

THE ARTISTIC, PHILOSOPHICAL, AND SOCIOPOLITICAL
SIGNIFICANCE OF GULKHANIY'S "ZARBULMASAL" IN UZBEK
CLASSICAL LITERATURE

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Abstract. *This academic paper provides a comprehensive analysis of Muhammad Sharif Gulkhaniy's masterwork, "Zarbulmasal" (The Collection of Proverbs). Composed during the early 19th century within the intellectual and literary milieu of the Kokand Khanate, "Zarbulmasal" stands as a monumental synthesis of Turkic folklore, animal allegories, and biting sociopolitical satire. This study investigates the structural framework of the text, its allegorical representation of 19th-century feudal society, the pedagogical and didactic functions of its extensive proverb integration, and its profound influence on the evolution of modern Uzbek prose and realism. By examining the interpersonal dynamics of the central characters—specifically the owls Yaphalak and Bayogli—this thesis reveals how Gulkhaniy utilized humor and allegory to critique corruption, moral degradation, and bureaucratic inefficiency under autocratic rule.*

Introduction. The late 18th and early 19th centuries marked a vibrant period of cultural renaissance in Central Asia, particularly within the Kokand Khanate under the enlightened patronage of rulers like Amir Umar Khan. During this epoch, literature was not merely an aesthetic pursuit but a vital sociopolitical medium. Poets, scholars, and satirists gathered in royal courts, engaging in literary debates and compiling anthologies (*tazkiras*). Among these luminaries, Muhammad Sharif Gulkhaniy emerged as a singular voice—a master of both classical lyrical poetry (*gazals*) and incisive, folk-rooted satirical prose.

"Zarbulmasal" (literally meaning "The Application of Proverbs") is Gulkhaniy's magnum opus. While his contemporary poets frequently indulged in ornate, highly Persianized, and abstract mystical motifs (*tasavvuf*), Gulkhaniy

turned his gaze toward earthly realities. He anchored his literary creation in the concrete socio-economic struggles, moral dilemmas, and cultural idioms of the common people. This introductory chapter establishes the historical backdrop against which Gulkhaniy composed his work, highlighting the tension between courtly opulence and rural destitution.

Structurally, "Zarbulmasal" belongs to the esteemed Eastern literary tradition of the *frame narrative* (a story-within-a-story), echoing classical masterpieces such as the *Panchatantra*, *Kalila and Dimna*, and *One Thousand and One Nights*. This narrative technique allowed Gulkhaniy to construct a multi-layered text where independent fables, anecdotes, and maxims are organically embedded into a central plotline.

The primary narrative framework centers on an absurd and satirical premise: the marriage negotiations between two owls—**Yaphalak** (the Great Owl) and **Bayogli** (the Little Owl/Buzzard). Yaphalak approaches Bayogli to seek the hand of his daughter in marriage. What should be a simple familial union transforms into a protracted, highly bureaucratized negotiation characterized by pompous speeches, extravagant dowry demands, and philosophical digressions.

Within this overarching framework, the characters narrate numerous sub-fables, allegories, and parables to validate their arguments, insult their rivals, or impart moral lessons. This ingenious architecture serves a dual purpose:

1. **Cohesion:** It unifies disparate folkloric elements into a single, cohesive literary structure.
2. **Irony:** The solemnity and pomposity of the owl aristocracy contrast sharply with their actual nature as birds of ruin and darkness, setting a permanent tone of mockery.

Gulkhaniy's utilization of animal characters (*masal* genre) is deeply rooted in the traditions of Aesop, Bidpai, and Alisher Navoi, yet it possesses a distinctively Uzbek vernacular flavor. In "Zarbulmasal," animals do not merely represent abstract moral virtues or vices; they function as precise sociological archetypes of 19th-century Kokand society.

The two central owls symbolize the ruling elite, corrupt officials, and arrogant landowners (*beys* and *mirsaps*). Their obsession with social status, ancestral lineage, and material dowries mirrors the moral bankruptcy of the feudal aristocracy. They live amidst ruins and desolation, yet they boast of their grandeur, symbolizing a regime out of touch with reality.

In the embedded stories and dialogues, creatures such as the donkey, the camel, the dog, and the sparrow represent the working masses. For instance, the overworked and underappreciated donkey embodies the exploited peasantry who bear the heavy tax burdens imposed by the khanate.

Gulkhaniy reserves some of his sharpest satire for hypocritical religious figures—those who preach asceticism and piety in public while engaging in greed and corruption in private. Through allegorical tales of predatory animals disguised as pious hermits, the author unmasks the abuse of religious authority.

The defining stylistic characteristic of "Zarbulmasal" is its rich integration of Uzbek oral folk art—specifically proverbs (*maqollar*), idiomatic expressions, and folk sayings (*matallar*). Gulkhaniy integrated approximately 300 to 400 distinct folkloric units into the fabric of his text.

In Gulkhaniy's universe, proverbs function as immutable laws of wisdom. When characters debate, they do not rely on rational logic or legal statutes; instead, they weaponize proverbs. A well-placed proverb acts as an unassailable proof, ending arguments or exposing hypocrisy. For example, stories are constructed specifically to lead up to a concluding proverbial moral, demonstrating how popular wisdom supersedes elite sophistry.

Prior to Gulkhaniy, classical Chagatai-Uzbek literature was heavily dominated by Persian literary canons, often alienating the illiterate or semi-literate populace. By elevating colloquial idioms, regional dialects, and peasant proverbs into the echelons of written literature, Gulkhaniy democratized the literary language. He proved that the vernacular tongue was fully capable of expressing complex philosophical, moral, and satirical ideas.

While superficially appearing as a collection of lighthearted animal fables, "Zarbulmasal" is a profound work of social protest. Gulkhaniy lived through an era of political instability, arbitrary taxation, and administrative corruption. Through Aesopian language—speaking through animals to warn humans—he launched a scathing critique of the feudal status quo.

1. **Critique of Tax Collectors and Officials:** The greedy negotiators in the frame story mirror the tax collectors (*zalkor*) who stripped farmers and artisans of their livelihoods.

2. **Exposing Ignorance:** Gulkhaniy ridicules the intellectual stagnation of the ruling class, who spent their time on trivial ceremonies while ignoring the infrastructural and educational decay of the state.

3. **The Theme of Injustice:** Many embedded fables explore the theme of power dynamics, where "might makes right," illustrating the helplessness of ordinary citizens before corrupt judges (*qazis*).

"Zarbulmasal" is written in *musajja* (rhymed prose) interspersed with lyrical poetic inserts (*gazals*, *rubais*, and *beyts*). This stylistic dualism creates a dynamic and rhythmic reading experience.

- **The Prose Sections:** Drive the narrative forward, capturing the sarcastic conversational tone of marketplace gossips, village elders, and court officials.

- **The Poetic Sections:** Elevate the emotional and philosophical resonance, offering lyrical reflections on fate, human nature, and societal corruption.

This stylistic fluidity laid vital groundwork for the emergence of 20th-century Uzbek realist prose, influencing writers such as Avlodiy, Qodiriy, and Hamza.

Conclusion. Muhammad Sharif Gulkhaniy's "Zarbulmasal" transcends its 19th-century origins to stand as an enduring masterpiece of Central Asian literature. By seamlessly fusing the ancient tradition of animal fables with the

vibrant dynamism of Uzbek folklore, Gulkhaniy created a work that is simultaneously entertaining, pedagogically profound, and politically subversive.

The text remains an invaluable monument for contemporary scholars of Turkic philology, folklore, and cultural history. It demonstrates how art can serve as a mirror to society, chastising its vices through laughter while preserving the indomitable wisdom of the common people.

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