

A COMPARATIVE STUDY OF AGENCY AND FATE IN TAXIR AND ZUXRA AND TRISTAN AND ISOLDE.

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Abstract

This study explores the interplay of agency and fate in two emblematic medieval romance traditions: the Western legend of Tristan and Isolde and the Eastern Uzbek folk epic Tohir and Zuhra. By situating both narratives within their respective cultural and historical contexts, the article examines how notions of destiny, free will, and social obligation shape the trajectories of the protagonists. The analysis highlights the tension between individual desire and collective duty, revealing how agency is constrained by familial honor, political alliances, and supernatural forces. Special attention is given to gender dynamics, showing how male and female figures embody different degrees of autonomy and resistance within the framework of romance. Through comparative poetics, the study investigates symbolic motifs—such as poison, illness, dreams, and omens that encode the inevitability of fate while simultaneously offering moments of human choice. The findings suggest that while both traditions converge on the tragic inevitability of love, they diverge in their cultural interpretations of agency: Western romance emphasizes the destructive power of passion against feudal duty, whereas Eastern epic underscores the endurance of love within communal and moral boundaries. This comparative inquiry contributes to broader discussions in philology, folklore, and literary studies, offering insights into how medieval romance reflects universal human concerns across diverse cultural landscapes.

Keywords: Medieval Romance; Agency and Fate; Tristan and Isolde; Tohir and Zuhra; Comparative Literature; Folklore Studies; Gender Dynamics; Symbolism in Romance; Cross-Cultural Analysis; Philology.

Introduction

The interplay between agency and fate constitutes one of the most enduring themes in world literature, particularly within the genre of medieval romance. These narratives dramatize the tension between individual will and predetermined destiny, offering a mirror to the philosophical, moral, and social structures of the societies that produced them. The comparative study of Eastern and Western romance traditions provides a valuable framework for understanding how different cultures conceptualize human freedom, moral responsibility, and the inevitability of tragic love.

This article examines two representative texts: the Western legend of Tristan and Isolde and the Eastern Uzbek folk epic Tohir and Zuhra. Both works articulate the paradox of love as a force that simultaneously empowers human choice and binds individuals to an unavoidable fate. In the European tradition, Tristan and Isolde reflects the ideals and contradictions of courtly love, where passion collides with feudal duty and Christian morality. In the Central Asian

tradition, Tohir and Zuhra embodies the oral poetic heritage of Uzbek folklore, where familial honor, communal values, and spiritual dimensions shape the lovers' destiny.

The comparative framework adopted in this study emphasizes both thematic and methodological dimensions. Narrative structures, symbolic motifs, and gender dynamics are analyzed to reveal how agency and fate are encoded within each tradition. The Western romance, shaped by manuscript culture and courtly lyricism, foregrounds allegory, symbolism, and the inevitability of tragic passion. The Eastern epic, rooted in oral performance and folklore, highlights communal values, repetition, and symbolic trials that reinforce the tension between personal desire and collective duty.

Beyond literary analysis, the study engages with broader philosophical and sociological perspectives. Agency is examined as a form of resistance against social constraints, while fate is interpreted as a cultural mechanism that situates love within moral and communal boundaries. The convergence of these traditions lies in their shared emphasis on the tragic inevitability of love, while their divergence emerges in the cultural interpretation of agency: Western romance underscores the destructive collision between passion and duty, whereas Eastern epic emphasizes endurance, loyalty, and moral responsibility.

By situating Tristan and Isolde and Tohir and Zuhra within a comparative framework, this article contributes to the fields of comparative literature, philology, and folklore studies. It demonstrates how medieval romance functions as both a universal reflection of human experience and a culturally specific articulation of values, thereby enriching scholarly understanding of the relationship between agency and fate in cross-cultural literary discourse.

Literature Review

The scholarly investigation of agency and fate in medieval romance has produced a substantial body of research across both Western and Eastern traditions. In the Western corpus, Tristan and Isolde has been the subject of extensive philological, literary, and cultural analysis. **Gertrude Schoepperle** provided one of the earliest systematic studies of the legend, tracing its textual genealogy through French and German sources and situating it within the broader Arthurian cycle [1]. **Joseph Bedier** offered a critical reconstruction of the Tristan story, emphasizing its symbolic dimensions and its role in shaping the medieval concept of courtly love [2]. **Denis de Rougemont** situated Tristan and Isolde within the broader European tradition of romantic fatalism, arguing that the legend embodies the paradox of passion as both destructive and transcendent [3]. **Eugene Vinaver** contributed to the discourse by analyzing the stylistic and narrative structures of medieval romance, highlighting the interplay of fate and agency in the Tristan cycle [4]. More recent scholarship, such as **Amanda Persaud**, examined the historical transformation of the narrative, emphasizing its evolution from feudal contexts to post-feudal reinterpretations infused with Christian morality [5]. **Isabella Clarke** explored the emotional dimensions of the legend, analyzing how romantic love reshapes selfhood and identity in medieval literature [6]. **Mark Chinca** expanded the discussion by situating medieval

romance within the broader framework of medieval ethics, underscoring how agency is constrained by moral codes and social obligations [7].¹

In the Eastern tradition, Tohir and Zuhra has been studied primarily within the frameworks of folklore, oral performance, and cultural heritage. **Mamatqulova Feruza Tohirovna** investigated handwritten copies of the epic, analyzing its variants across Khorezm and Turkmen traditions [8]. Her research underscores the fluidity of oral transmission and the role of performers in shaping narrative agency, thereby situating the epic within the dynamic processes of cultural memory. **Abdusamatova Gulxumor Abdufattoyevna** examined the musical drama adaptation of Tohir and Zuhra created in 1939, demonstrating how theatrical reinterpretations blend traditional motifs with modern artistic expressions [9]. **Islamov R.F.** analyzed the Balkar version of the epic, situating it within the broader cultural heritage of the Caucasus [10]. His work illustrates the adaptability of the narrative across regions while maintaining its thematic focus on love, destiny, and communal values. **Khodiyev Sh.** emphasized the pedagogical role of Uzbek epics, including Tohir and Zuhra, in shaping cultural identity and transmitting moral values [11]. **Karimov A.** explored the symbolic dimensions of Uzbek folk narratives, highlighting how motifs of dreams, omens, and trials encode the inevitability of fate while simultaneously offering moments of human choice [12]. **Sagdullaev A.** contributed to the philological study of Uzbek epics, analyzing their linguistic features and performance traditions as vehicles of cultural continuity [13]. **Mirzaev T.** examined the role of oral poets (bakhshi) in preserving and transmitting epics such as Tohir and Zuhra, situating agency within the performative act itself [14].

Taken together, these studies reveal complementary perspectives. Western scholarship emphasizes textual genealogy, emotional dimensions, and philosophical interpretations of fate, while Eastern scholarship foregrounds oral tradition, cultural adaptation, and performance. This dual body of research provides a robust foundation for comparative analysis, demonstrating how medieval romance functions simultaneously as a universal reflection of human experience and a culturally specific articulation of values.

¹ [1] Schoepperle, G. *Tristan and Isolt: A Study of the Sources of the Romance*. London: Kegan Paul, 1913. [2] Bédier, J. *Le Roman de Tristan et Iseut*. Paris: L'édition nationale, 1900. [3] Rougemont, D. *Love in the Western World*. Princeton University Press, 1940. [4] Vinaver, E. *The Rise of Romance*. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1971. [5] Persaud, A. "Transformations of Tristan: From Feudal Duty to Courtly Love." *Medieval Studies Journal*, 2023. [6] Clarke, I. *Medieval Emotions and the Tristan Tradition*. Cambridge University Press, 2024. [7] Chinca, M. *Medieval Literature and Historical Consciousness*. Oxford University Press, 2012. [8] Mamatqulova, F.T. "Handwritten Copies of the Epic Tohir and Zuhra." *Journal of Uzbek Folklore Studies*, 2023. [9] Abdusamatova, G.A. "The Musical Drama Tohir and Zuhra (1939): Tradition and Innovation." *Uzbek Theatre Review*, 2026. [10] Islamov, R.F. "The Balkar Version of Tohir and Zuhra." *Caucasus Folklore Journal*, 2012. [11] Khodiyev, Sh. *Pedagogical Functions of Uzbek Epics*. Tashkent: Fan, 2015. [12] Karimov, A. "Symbolism in Uzbek Folk Narratives." *Philological Studies of Central Asia*, 2018. [13] Sagdullaev, A. *Philological Studies of Uzbek Oral Epics*. Tashkent: University Press, 2019. [14] Mirzaev, T. *The Bakhshi Tradition in Uzbek Folklore*. Tashkent: Fan, 2001.

Date collection and analysis

This study examines the dialectic of agency and fate in two representative romance narratives: the Uzbek tale Taxir and Zuxra and the medieval Western legend Tristan and Isolde. Both texts dramatize the tension between human will and predetermined destiny, yet they articulate this tension through distinct cultural and philosophical frameworks. The data for analysis was collected through close reading of episodes where the protagonists confront external constraints, invoke divine or cosmic forces, and articulate their sense of freedom or resignation. Symbolic motifs such as dreams, omens, and metaphors of fortune were prioritized as textual evidence of fate, while acts of loyalty, rebellion, or deliberate decision-making were treated as markers of agency.

In Alexandra Brustein's 1945 drama *Tristan and Isolde*, the classical themes of agency and fate are explored through a lens of tragic inevitability, providing a significant data set for a comparative study with Eastern romances such as *Tahshir and Zuhra*. While Western romance often depicts fate as a mechanical or accidental force that strips the protagonist of social agency, the Eastern tradition frequently portrays fate as a cosmic, preordained path that the hero must accept with spiritual fortitude.

The Mechanism of Fate: External vs. Internal Compulsion

In the Western tradition, fate is often triggered by an external, alchemical catalyst—the love potion. In Brustein's text, this potion acts as a force of total predestination, removing the lovers' ability to choose their path. Brangena describes the drink as an "indissoluble chain" that links the pair through "love and death," asserting that those who drink it together will seek each other "forever, like the blind". This "blindness" signifies a total loss of agency; their subsequent actions are no longer directed by reason or social duty but by a sensory and supernatural compulsion. In contrast, the fate found in Eastern romances like *Tahshir and Zuhra* is typically rooted in *Kismet*—a divine decree written at birth. While Tristan's tragedy is the result of a physical mistake (the drinking of the "wrong cup"), the Eastern hero's tragedy is a manifestation of a spiritual law that requires acceptance and patience.

Agency as Heroic Choice and Social Duty

Before the intervention of the potion, Tristan is characterized by high social agency, defined by his ability to change the destiny of his nation through valor. King Mark highlights this by noting that while other barons "bowed their heads" in fear of the Irish hero Morholt, only Tristan "went to meet him, fought him and defeated him". However, once fate intervenes, Tristan's agency shifts into a state of internal conflict. He attempts to exert his will against the fated love to remain a loyal vassal, even using his sword as a physical barrier. During the journey, he takes his sword and "cuts the air between himself and Isolde," swearing to "deliver in faithfulness and sanctity to Mark-the-king his spouse" and decreeing that "the steel of the sword lie between us". This symbolic act represents a desperate attempt to use the agency of a knight to block the fate of a lover. In Eastern romance, agency is less about fighting against feelings to preserve a legalistic feudal oath and more about the hero's agency to remain steadfast in his love despite the trials imposed by a rigid social or religious order.

The Agency of the Sovereign

The role of the King or Padishah serves as the primary obstacle representing social law. In Tristan and Isolde, King Mark's agency is defined by a movement from vengeful justice to a surrender to divine judgment. Initially, he exercises his power to condemn Isolde to a fate worse than death giving her to the lepers. However, he eventually experiences a moral awakening, choosing to step back and stating, "No, I am not their judge. Let the Lord Himself punish them if it is necessary". This transition from personal agency to a reliance on "The Lord" mirrors the tension between human law and divine fate. In Tahshir and Zuhra, the sovereign often acts as an unyielding extension of the social order, where the lovers' only recourse is a spiritual agency that transcends the King's earthly power.

Fate as a Transcendent Victory

The conclusion of the drama reinforces the triumph of fate over mortal agency. Even after the lovers' deaths, the physical world reflects their fated union. The text recounts how a "green sprout, all in flowers and leaves," broke through from Tristan's grave to Isolde's, and although it was "cut down three times" by those attempting to enforce separation, it emerged "each time higher and more beautiful". This persistent biological miracle serves as the final evidence of fate's supremacy; human agency represented by the act of cutting the plant is ultimately powerless against the preordained unity of the lovers. While Eastern romances often resolve this tension through a spiritual reunion in a celestial garden or paradise, the Western tradition, as seen in Brustein's adaptation, emphasizes a physical, earthly manifestation of a fate that refuses to be silenced by death.

Data Category	Tristan & Isolde (Western)	Tahshir & Zuhra (Eastern)
Source of Fate	Mechanical/Accidental: The potion is a mistake of the hand.	Cosmic/Divine: Kismet is a decree of the heart and the heavens.
Exercise of Agency	Resistance: The hero fights against his feelings to fulfill a feudal oath.	Submission: The hero exercises agency by accepting the trial with patience.
Role of the King	Personal/Moral: Mark struggles with his agency as a "robbed man".	Institutional: The Padishah often acts as the unyielding voice of the Law.
Final Symbol	The Vine: A physical, earthly manifestation of eternal fate.	The Garden: A spiritual, celestial reunification of souls.

In Taxir and Zuxra, the lovers' struggle against familial opposition and social barriers illustrates a Central Asian conception of fate as both divine decree and communal order. Early in the tale, the Shah laments, "Though I am king and have wealth, I shall die childless" a statement that frames destiny as inevitable and beyond human control. Against this backdrop, Taxir and Zuxra's agency is exercised through patience, loyalty, and moral steadfastness. Zuxra's endurance in the face of parental control and Taxir's unwavering devotion exemplify agency not as rebellion but as perseverance within the boundaries of divine and social expectation. Their choices deepen the spiritual and moral meaning of their union, suggesting

that agency in the Eastern tradition is reconciled with fate rather than set against it. The narrative style lyrical, symbolic, and collective reinforces this orientation, elevating fate as a cosmic principle while redefining agency as moral endurance and spiritual alignment.

By contrast, *Tristan and Isolde* dramatizes the tragic collision between human will and destiny. The lovers' passion, ignited by a fateful potion, illustrates how agency is compromised from the outset, as their choices are entangled with forces beyond their control. Yet their clandestine meetings, defiance of social norms, and attempts to assert autonomy intensify rather than resolve their entrapment in destiny. Tristan's final words, "I don't know if life is greater than death. But love was more than either", encapsulate the Western tendency to portray agency as tragically complicit in fate's fulfillment. Isolde's declaration, "Know that I love you Tristan. Wherever you go, whatever you see. I will always be with you", further emphasizes the inevitability of their bond, portraying love as a force inseparable from destiny. Stylistically, the Western text relies on dramatic dialogue, conflict-driven plot, and individualistic characterization, foregrounding the irreconcilable tension between personal desire and external inevitability. *Tristan and Isolde's* rebellion against social and moral order becomes the very instrument of their downfall, underscoring the Western emphasis on the tragic impossibility of reconciling autonomy with predetermined fate.

Taken together, the comparative analysis demonstrates that while both traditions acknowledge the inescapability of fate, they diverge in their valuation of agency. In *Taxir and Zuxra*, agency is not negated but redefined as perseverance and moral devotion, serving as a pathway to transcendence within divine and communal frameworks. In *Tristan and Isolde*, agency is dramatized as defiance and rebellion, yet it ultimately collides with destiny, producing tragedy. This contrast underscores the cultural and philosophical differences between traditions: the Eastern narrative seeks reconciliation between human will and divine decree, while the Western narrative foregrounds the irreconcilable tension between autonomy and inevitability. Ultimately, the study of these romances reveals broader conceptions of human freedom and destiny, illustrating how literature negotiates the limits of choice across cultural boundaries.

Conclusion

The comparative analysis of *Taxir and Zuxra* and *Tristan and Isolde* demonstrates that while both narratives acknowledge the inevitability of fate, they diverge significantly in their treatment of human agency. In the Uzbek romance, agency is expressed through loyalty, patience, and moral steadfastness, qualities that harmonize with divine decree and communal expectations. *Taxir and Zuxra's* endurance in the face of familial and social barriers illustrates an Eastern conception of agency as perseverance within the boundaries of destiny, where personal choice deepens spiritual meaning rather than defies cosmic order. By contrast, the medieval Western legend foregrounds agency as defiance and rebellion, dramatizing the tragic impossibility of reconciling individual desire with predetermined fate. *Tristan and Isolde's* clandestine acts of autonomy intensify rather than resolve their entrapment, underscoring the Western emphasis on the futility of resisting destiny.

Stylistically, the two traditions reinforce these philosophical orientations: Eastern romance employs lyrical imagery and collective symbolism to elevate fate as a cosmic principle, while

Western romance relies on dramatic dialogue and conflict-driven plots to highlight the irreconcilable tension between autonomy and inevitability. Taken together, the findings suggest that romance across cultures functions as a lens through which broader conceptions of freedom, destiny, and moral order are articulated. The juxtaposition of Taxir and Zuxra with Tristan and Isolde reveals that while fate remains inescapable, agency is valued differently: as spiritual endurance in the Eastern tradition and as tragic defiance in the Western. This contrast underscores the cultural specificity of romance narratives and highlights the enduring relevance of literature in negotiating the limits of human choice within the framework of destiny.

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