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Cognitive Model of the Structure of Heroicity in an Examination of a Sample Fairy Tale of Azerbaijan

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Öz

This study explores the cognitive model of heroicity as represented in Azerbaijani fairy tales, viewing heroic behavior not merely as a narrative function but as a structured mental and cultural construct. Drawing upon an interdisciplinary framework that integrates folkloristic, cognitive narratology, and cultural psychology, the research analyzes a corpus of Azerbaijani fairy tales to identify the cognitive mechanisms that shape heroic identity, decision-making, and moral action. A dynamic set of cognitive processes, such as danger assessment, goal development, emotional management, moral reasoning, and identity reconstruction, organizes Azerbaijani fairy-tale heroism. In order to mirror culturally ingrained patterns of psychological growth, heroes usually come from

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peripheral social positions and go through symbolic processes of separation, trial, change, and reintegration. It is demonstrated that antagonistic forces, magical components, and supernatural assistants serve as cognitive metaphors that externalize internal mental conflicts and resolutions.

Anahtar sözcükler: *cognitive model, heroic structure, social oppression, psychological distress, cognitive transformation*

Azerbaycan'dan Bir Örnek Masalın İncelenmesiyle Kahramanlık Yapısının Bilişsel Modeli

Abstract

Bu çalışma, Azerbaycan masallarında temsil edildiği şekliyle kahramanlığın bilişsel modelini inceleyerek, kahramanlık davranışını yalnızca bir anlatı işlevi olarak değil, yapılandırılmış bir zihinsel ve kültürel yapı olarak ele almaktadır. Folklorik, bilişsel anlatıbilim ve kültürel psikolojiyi bütünleştiren disiplinlerarası bir çerçeveden yararlanan araştırma, kahraman kimliğini, karar alma sürecini ve ahlaki eylemi şekillendiren bilişsel mekanizmaları belirlemek için bir Azerbaycan masalları külliyatını analiz etmektedir. Tehlike değerlendirme, hedef geliştirme, duygusal yönetim, ahlaki akıl yürütme ve kimlik yeniden inşası gibi dinamik bir bilişsel süreçler dizisi, Azerbaycan masallarındaki kahramanlığı düzenler. Kültürel olarak yerleşik psikolojik gelişim kalıplarını yansıtmak için kahramanlar genellikle çevresel sosyal konumlardan gelir ve ayrılık, sınama, değişim ve yeniden bütünleşme gibi sembolik süreçlerden geçerler. Düşman güçlerin, büyülü bileşenlerin ve doğaüstü yardımcılarının, içsel zihinsel çatışmaları ve çözümleri dışsallaştıran bilişsel metaforlar olarak hizmet ettiği gösterilmiştir.

Keywords: bilişsel model, kahramanlık yapısı, toplumsal baskı, zihinsel sıkıntı, bilişsel dönüşüm

1. Introduction

Fairy tales have long been a vital means for societies to transmit moral values, cultural identity, and collective memory. As repositories of moral values, heroic ideals, and symbolic human behavior patterns, fairy tales play an important part in Azerbaijani folklore.

“Azerbaijani folktales provide rich material to study archaic ideas and views about the world. It is important not only for the variety of plots and images, but also for the richness of the elements of the narratives, the study of archaic ideas about time and space, life and death.” (Xudaverdiyeva, 2017)

The heroes of these stories are not only narrative characters but also cultural and cognitive constructions that embody the worldview, moral standards, and psychological expectations of the community. For instance, Carl Jung claimed that "myths represent archetypal images that come from the collective unconscious of humanity." Myths are therefore powerful depictions of psychological reality and the shared human experience rather than "false" stories. Yuval Noah Harari's description of consciousness as "the greatest mystery in the universe" [Harari, 2018] highlights the profound complexity and enigmatic nature of conscious experience. His view emphasizes that despite advances in science and philosophy, understanding how and why consciousness arises remains elusive. Roch, Samuelson, Allison, & Dent, (2000) clearly explained that a cognitive pattern involving an initial rapid heuristic split of information followed by an egocentric, self-enhancing evaluation, linking it to what is called "pre-heroic consciousness." This concept highlights how our brains often operate on autopilot, making quick judgments that serve the self before deeper reflection or transformation occurs (Roch, Samuelson, Allison, & Dent, 2000).

The pre-heroic consciousness—characterized by automatic, self-serving judgments and mental divisions—must be consciously discarded for an individual to embark fully on the hero's journey. This shedding of the initial egocentric mindset allows heroes to break free from autopilot thinking and open themselves to deeper reflection and self-awareness. According to Allison and Goethals (2014), this transformation is crucial because it enables the hero to achieve clarity, seeing both themselves and the world without the distortions of preconceptions and biases.(Allison & Goethals, 2014). Through this process, heroes accumulate life-changing insights that often challenge their previous beliefs, values, and identity. This insight is not merely intellectual but experiential, shaping a renewed understanding of purpose and connection. Psychologically, this transition involves moving from heuristic, superficial processing to more deliberate, integrative cognition, fostering growth and resilience.

Ultimately, by discarding the pre-heroic consciousness, heroes develop the capacity for authentic self-knowledge and a broader perspective on their place within

the world, which is essential for meaningful transformation and the fulfillment of the hero's journey.

Folk theories are implicit, domain-specific collections of knowledge that people utilize to make decisions. Folk biology and folk psychology are two examples of fields where folk theories contain a universal core, despite the fact that many folk beliefs differ throughout cultures. Additionally, belonging to a generic species is linked to "psychological essentialism" in a variety of varied cultures (Medin & Ortony, 1989; Gelman, 2003, Medin & Atran, s. 2004). In recent decades, new avenues for comprehending traditional storytelling have been made possible by interdisciplinary techniques that combine folkloristic, cognitive linguistics, and cultural psychology. "Folklore functions as a cognitive tool that helps individuals navigate their environment and make sense of the world" [Panigrahi, 2025]. Within this approach, heroicity can be studied as a cognitive model—a organized mental representation that arranges knowledge about bravery, sacrifice, justice, and social responsibility—rather than just as a literary motif. The premise of this study is that certain mental schemas that influence how heroic behaviour is perceived and assessed are formed and transmitted through fairy tale narratives.

Azerbaijan numerous stories, such as those about heroes like Malikmammad, are meant to teach morals like bravery, generosity, and kindness. The cognitive model portrays heroes as role models who exemplify ideal virtues by reflecting both the internal moral traits and the external heroic activities. Additionally, there are symbolic aspects that connect cognitive topics to mystical or metaphysical dimensions, such as transformational objects or magical birds. Together, these characteristics create the cognitive model of heroicity found in Azerbaijani fairy tales, where heroes serve as both complex psychological entities and moral ideals inside a structured narrative framework typical of the traditional heritage of the area. "Folklore, as an integral part of children's literature, plays a crucial role in teaching moral values and preserving cultural and artistic treasures" [Gafarova, 2023].

The folklore hero acts according to schemes of perception, assessment, and decision-making stored in the communal memory rather than at random. According to this perspective, the structure of heroism is a result of people's culture,

worldviews, psychological archetypes, and cultural-cognitive systems rather than being restricted to the text's storyline. "An entirely different approach to the relations between culture and cognition focuses on differences across cultures. Many differences are best described as ethnographic" (Fessler & Machery, 2012).

In Azerbaijani fairy tales, heroism serves as both a cognitive model and a sociocultural ideal. Recent studies by Scott T. Allison (2019) provided strong evidence that "The goal of spirituality shares the same goal as heroism -- to see our inner, truer, and best self, and to discern that this new truer self is deeply connected to everyone and to everything" [Scott T. Allison, 2019].

Turk mythology, Islamic ethical traditions, nomadic-sedentary cultural synthesis, and historical experience all contribute to the unique paradigm of heroism seen in Azerbaijani fairy tales. The world of folk tales is full of various options and transformations of certain ideas. As a lowly shepherd, an orphan, or the youngest son, the archetypal hero in these stories frequently rises from marginal or liminal situations and experiences a number of hardships that symbolize both internal cognitive changes and external obstacles. Processes including risk assessment, goal-setting, emotional regulation, moral judgment, and the reconstruction of social and personal identity are all part of these changes.

Even though Azerbaijani fairy tales are rich, little is known about the cognitive processes that underlie their heroic stories. While the mental models and cognitive patterns ingrained in heroic behaviour have gotten little study, the majority of previous research has concentrated on structural, thematic, or comparative components of folklore. By offering a cognitive framework for examining heroicity in Azerbaijani fairy tales, this study fills this knowledge vacuum.

The article is identifying the cognitive model of the heroic structure in fairy tales and to analyze the mental mechanisms that shape the hero's behavior. Finding and describing the cognitive model of heroicity that functions in Azerbaijani fairy tale narratives is the primary goal of this work. The study aims to respond to the following queries:

1. What is the mental structure of heroism in these stories?
2. What mental processes influence the hero's choices and actions?

3. In what ways can cultural values influence how heroic behavior is perceived in the mind?

This study intends to advance knowledge of how Azerbaijani fairy tales serve as cognitive instruments for forming moral consciousness, social values, and models of human greatness by using techniques from cognitive narratology, folklore studies, and cultural analysis.

2. Methodology

The folklore text is assumed to be a "thought architecture" derived from oral tradition in the research employing the Cognitive Approach and Frame Analysis. This research employs Frame Analysis to examine the narrative structures within Azerbaijani fairy tales, identifying typical heroic frames that shape the hero's journey. Key frames include: Departure Frame: Marked by the hero's leaving home by force, initiating the journey away from the family. Trial Frame: Encompassing tests of courage, morality, and intelligence that challenge the hero and catalyze growth. Aid Frame: Featuring helpers such as wise old men, animals, or magical objects that assist the hero in overcoming obstacles. By analyzing these frames, the study reveals how Azerbaijani fairy tales construct and communicate heroic consciousness, reflecting cultural values and psychological archetypes.

3. Cognitive Basis of the Heroic Structure

3.1. The hero's first state: Psychological Distress

The hero's initial state in Azerbaijani fairy tales is typically accompanied by his mental pain, and this state serves as the primary beginning point of the hero's developmental route. In Azerbaijani magical fairy tales, the hero's asymmetrical state, uncommon origin, and unique talents and abilities acquired at a young age are all significant characteristics. In the story, the hero's initial state is frequently linked to social and psychological distress, which serves as motivation for him to overcome obstacles and accomplish his objective.

In the fairy tale "The Boy with the White Horse" [Azərbaycan nağılları, 2005] for instance, the protagonist's strange childhood experiences and the belief that his physical prowess had demonic roots are examples of his early unease.

A khan's daughter was one of the king's spouses, a bay's daughter was the second, and a poor camel driver's daughter was the third. She was so attractive that the king married her. Narbala was constantly made fun of in the palace since the heroine's mother was a member of a lower social class. He was referred to by the other brothers as a male child, a camel child, and a donkey at different times. But Narbala was both stronger and smarter than his other brothers.

This kind of situation shows how prepared the hero is for both internal and external strife. Additionally, in everyday fairy tales, the hero's resourcefulness, ingenuity, and logical approach to the problems he encounters are all considered elements of the initial situation. These early mental discomforts and peculiar situations are a reflection of the hero's difficult journey of discovering his position in the social and cultural surroundings.

The following is a description of the opening scenes of Azerbaijani magical and everyday stories: In magical tales, the hero's beginnings are often characterized by strange births, mysterious origins, or remarkable events. For instance, the hero in the story "The Boy with the White Horse" the padshah has no children, and a dervish comes, gives him 3 apples, and tells him to divide each apple and eat it with one of his wives. He will have three sons. But he had a condition: Padshah had to give one of his sons to a dervish when they turned 15 years old.

These kinds of magical stories typically start with the hero's traits that are different from those of a youngster and early acts of bravery.

In family stories, the opening scene is based on more real-life scenarios, and the hero must be clever, funny, and perceptive in order to find creative solutions to difficult issues. Initial conditions in Azerbaijani home tales include things like the brothers discovering the track of a lost camel or discovering the answer to a challenging inquiry posed by the king. "Conflict at different levels of society (ruler-vassal; elder-younger; independent-dependent; upper-lower class) resulted from the older brother's representation of the upper social class (wealthy) and the younger brother's representation of the lower social class" [Əsgərov, 2017].

In general, the hero's beginning in everyday tales is marked by realistic situations and intelligent behavior, with the hero's problem-solving intelligence and quick

response being at the forefront, whereas the initial situations in magical tales are filled with more mystical and fantastical elements.

The cognitive model states that the hero's journey starts with a psychological breakdown. In fairy tales, the hero's emotional conflicts and motivations are frequently rooted in themes of poverty and injustice, which serve as his psychological breaking point. These circumstances mirror the challenges and fears the hero encounters in his cultural milieu, both within and outside.

The hero in fairy tales is frequently inspired to pursue the path of true heroism by his poverty and exposure to injustice, which highlights his helplessness and weakness. The hero experiences worry, rage, and occasionally psychological anguish and stress as a result of this circumstance. For instance, the hero's battle with injustice and poverty in the fairy tale "The Boy with the White Horse" puts his moral principles and inner fortitude to the test. The hero develops inner rage and discontent as a result of such circumstances.

Psychological Breakdown Point: In fairy tales, the hero's circumstances of injustice and poverty are thought to mark the start of his psychological collapse. This is linked to being a victim of injustice and inequality as well as living in a primitive and constrained environment. At this point, the hero's struggle and achievement are driven by his inner discomfort, worry, fury, and overall emotional and psychological state. In the fight against injustice and poverty, he discovers and grows his inner strength.

The psychological collapse of a fairy tale hero is an example of how themes of fear, loss of loved ones, and social sorrow frequently mirror the hero's own conflicts and concerns. These factors have a significant impact on his mental and emotional state and are essential to the fairy tale hero's growth.

Fear Motif: The fear motive in the folktale "A fellow on a white horse" is sometimes associated with the symbolic contrast between underlying concerns of death, supernatural powers, or existential threats and purity, strength, and spiritual direction, as symbolized by the white horse. Fear of unknown or transformational occurrences, as well as of confronting deeper or hidden truths, might be evoked by seeing the man on the white horse, which frequently represents a spiritual or

otherworldly presence. The hero's perils, the unknown, or the threat of formidable foes are frequently the sources of terror in this tale. His internal conflict begins with this fear, which occasionally gives him the courage and strength he needs. The hero grows as a person, and the heroic element of the story is reinforced by overcoming and conquering this fear.

The motif of losing his family: The protagonist's psychological distress is primarily caused by the theme of losing loved mother. He becomes more resilient and brave as a result of this loss, which leaves a huge gap and disappointment in his life. The protagonist's memories of loved ones become a driving force in his decisions and actions when he is separated from or loses them.

Social oppression motif: Social pressure and oppression worsen the hero's psychological state. He frequently experiences conflict and injustice, which increases his emotional stress and makes it more difficult for him to overcome opponents. They called him the camel's son since his mother was the daughter of a poor camel driver. Consequently, the monarch selected his other sons over him, gave Narbala to the dervish and imprisoned his mother. The second monarch expelled his young daughter from his palace because she loved Narbala and offended the old gardener by claiming him as his son. Such situations are used in fairy tale to emphasize the hero's perseverance and strength.

In fairy tales, these psychological points of disruption are crucial to the development and reinforcement of the hero's inner world, psyche, and moral attributes. This highlights the significance of the hero's personal growth and his fight for equity and social justice. The primary themes that contribute to the hero's psychological problems are fear, bereavement, and social anguish. The intricacy of his inner world and the paradoxes of the heroic road in the story are reflected in these elements. These illnesses deepen the hero's spiritual-emotional depth and serve as a turning point in his development.[1] [2] The "activating scheme" that propels the hero into action is this mental state.

3.2. The beginning of cognitive transformation

The quest creates a desire-fear dilemma in the hero's mind. At this stage, the hero goes through the following cognitive processes: In line with the fairy tale's plot

dynamics, we have attempted to provide a scientific-analytical explanation of the hero's cognitive processes in "The Fellow on the White Horse" [Azərbaycan nağılları, 2005], including risk assessment, the initial activation of self-confidence, the creation of a goal map, and the reconstruction of the value system.

3.3. Evaluation of Risk

a) The hero's psychological and cognitive responses move through three main stages when he first encounters a challenge: coming into contact with danger, facing an unfamiliar force, and going into a scary, lonely area.

b) When the dry skull informs him that the dervish is a cannibal, he must save his own life.

3.3.1. Risk result Evaluation: Two result lines are created by the hero:

- Adverse consequences include failure, risk to life, and defeat.
- The people's salvation, the preservation of beauty, and self-evidence are positive outcomes.

In cognitive psychology, this is referred to as dual outcome evaluation.

3.3.2. Choosing a Strategy

The hero, based on risk:

- Chooses diplomatic behavior with the other side
- Often acts correctly on instinct - this is the archetypal hero instinct.

4. Initial activation of self-efficacy

The hero's self-confidence is not formed all at once, but through successive cognitive impulses. "The action in Azerbaijani fairy tales is formal. The journey-related self-discovery of the hero is symbolic" [Mürşüdoğlu, 2018]. The initial intention arises inside the Fellow on the White horse; "I must save myself and my loved ones" This is the first awakening of self-efficacy.

4.1. External Validators

Motivating elements like the dry skull's signals and the assistance of the horse, dog, and dove itself help the hero. This is considered external validation of

competence in psychology. "Heroes in Azerbaijani fairy tales make friends with animals, obtain their assistance, and accomplish their objectives by working together on a variety of tasks" [Mürşüdoğlu, 2018].

4.2. Success from early trials

The hero's confidence grows as he conquers challenges like slaying the dervish and finishing duties. In terms of cognition, this is the "cumulative effect of micro-victories." The hero's goal map gradually emerges throughout the narrative and guides all of his subsequent actions. The first goal is rather broad: everyone must be saved, and justice must be restored.

5. Cognitive orientation and symbols: In a fairy tale, the goal map consists of symbolic markers rather than a particular geographic location:

- A palace at the end of the valley → conquering dread
- The other side of mountain → a challenging stage
- Battlefield → meeting with the ultimate reality

These locations serve as a psychological map for the hero.

6. Restructuring the system of values: In addition to displaying bravery, The Fellow on the White horse experiences a metamorphosis.

6.1. Destroying traditional values: The hero is aware that acting alone does not always result in success (sometimes an auxiliary presence is essential), that power alone is insufficient, and that fear must be managed rather than eliminated.

6.2. Acquiring new values: The hero primarily fortifies four values by the story's conclusion:

a) Mercy: This is shown by the manner he treats the people he saves, the creatures he helps along the road, and the foes he defeats.

b) Justice: Justice: In addition to re-establishing justice, the hero vanquishes the witch dervish, the two merciless padshahs and other brutal people..

c) Wisdom over fear: He actively controls his fear rather than denying it.

d) Self-awareness: He already knows who he is and what he is fighting for when he passes the final exam.

7. Scheme of the cognitive heroism model

- a) Imbalance (problem)
- b) Challenge (fear + desire)
- c) Decision (choosing a goal)
- d) Trials (experience, expansion)
- e) Awakening (discovery of inner strength)
- f) Victory
- g) Return and social integration

Conclusion

This study has shown that heroicity in Azerbaijani fairy tale "The Fellow on the White Horse" is a sophisticated cognitive and cultural construct that represents the moral standards, psychological processes, and collective worldview of the Azerbaijani people, rather than just a storytelling device. The study used cognitive modelling to show that the heroic figure is organized around a dynamic interplay of mental processes, such as goal mapping, risk assessment, emotional control, moral reasoning, and identity creation.

The results demonstrate how culturally unique qualities like respect for elders, national loyalty, social justice, spiritual purity, and endurance define "The Fellow on the White Horse" tale heroes. The narrative schemas that direct the hero's development from a common person to a culturally idealized figure are infused with these ideals. A complex internal model of psychological development is indicated by the nonlinear transition, which moves through cognitive stages of doubt, trial, adaptation, symbolic death, and rebirth.

Additionally, the study verified that legendary frameworks and magical aspects in Azerbaijani fairy tale "The Fellow on the White Horse" serves as cognitive metaphors, signifying internal mental struggles and resolutions as opposed to just exterior imagination. Enchanted items, hostile forces, and supernatural assistants all function as symbolic actors in the hero's mental landscape, influencing his or her ethical stance and decision-making processes.

By providing an integrative framework for comprehending heroicity as a mental and cultural model rather than a fixed archetype, the research advances folkloristic, cognitive literary studies, and cultural psychology. Additionally, it suggests that Azerbaijani fairy tales have a distinct cognitive logic of heroism based on community-oriented ethics and adaptive resilience, opening up new avenues for comparative study with other Turk and global folklore traditions according to the tale of "The Fellow on the White Horse".

In conclusion, the cognitive model of heroicity in Azerbaijani fairy tale demonstrates a structured way of thinking that encodes moral instruction, cultural memory, and psychological growth, demonstrating that these stories are not only entertaining but also effective instruments for forming both individual and collective consciousness.

Notes

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