



LINGUISTIC EXPRESSION OF THE UNSEEN WORLD IN ENGLISH AND UZBEK LITERATURE: A COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS

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Abstract: Every culture has its own way of speaking about what cannot be seen — the spirits, the divine, the mysterious forces that shape human life from beyond the visible world. This article explores how English and Uzbek literary traditions have used language to give voice to that invisible realm, comparing the words, images, and storytelling methods each tradition has developed over centuries. Rather than treating these two literatures as distant or unrelated, this study looks for the deeper human threads that connect them, while also paying close attention to the cultural and religious differences that make each tradition uniquely its own. Drawing on texts from classical and modern periods in both traditions — from the mystical ghazals of Alisher Navoi and the shamanistic echoes of the Alpomish epic to the Gothic fiction of the English Romantics and the supernatural imagery of Shakespeare — the article argues that literature's engagement with the unseen is not merely decorative or fantastical. It is, rather, one of the most fundamental things language does: reach toward what words alone can never fully capture.

Keywords: unseen world, supernatural imagery, comparative literature, English literature, Uzbek literature.

Introduction

There is something quietly remarkable about the fact that every human language, in every corner of the world, has developed words for things that no one has ever physically seen. Souls, spirits, angels, jinns, ghosts, divine presences — the vocabulary of the invisible is, in many ways, just as rich and carefully developed as the vocabulary of the everyday world. This is not a coincidence. It tells us something important about what literature is for and what language, at its deepest level, tries to do.

The unseen world has been one of literature's oldest and most persistent subjects. Long before the novel existed, before written poetry, before formal literary traditions of any kind, human beings were already telling stories about forces and beings beyond the reach of ordinary sight. These stories were not simply entertainment. They were ways of making sense of suffering, of death, of beauty, of the strange feeling that the visible world is not the whole of reality. They were, in a word, essential.



Both English and Uzbek literary traditions carry this ancient impulse, though they have developed it in remarkably different ways. English literature has been shaped by Christianity, by Celtic and Norse mythology, by the rationalism of the Enlightenment, and by the Romantic rebellion against that rationalism. Uzbek literature has grown from the soil of Islamic spirituality, Sufi mysticism, pre-Islamic Zoroastrian and shamanistic belief, and the great oral epic tradition of the Turkic steppe. These are genuinely different worlds, and the literatures they have produced reflect that difference in everything from vocabulary to imagery to the fundamental attitude toward what lies beyond the visible.

And yet, when one reads deeply in both traditions, something unexpected happens. Beneath the surface differences — the different gods, the different spirits, the different ritual languages — one finds similar strategies, similar struggles, and similar recognitions. Both traditions understand that ordinary language is not quite adequate to the task of speaking about the unseen. Both reach for metaphor, for symbol, for indirection, for silence. Both know, in their own way, that the most important things may be precisely the ones that cannot be directly named.

This article sets out to explore and compare how English and Uzbek literature have linguistically constructed the unseen world. It is not simply a catalogue of supernatural vocabulary, though lexical comparison plays an important role. It is an attempt to understand how language, shaped by culture and belief, stretches itself toward what it cannot fully contain — and what that stretching reveals about the human beings doing the reaching.

Methods and Materials

This study is qualitative and comparative in its approach, bringing together close textual analysis with cross-cultural literary interpretation. The choice of texts was guided by two principles: representativeness and depth. Rather than attempting to survey the entirety of either literary tradition, the study focuses on texts that engage most directly and meaningfully with the unseen world, and that allow for genuine comparison across cultural and linguistic lines.

From the English literary tradition, the primary texts examined include selected plays of William Shakespeare — particularly *Hamlet*, *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, and *The Tempest* — as well as the poetry of William Blake and John Keats, the Gothic fiction of Mary Shelley and Bram Stoker, and the metaphysical poetry of John Donne. These texts were chosen because they represent different historical periods and different generic approaches to the supernatural, from the dramatic ghost to the Romantic symbol to the Gothic monster.



From the Uzbek literary tradition, the primary texts include the ghazals and Khamsa of Alisher Navoi, the Hikmatlar (Wisdoms) of Ahmad Yassawi, and the Alpomish epic as recorded in its various oral and written versions. Selected modern Uzbek poetry and prose, particularly works by Erkin Vohidov and Abdulla Oripov, are also considered to show how these older traditions have been inherited and transformed in contemporary Uzbek literary culture.

The analytical framework draws on three intersecting areas: lexical semantics, which examines the specific words and word clusters used to denote the unseen; stylistic analysis, which considers the figurative and rhetorical strategies employed; and cultural-contextual reading, which situates linguistic choices within their broader religious, historical, and philosophical frameworks. This three-layered approach allows the analysis to move between the specific and the general, between the word on the page and the worldview behind it.

Results and Discussion

One of the first things that strikes a reader comparing the supernatural vocabulary of English and Uzbek literature is how much each tradition's words carry with them. In English, the cluster of terms for the returning dead — ghost, specter, wraith, shade, apparition, phantom — each carry subtly different connotations rooted in their etymological origins. “Ghost” comes from the Old English *gāst*, related to breath and the animating spirit of life; “shade” echoes the classical underworld of Greek and Latin poetry; “specter” carries a more visual, optical quality, as if the unseen were something glimpsed at the edge of sight. These are not simply synonyms. Each word opens onto a slightly different conceptual world, and skilled English writers have always been sensitive to those differences.

In Uzbek literary language, the vocabulary of the unseen is shaped above all by the deep influence of Arabic and Persian. Words like *ruh* (soul, spirit), *jin* (*jinn*), *pari* (a fairy-like supernatural being, often female and beautiful), *div* (a monstrous demon), and *sirr* (mystery, secret, the hidden essence of things) form the core of a supernatural lexicon that is simultaneously religious, poetic, and folk-cultural. What is particularly interesting is that these words do not always fit neatly into Western categorical distinctions between “good” and “evil” supernatural beings. A *pari*, for instance, can be terrifyingly powerful or gently protective; a *jin* can serve a holy man or destroy an ordinary one. The moral landscape of the Uzbek unseen is more ambiguous, more dependent on relationship and context, than the sharper dualism that often characterizes English supernatural fiction.

Nowhere is this more beautifully expressed than in the poetry of Alisher Navoi. Navoi's engagement with the unseen world is not primarily one of fear or wonder at supernatural beings, but of longing — the profound Sufi longing



of the soul for its divine origin. His language is famously allusive and layered: the wine he describes is not wine; the beloved whose face he praises is not an earthly beloved; the tavern where his speaker wanders is not a place one could visit. This is the linguistic strategy known in Sufi literary tradition as *ishora*, or allusion — the use of concrete, sensory, often transgressive images as a coded language for spiritual realities that ordinary religious discourse cannot adequately express. The unseen, in Navoi's hands, becomes visible only through its disguises.

Shakespeare engages with the unseen in a strikingly different but equally sophisticated way. The ghost of Hamlet's father is one of English literature's most carefully constructed supernatural presences, and what makes it so powerful is precisely its linguistic ambiguity. The ghost speaks, commands, reveals — but also raises questions that the play never fully resolves. Is it truly the spirit of a murdered king, or a devil in disguise? Shakespeare gives us no definitive answer, and that refusal is itself a linguistic strategy. The unseen remains genuinely unseen, even when it appears on stage and speaks in verse.

Both traditions, then, share a deep awareness that language is not simply adequate to the task of representing the unseen. Both develop strategies of indirection, allusion, and productive ambiguity. But the emotional register of that indirection differs significantly. In the Sufi-influenced Uzbek tradition, the inadequacy of language before the divine is experienced as a kind of sweet sorrow — the lover's tongue-tied wonder before the beloved's face. In the English Gothic and Romantic traditions, the inadequacy of language before the supernatural is more often experienced as dread, as the vertiginous recognition that the world is larger and stranger than reason can contain.

The oral epic tradition, as represented by Alpomish, offers yet another dimension of Uzbek engagement with the unseen. Here the invisible world is not primarily mystical or theological but cosmological and practical: it is populated by *devs* and *albastis*, by sacred horses with near-human intelligence, by divine intervention in the form of miraculous rescue. The language of the epic is formulaic and ritualistic, reflecting an understanding that certain words, used in certain ways, have real power over the forces of the invisible. This shamanistic inheritance gives the Uzbek literary vocabulary of the unseen a performative quality that is somewhat different from the more contemplative or aesthetic approach of the classical *Divan* tradition.

What unites these different strands — in both traditions — is the recognition that to speak of the unseen is always also to speak of what it means to be human. The ghost in Hamlet raises questions about justice, memory, and moral obligation. The divine beloved in Navoi's ghazals raises questions about the nature of love, beauty, and the soul's deepest longing. The *devs* and



parizods of the Alpomish epic raise questions about courage, community, and the relationship between human beings and the larger forces that shape their lives. In every case, the unseen world is a mirror in which the visible world, and the human beings who inhabit it, can be more clearly seen.

Conclusion

What this study ultimately finds, after moving through centuries of English and Uzbek literary engagement with the invisible, is something that feels both surprising and, in retrospect, entirely natural: that these two very different literary traditions are engaged in the same fundamental project. They are both trying to use language — limited, imperfect, human language — to reach toward something that exceeds it. And in that reaching, they reveal not only their cultural differences, but something much more basic about what literature is for.

The differences are real and should not be minimized. The Sufi framework of Uzbek classical poetry, with its elaborate system of spiritual allusion and its deep rootedness in Islamic theology and Persian aesthetic tradition, produces a relationship to the unseen that is quite distinct from the Gothic frisson of English Romantic writing, or the philosophical unease of a Shakespearean ghost. These are not simply different ways of saying the same thing. They are different ways of being human, shaped by different histories, different beliefs, different experiences of the world.

And yet the convergences matter too. Both traditions understand that the most important things — the things that most need to be said — are precisely the things that most resist being said directly. Both reach for metaphor, for symbol, for the suggestive image that points beyond itself. Both know that silence can be as expressive as speech. Both recognize, in their deepest literary achievements, that to engage honestly with the unseen is not an escape from reality but a deeper way of confronting it.

For readers today — in Uzbekistan, in England, anywhere — there is something genuinely valuable in this recognition. We live in a time that is often uncomfortable with the unseen, that tends to dismiss what cannot be measured or proven. Literature, and particularly the comparative study of how different literary traditions have engaged with the invisible, offers a corrective to that narrowness. It reminds us that human beings have always known, in some part of themselves, that the visible world is not the whole of the story. And it shows us, in the specific textures of specific languages and specific literary traditions, the remarkable variety of ways that knowledge has been expressed, honored, and passed on.

Further research in this area would benefit from expanding the corpus to include more contemporary Uzbek and English writers, and from exploring



how translation mediates — and sometimes transforms — the linguistic expression of the unseen as it crosses cultural boundaries. The field remains wide open, and richly rewarding for those willing to enter it.

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