces moral ambivalence and shades of gray, marking a departure from rigid folkloric schemes.

Finally, the etymological persistence of the term *merhum/e* in Albanian, meaning “a passive or unresponsive person,” illustrates the deep integration of this narrative vocabulary into broader cultural memory. Although further linguistic analysis lies beyond the scope of this study, it points to the layered diffusion of the story across languages and traditions.

Conclusions

- The comparison between *Erveheja* and the tale of Merhume in *Tuti-nama* shows that they share the same narrative core. The same subject also appears in Kazakh folklore of the 15th century, confirming that the poem draws from this tradition.
- The parallels with both written works and oral folktales prove that *Erveheja* belongs to an intercultural archetype that traveled through time and space as a moral model of integrity.
- The mystical-religious approach shifts the extraordinary from the heroine to God. This marks a transition from fantastic tales with witches and demons toward more realistic narratives, where miracle belongs to the divine rather than to free fantasy.
- The linear structure and recurring motifs made this subject easily adaptable across regions. The close link between the heroine's morality and divine morality may explain its preservation over centuries with minimal alterations.

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