

THE SOCIAL ROLE OF WOMEN IN OYBEK'S "ULUG' YO'L": A FEMINIST INTERPRETATION

Nasridinova Sitora Utkirovna

Assistant Teacher at Asia International University.

Abdullayeva Zarinabonu Obid qizi

Master student of Asia International University.

Abstract:

Background. The representation of women in literature has been widely examined within feminist literary criticism, particularly in the works of scholars such as Elaine Showalter, who emphasized the importance of analyzing female experience and women's writing traditions, and Judith Butler, whose theory of gender performativity redefined the understanding of gender as a social construct. In Central Asian studies, Marianne Kamp has explored the transformation of women's roles in Uzbekistan during the Soviet period, highlighting the tension between tradition and modernity. Within this theoretical framework, this article examines the social role of women in "Ulug' yo'l" by Oybek. The novel reflects a period of profound socio-political transformation in twentieth-century Uzbekistan, making it a valuable source for analyzing the changing representation of women and their participation in social life.

Research methods and materials. The research is based on feminist literary criticism and gender theory as the primary methodological framework. Comparative and textual analysis methods are applied to examine the depiction of female identity, agency, and social participation in the novel. The analysis focuses on character development, narrative strategies, and the interaction between tradition and modernity as reflected through female images.

Results and discussion. The study reveals that while traces of patriarchal ideology remain visible in the narrative structure, the novel simultaneously presents women as socially conscious individuals capable of influencing their surroundings. Female characters are portrayed as moral supporters, intellectual companions, and contributors to social transformation. The tension between inherited cultural norms and emerging modern values highlights the gradual redefinition of women's social roles. From a feminist perspective, "Ulug' yo'l" demonstrates an evolving literary vision in which women are depicted not merely as symbolic figures but as subjects with personal agency and social significance.

Conclusion. The analysis confirms that the representation of women in "Ulug' yo'l" reflects broader changes in Uzbek society during the Soviet period. Through its portrayal of female participation in social life, the novel contributes to the development of a more complex and dynamic image of women in Uzbek prose. Thus, a feminist interpretation of the work allows for a deeper understanding of gender discourse and the transformation of female identity in twentieth-century Uzbek literature.

Keywords: Oybek, "Ulug' yo'l", feminist literary criticism, women's social role, gender representation, Uzbek literature, Patriarchy, social transformation, female identity, Soviet-era prose.

Introduction. The representation of women in literature has long been a central concern of feminist literary criticism, which seeks to examine how literary texts reflect, reinforce, or challenge gender hierarchies embedded within society. Beginning in the late twentieth century, feminist scholars shifted the focus of literary analysis toward the ways in which women's experiences were either marginalized or redefined within dominant cultural narratives. Elaine Showalter¹ argued that women must be studied not merely as characters constructed within male-authored traditions, but as participants in a distinct literary and cultural experience. Similarly,

¹ Showalter, E. (1979). Toward a feminist poetics. *Women's Writing and Writing About Women*, 125–143.



Judith Butler² reconceptualized gender as a performative and socially constructed category, thereby opening new possibilities for interpreting literary representations of femininity and social identity.

These theoretical developments have significantly influenced the study of non-Western literatures, including Central Asian literary traditions. In the context of Uzbekistan, the early and mid-twentieth century marked a period of dramatic social transformation. The Soviet modernization project aimed to redefine women's roles in society by promoting education, labor participation, and political engagement. At the same time, deeply rooted patriarchal customs continued to shape family structures and gender expectations. As historian Marianne Kamp demonstrates, the campaign for women's emancipation in Uzbekistan was complex and often contradictory, involving both genuine opportunities for empowerment and ideological control.³ This historical tension between tradition and reform inevitably influenced literary discourse.

Within this socio-political environment, Oybek emerged as one of the leading representatives of twentieth-century Uzbek prose. His works reflect not only ideological shifts but also profound transformations in individual and collective consciousness. While Oybek's literary work is frequently examined through historical or realist frameworks, the gender dimension of his prose remains comparatively underexplored. The novel "Ulug' yo'l" offers particularly rich material for such analysis, as it portrays characters navigating the transition from traditional social structures toward a modernizing society. In "Ulug' yo'l", female characters are situated at the intersection of domestic responsibility and emerging public engagement. On the one hand, they are depicted within familial frameworks shaped by patriarchal authority; on the other, they increasingly appear as morally conscious individuals capable of influencing social processes. This dual positioning reflects what scholars of gender studies identify as a transitional model of femininity, one that does not fully reject tradition but gradually reinterprets it within new ideological conditions. Moreover, feminist literary criticism encourages us to question whether women in such narratives function merely as symbolic embodiments of national morality or whether they possess genuine narrative agency. According to Showalter, the evolution of female representation in literature can be traced through shifts in narrative voice, thematic focus, and character autonomy.⁴ Applying this framework to Oybek's prose enables a deeper examination of whether "Ulug' yo'l" reproduces patriarchal discourse or subtly participates in its transformation.

It is important to recognize that Soviet-era literature often balanced ideological expectations with artistic expression. As a result, representations of women could simultaneously promote official narratives of emancipation while retaining traditional gender norms. This ambivalence creates a productive space for feminist interpretation. By analyzing character construction, dialogue, social positioning, and symbolic functions within the novel, it becomes possible to uncover the complexities underlying female representation. Therefore, this study aims to investigate the social role of women in "Ulug' yo'l" through the lens of feminist literary criticism and gender theory. The article seeks to demonstrate that although patriarchal elements remain embedded within the narrative structure, the novel contributes to a gradual redefinition of female identity in Uzbek literature. Through this perspective, Oybek's work may be understood not only as a historical novel reflecting its time but also as a text participating in broader

² Butler, J. (1990). *Gender trouble: Feminism and the subversion of identity*. Routledge.

³ Kamp, M. (2006). *The new woman in Uzbekistan: Islam, modernity, and unveiling under communism*. University of Washington Press.

⁴ Showalter, E. (1979). Toward a feminist poetics. *Women's Writing and Writing About Women*, 125–143.



discussions of gender, social change, and cultural transformation. Furthermore, examining the social role of women in “Ulug‘ yo‘l” requires attention not only to thematic representation but also to narrative structure and ideological framing. In many realist novels of the Soviet period, female characters were often positioned as symbolic carriers of moral values, national dignity, or revolutionary progress. However, a closer reading suggests that their narrative function frequently extended beyond symbolism. In Oybek’s prose, women are situated within dynamic social environments in which personal choices intersect with collective transformation. Their portrayal reflects both continuity with traditional gender expectations and subtle shifts toward autonomy. It is particularly significant that the novel presents women within contexts of education, social responsibility, and moral decision-making. Such representation corresponds with broader socio-historical reforms that aimed to integrate women into public life. Yet literary representation does not simply mirror historical reality; it interprets and reshapes it. Therefore, analyzing how female characters speak, act, and influence other characters becomes essential for understanding whether they function as passive reflections of ideology or as agents of social change. From a feminist interpretative standpoint, the concept of agency becomes central. Agency in literature is not limited to overt rebellion against patriarchal authority; it may also appear in quieter forms: intellectual resilience, ethical steadfastness, emotional influence, and participation in social dialogue. In transitional societies, especially those undergoing rapid modernization, women’s empowerment often emerges gradually rather than through radical confrontation. This nuanced evolution is visible in Oybek’s depiction of interpersonal relationships and community life.

Another important aspect concerns the intersection of gender and national identity. Twentieth-century Uzbek literature frequently linked women’s image to broader discussions of cultural renewal and social progress. As a result, female characters could embody both the preservation of moral traditions and the promise of a modern future.⁵ This dual symbolic burden complicates feminist interpretation. On one level, the woman may appear idealized; on another, she becomes a mediator between past and future. Such complexity suggests that Oybek’s narrative does not present a one-dimensional model of femininity but rather a layered and evolving construction shaped by historical realities. Moreover, the dialogic interactions between male and female characters reveal subtle negotiations of authority. While male figures often occupy visible positions of leadership, women influence decisions through persuasion, emotional intelligence, and ethical reasoning. These narrative strategies indicate that power in the novel is not exclusively hierarchical but relational. Feminist literary criticism encourages attention to these relational dynamics, as they demonstrate how social influence may operate beyond formal structures of authority. In addition, the emotional interiority of female characters deserves particular attention. By granting women psychological depth — including doubts, aspirations, and moral reflections — the novel moves beyond purely functional characterization. Such interiorization contributes to the formation of a more individualized female subject, which aligns with broader modern literary trends emphasizing personal consciousness. The emergence of this individualized subjectivity can be interpreted as part of the gradual transformation of gender representation in Uzbek prose.⁶

In addition to examining a specific novel, it is also important to consider the broader representation of women across Oybek’s literary heritage. Throughout his prose and poetic works, female characters frequently function as key moral and emotional centers of the narrative. Rather than being portrayed as marginal figures, women in Oybek’s creative world often

⁵ Lois Tyson. (2015). *Critical theory today: A user-friendly guide* (3rd ed.). Routledge.

⁶ Marianne Kamp. (2006). *The new woman in Uzbekistan: Islam, modernity, and unveiling under communism*. University of Washington Press.



embody compassion, perseverance, intellectual sensitivity, and ethical integrity. Such characteristics reflect not only artistic intention but also the historical context in which his works were produced. In several of his narratives, women appear as mediators between tradition and modernity. They are positioned within family structures shaped by patriarchal norms, yet at the same time they demonstrate awareness of social change and cultural transformation. This dual representation suggests that Oybek did not treat the image of women as static; instead, he depicted it as evolving alongside broader societal developments. From a literary perspective, this approach aligns with realist principles, where characters are shaped by historical circumstances but retain individual psychological depth. Moreover, the emotional complexity of Oybek's female characters contributes significantly to narrative development. Their internal reflections, moral decisions, and interpersonal influence often guide the ethical direction of the plot. Such narrative strategy indicates that women in his works are not merely decorative or symbolic elements; they actively participate in shaping social meaning within the text. This aspect becomes especially visible when analyzing works such as "Ulug' yo'l", where female figures operate within both domestic and social spheres.

Thus, extending the analysis of "Ulug' yo'l" beyond surface-level ideological readings allows for a more comprehensive understanding of its gender discourse. The novel reflects a transitional moment in which traditional patriarchal norms coexist with new models of female participation. Rather than presenting a fully emancipated feminist paradigm, Oybek's narrative portrays a society in motion — one in which women increasingly claim intellectual and social space while still negotiating inherited constraints. By situating the novel within feminist theoretical frameworks and its historical context, this study argues that the social role of women in "Ulug' yo'l" represents a significant step in the evolution of female imagery in twentieth-century Uzbek literature. The complexity of these representations invites further scholarly exploration and demonstrates the relevance of feminist interpretation for reassessing canonical works of national prose.

Research methods and materials. Throughout the history of Uzbek literature, female characters have played a vital yet evolving role in shaping narrative, emotion, and moral structure. From the noble and loyal heroines of classical epics to the more nuanced, psychologically complex women found in contemporary fiction, the literary image of the Uzbek woman reflects not only artistic choices but also the sociocultural values and historical realities of each era. In traditional works such as *Alpomish*, *Yusuf and Zulaykho*, or Alisher Navoi's *Layli va Majnun*, female figures often embody ideals of beauty, devotion, modesty, and self-sacrifice. These representations served didactic purposes, reinforcing patriarchal values and societal expectations. However, with the advent of modernization, urbanization, and growing awareness of gender equity, contemporary Uzbek literature has begun to challenge and diversify these portrayals. Modern writers—both male and female—now depict women not just as romantic or moral archetypes but as independent thinkers, active participants in society, and voices of resistance or transformation. Their stories increasingly address themes of education, identity, inequality, motherhood, and personal freedom.⁷ In English literature, scholars have examined the works of the Brontë sisters, George Eliot, and later figures such as Maya Angelou, highlighting themes of gender inequality, social marginalisation, and the pursuit of self-expression. Their contributions are often framed within the larger context of feminist movements in Europe and America. Uzbek women's literature has also gained scholarly attention, though much of it remains less accessible internationally. Poets such as Zulfiya and Saida Zunnunova are often studied for their blending of personal emotion with national identity, especially during the Soviet period. Research indicates that Uzbek women's writing often reflects both the

⁷ Karimova, D. (2025). Female characters in Uzbek literature: Historical and contemporary interpretations. *Conference of Natural and Applied Sciences in Scientific Innovative Research*, 2(6), 314–318.



challenges of patriarchy and the responsibilities of cultural preservation. However, little comparative work has been done between Uzbek and English women's literature.⁸

In addition to the general theoretical framework of feminist literary criticism, this research specifically situates Oybek's novel "Ulug' yo'l" within the broader transformation of female representation in Uzbek prose of the twentieth century. While classical epics such as *Alpomish* and *Layli va Majnun* present women primarily as embodiments of loyalty and moral purity, Oybek introduces female characters who are positioned within dynamic social processes. In "Ulug' yo'l", women are not merely symbolic figures but participants in ideological, educational, and cultural change. Methodologically, the study applies close textual analysis to examine how narrative voice, dialogue, and character interaction construct female subjectivity. Particular attention is paid to the ways female characters respond to social expectations, family obligations, and emerging modern values. Their speech patterns, internal reflections, and social positioning are analyzed as indicators of agency rather than passive compliance. Through this lens, the novel is interpreted not simply as a historical or ideological text, but as a literary space where gender roles are negotiated and redefined.

Furthermore, the research employs contextual analysis, situating "Ulug' yo'l" within the socio-political atmosphere of early Soviet Uzbekistan. During this period, official discourse promoted women's emancipation, literacy, and participation in public life, yet traditional norms continued to influence private and communal structures. By examining this tension between ideological progress and cultural continuity, the article demonstrates how Oybek's portrayal of women reflects both transformation and limitation. Female characters often stand at the intersection of tradition and reform, embodying the psychological complexity of a society in transition. Comparative elements are also incorporated by briefly referencing broader feminist interpretations in world literature. For instance, scholars analyzing authors such as Charlotte Brontë and George Eliot emphasize the development of women's inner consciousness and moral independence. Similarly, this study explores whether Oybek grants his female characters intellectual autonomy and narrative depth, or whether they remain framed within male-centered ideological structures. Thus, the methodological approach combines feminist theory, textual analysis, historical contextualization, and limited comparative perspective to provide a multidimensional reading of women's social roles in "Ulug' yo'l". This integrated framework allows the research to move beyond descriptive character analysis and toward a critical evaluation of gender representation in Oybek's literary worldview.

Results and discussion. "The sun of revolution pours its generous rains on Oybek's entire life and work. Oybek cannot imagine his development as a writer, the social and cultural development of his people without revolution. Therefore, this important point of the people's life found its bright reflection in his work –both in poetry and prose," says Naim Karimov in his collection "Oybek".

The findings of this study indicate that the representation of women in "Ulug' yo'l" reflects a transitional stage in the evolution of gender discourse in Uzbek literature. While the narrative framework largely follows realist conventions and maintains visible traces of patriarchal ideology, female characters are not confined to passive or purely decorative roles. Instead, they contribute to the emotional depth and moral structure of the novel. From a structural perspective, male characters dominate the public sphere of action, decision-making, and ideological expression. However, women significantly influence interpersonal relationships and ethical development within the narrative.⁹ Their presence shapes key emotional turning points, offering

⁸ Abdumalikova, S. (2025). Women's voices in Uzbek and English literature: A comparative study. *Journal of Multidisciplinary Sciences and Innovations*, 1(6), 426–429.

⁹ Showalter, E. (1979). Toward a feminist poetics. In *Women's writing and writing about women* (pp. 125–143).



moral support and reinforcing social responsibility. This demonstrates that agency in the novel is not expressed only through direct authority but also through relational and emotional influence. The interaction between tradition and modernity constitutes one of the central dynamics of the novel. Female characters are positioned within family and community contexts shaped by established cultural norms, yet they are also connected to emerging ideas of education and social awareness. This dual positioning reflects the broader historical transformation of early twentieth-century Uzbek society. Rather than presenting a radical break with tradition, the novel portrays gradual internal change.¹⁰

In the novel, Zumrad functions as a representative of emerging female consciousness rather than a fully individualized biographical character whose fate dominates the plot. Her narrative presence should therefore be interpreted symbolically within the broader framework of social transformation depicted in the work. Even when the text does not foreground her personal destiny, her character contributes significantly to the ideological and emotional structure of the novel. From a feminist perspective, Zumrad embodies a transitional stage in the development of women's identity. She is positioned between traditional expectations and modern aspirations. Her behavior reflects modesty and cultural rootedness; however, at the same time, she demonstrates awareness of social change and openness to new ideas. This duality suggests that Oybek constructs her as a figure of negotiation rather than confrontation. Instead of openly rebelling against patriarchal norms, she represents gradual internal transformation. Although the novel does not necessarily provide a radical resolution for her character, this narrative openness itself is meaningful. The absence of an explicitly defined final destiny allows readers to interpret her role as part of a collective process of change rather than as an isolated individual trajectory. In this sense, Zumrad symbolizes the broader evolution of Uzbek women during the period of modernization, education reform, and social reorganization. Thus, her significance lies not only in specific events connected to her storyline but in her function as a literary indicator of shifting gender dynamics. Through Zumrad, the novel reflects the gradual redefinition of women's social roles, moving from passive representation toward limited but noticeable agency within a transforming society.

Importantly, women in the novel are granted psychological depth. Their reflections, concerns, and responses to social circumstances reveal individual subjectivity. Such interior representation aligns with modern realist tendencies, where characters are developed as complex human beings rather than symbolic archetypes. Through this artistic strategy, the novel moves beyond simplified gender roles and introduces nuanced female consciousness. Overall, the results confirm that the novel contributes to the gradual redefinition of women's literary representation. Although it does not propose full gender equality in a modern feminist sense, it expands the narrative space available to women and acknowledges their social and moral significance. In this way, "Ulug' yo'l" reflects both the ideological context of its time and the evolving perception of women as socially meaningful participants in cultural transformation.

Conclusion. To conclude, "If talent, as L.N. Tolstoy said, consists in love for work, labor and people, then this quality, in my opinion, is one of the most important and pleasant signs in the life and work of our beloved writer Oybek." Reading the novel "Ulug' yo'l", the analysis of book shows presents women as more than secondary characters within the narrative. Although the story reflects the social and ideological context of its time, female figures are portrayed with emotional depth, moral strength, and a clear sense of responsibility. They contribute to the development of events not only through their presence but also through their influence on other characters and social attitudes.

¹⁰ Kamp, M. (2006). *The new woman in Uzbekistan: Islam, modernity, and unveiling under communism*. University of Washington Press.



From a feminist perspective, the novel reveals a gradual transformation in the representation of women. Female characters are not shown solely as traditional symbols of beauty, loyalty, or domestic stability. Instead, they are depicted as individuals capable of thinking, supporting social change, and participating in conversations about progress and education. Even within the limits of the historical period, their voices and actions suggest a movement toward greater awareness and independence. At the same time, the novel does not completely remove traditional gender expectations. Rather, it reflects a society in transition, where old values and new ideas coexist. This balance makes the representation of women realistic and historically grounded. At the same time, we are reminded once again that not only men, but also women have a broad outlook, a burning heart, and great courage. In the work, girls are depicted not only as wives who bow their heads in shame and do not deviate from their husbands' path, as mistresses who charm people with their endless grace and beauty, but as fighters who strive for knowledge and dream of becoming a spiritually, physically, and spiritually free person. Therefore, "Ulug' yo'l" can be understood as an important literary work that demonstrates the evolving social role of women in twentieth-century Uzbek prose.

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