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A COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS OF MORAL AND DIDACTIC MOTIFS IN GULKHANI'S "ZARBULMASAL" AND AESOP'S FABLES

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Abstract. This article offers a comparative study of moral and didactic motifs in Muhammad Sharif Gulkhani's "Zarbulmasal" and the fables traditionally attributed to Aesop. The study focuses on the ways in which both literary traditions transform observations of human conduct into memorable ethical instruction through allegory, animal characterization, contrast, irony, proverbial wisdom, and narrative consequence. Although the two corpora emerged from different historical and cultural environments, they share a fundamental didactic purpose: human weaknesses are displaced onto non-human characters so that social and individual faults can be criticized indirectly. At the same time, important differences are visible in composition and moral presentation. Aesopic fables generally concentrate an ethical problem within a brief narrative and often lead the reader toward a compact moral inference, whereas "Zarbulmasal" integrates fable-like episodes, dialogue, satire, folk sayings, and proverbs into a broader literary structure. The comparison demonstrates that moral instruction in both traditions is inseparable from artistic form and cultural memory.

Keywords: Gulkhani, Zarbulmasal, Aesop, fable, comparative literature, didacticism, morality, allegory, proverb, satire.

INTRODUCTION

Fables belong to the most durable forms of didactic literature because they combine brevity, symbolic representation, and practical moral reasoning. Their characters may be animals, birds, plants, or other personified beings, yet their conflicts are recognizably human. Through this displacement, the fable can criticize greed, arrogance, foolishness, dishonesty, injustice, ingratitude, and abuse of power without depending on direct portraiture of particular individuals. Moral instruction is therefore not merely added to the story; it is produced through the relation between character, action, consequence, and interpretation.

The fables attributed to Aesop occupy a foundational place in the European fable tradition. Their long transmission history has produced many collections and variants, but the Aesopic mode remains identifiable through concise plots, sharply differentiated characters, practical wisdom, and ethical conclusions. Gulkhani's nineteenth-century "Zarbulmasal," by contrast, belongs to the Uzbek classical literary tradition and draws deeply on oral culture, proverbial speech, satire, and allegorical characterization. Its structure is more expansive than the typical individual Aesopic fable, and its didactic force often emerges through dialogue and the accumulation of culturally recognizable sayings.

A comparison of these works is significant for comparative literary studies because it reveals both typological similarity and cultural specificity. Similar ethical problems can be represented through different narrative mechanisms, and similar animal figures can acquire distinct meanings in different traditions. The aim of this article is therefore to identify major moral and didactic motifs shared by "Zarbulmasal" and Aesop's fables, to examine the artistic devices

through which those motifs are expressed, and to clarify the principal differences in their modes of moral instruction.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Scholarship on "Zarbulmasal" repeatedly emphasizes its unusual synthesis of literary and folkloric materials. Studies of the work describe the importance of proverbs, allegorical figures, satire, and educational meaning in its artistic organization. Research devoted to the proverbs of "Zarbulmasal" treats proverbial language as a carrier of collective experience and moral norms, while studies of its plot and composition note the close integration of fables and folk expressions into the movement of the narrative. Recent work on Gulkhani also highlights the function of animal and bird imagery in exposing human and social shortcomings.

Research on Aesop's fables similarly treats ethical instruction as a defining feature of the genre. Modern interpretations have examined the fables as compact structures in which an action produces an intelligible consequence and invites reflection on prudence, justice, cooperation, power, and responsibility. Comparative studies of Uzbek and European fable traditions further suggest that allegorical animals constitute a shared poetic mechanism, while the cultural framing of those images differs according to literary convention and historical context.

The present article builds on this scholarship but narrows the comparison to moral and didactic motifs. Rather than treating general similarity as sufficient evidence of literary equivalence, it distinguishes between shared ethical functions and different methods of realization. This distinction is important: typological resemblance can arise because the fable genre repeatedly solves a similar artistic problem—how to make ethical judgment concrete and memorable—without requiring direct textual dependence.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

The study uses comparative-typological and close-reading methods. "Zarbulmasal" is considered as an allegorical-didactic work whose fable episodes, proverbial expressions, and character interactions form an interconnected system of moral evaluation. Selected Aesopic fables—including "The Tortoise and the Hare," "The Lion and the Mouse," "The Fox and the Grapes," "The Ant and the Grasshopper," and "The Wolf and the Lamb"—are used as representative examples of recurring ethical patterns in the Aesopic tradition. Because Aesop's fables exist in numerous textual versions, the analysis concentrates on stable narrative motifs rather than wording specific to one modern translation.

The comparison is organized around four analytical categories: (1) the representation of moral virtues and vices; (2) the didactic function of animal characterization; (3) the role of consequence, proverb, and dialogue in communicating ethical judgment; and (4) the relationship between individual morality and social criticism. This approach makes it possible to compare works of unequal scale without reducing "Zarbulmasal" to a collection of isolated fables.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

1. Allegorical animals as mirrors of human conduct

The most obvious common feature is the use of non-human characters to represent human behavior. In both traditions, animals do not function primarily as zoological subjects. They are moral signs. Their actions compress recognizable patterns of social conduct into a form that is easy to visualize and remember. Strength, weakness, cunning, vanity, patience, fear, and greed become visible through characters whose qualities are immediately legible to the audience.

In Aesopic narrative, characterization is usually economical. A lion can signify power, a fox cunning, a wolf predatory force, or a small creature apparent weakness. The narrative then tests the expectation attached to the character. "The Lion and the Mouse," for example, reverses the assumption that social or physical smallness equals uselessness: the weaker figure can later become the helper of the strong. The moral value arises from the reversal itself, encouraging gratitude and restraint in the exercise of power.

In "Zarbulmasal," allegorical characterization works within a denser verbal and social environment. Birds and animals participate in extended exchanges, and their speech is enriched by proverbs and culturally marked expressions. Consequently, the reader is not only asked to recognize a single vice or virtue but also to interpret a network of social attitudes. The animal mask allows Gulkhani to criticize human shortcomings indirectly while preserving the liveliness of folk speech and comic representation.

2. Wisdom, prudence, and the correction of pride

One of the strongest shared motifs is the superiority of practical wisdom over pride. Aesop's "The Tortoise and the Hare" turns a simple contest into a lesson about overconfidence. Natural advantage becomes useless when it produces carelessness, while limited ability can succeed through persistence. The didactic structure is based on contrast: the reader sees not only that patience is valuable, but also why arrogance makes a capable character vulnerable.

A comparable moral logic appears throughout "Zarbulmasal," where speech and action repeatedly expose the difference between sound judgment and foolish self-confidence. Gulkhani's frequent use of proverbial wisdom is especially important here. A proverb represents knowledge tested by collective experience; when inserted into a character's speech or narrative situation, it functions as a compact standard against which behavior can be judged. The didactic lesson therefore acquires social authority rather than appearing as an isolated opinion of the narrator.

The difference lies in delivery. Aesopic wisdom is often generated by the final outcome of a short event. Gulkhani's wisdom is more dialogic and cumulative. The reader encounters ethical judgment through the interaction of story, satire, proverb, and response. In both cases pride is corrected, but the route toward that correction reflects the distinctive poetics of each tradition.

3. Labor, responsibility, and foresight

Another important didactic motif concerns preparation for the future. In the Aesopic tradition, "The Ant and the Grasshopper" contrasts disciplined preparation with improvidence. Whatever variations exist among later versions, the central ethical problem is stable: present choices have future consequences. The fable teaches through temporal structure, moving from a period of opportunity to a period in which earlier conduct is tested.

The moral world of "Zarbulmasal" likewise values reasoned conduct, responsibility, and the ability to foresee consequences. Its proverbs repeatedly connect action with result, presenting ethical behavior as a practical necessity rather than an abstract ideal. This feature is central to the didactic power of proverbial language. A proverb condenses a cause-and-effect relationship into a memorable verbal formula, and the surrounding narrative supplies concrete circumstances in which that formula becomes meaningful.

Thus, both traditions educate by making consequence visible. They do not simply command the reader to be responsible. Instead, they dramatize the cost of irresponsibility. Such a method is pedagogically effective because the moral principle is linked to an image, conflict, or memorable phrase.

4. Justice, power, and the exposure of social inequality

Fables can also move beyond private morality and become instruments of social criticism. Aesop's "The Wolf and the Lamb" is a particularly clear example. The stronger character seeks a justification for violence, but the accusations do not withstand rational examination. The episode exposes a disturbing truth: power may invent reasons after it has already decided to dominate. The didactic lesson is therefore not limited to individual dishonesty; it concerns the relationship between force and justice.

This social dimension is highly relevant to "Zarbulmasal." Gulkhani's allegorical world permits criticism of social behavior, pretension, ignorance, selfishness, and distorted relations among people. Satire intensifies the didactic effect because laughter and criticism operate together. A ridiculous character becomes an example of conduct to reject, while the indirectness of allegory makes social judgment artistically flexible.

The two traditions consequently share an important principle: morality cannot always be separated from power. Ethical failure may be expressed as personal greed or vanity, but it may also appear as exploitation, unjust authority, or the manipulation of weaker figures. The fable's apparent simplicity allows such themes to be communicated without lengthy philosophical argument.

5. Self-deception and the psychology of moral failure

Aesop's "The Fox and the Grapes" presents another kind of moral weakness: the tendency to reinterpret failure in order to protect self-esteem. The fox cannot obtain the grapes and therefore dismisses their value. The lesson is psychologically precise because the character's speech exposes a contradiction between desire and later judgment. The reader recognizes the strategy of self-deception through irony.

Gulkhani's satirical method similarly depends on the gap between what a character believes or claims and what the reader understands. Proverbs and contextual irony help reveal that gap. The moral lesson is therefore often produced by interpretive distance: the audience is expected to see more clearly than the flawed character. This is a sophisticated didactic mechanism because it does not merely state the correct answer; it invites the reader to diagnose the error.

6. Proverbs and explicit morals: two modes of didactic compression

A major difference between the works concerns the linguistic form of moral compression. Many Aesopic fables circulate with short morals that summarize the practical lesson of the narrative. Even where a moral has been added or reformulated in later transmission, the compact structure of the story naturally encourages a concise generalization. Narrative and maxim therefore stand in a close relationship.

In "Zarbulmasal," proverbial language is not simply an appendix to a story. It is woven into the texture of the work. Scholars have noted the large number of proverbs and folk expressions incorporated into its composition. This creates a different didactic rhythm. Instead of moving only from story to final maxim, Gulkhani frequently allows inherited folk wisdom to enter the narrative itself, shaping dialogue, judgment, and characterization.

Both techniques make moral knowledge memorable, but they distribute authority differently. The concise moral associated with an Aesopic fable tends to generalize from a particular incident. The proverb in "Zarbulmasal" often enters the incident as already recognized communal knowledge. One moves prominently from example toward rule; the other repeatedly places rule and example in active conversation.

7. Humor, satire, and indirect instruction

Didactic literature can become ineffective when instruction is too abstract or openly moralizing. Both traditions avoid this problem by converting ethical ideas into dramatic and often humorous situations. Animals argue, boast, misjudge one another, make excuses, and suffer the consequences of their choices. Entertainment is therefore not opposed to instruction; it is one of its principal vehicles.

Gulkhani's use of satire is especially significant because it expands the function of humor from individual correction to social observation. Comic characterization can expose habits and attitudes that would be less effective if described in purely didactic prose. Aesopic irony is usually more compressed, often culminating in a sudden reversal or revealing final action. The shared principle, however, remains the same: the reader learns by recognizing the absurdity or contradiction of flawed conduct.

8. Universal ethical patterns and cultural specificity

The similarities identified above should not erase cultural difference. Themes such as wisdom, justice, gratitude, restraint, responsibility, and the criticism of arrogance are widely intelligible, but the forms through which they are communicated are culturally situated. "Zarbulmasal" carries the linguistic memory of Uzbek proverbial culture and reflects a literary environment in which oral wisdom and classical written tradition interact closely. Its didactic voice is therefore inseparable from the social resonance of its proverbs and idioms.

Aesop's fables, transmitted through Greek, Latin, and numerous later European and world traditions, possess a different history of textual circulation. Their extreme portability has encouraged adaptation to many educational contexts. The comparison thus reveals a productive balance: the ethical situations are often typologically comparable, while their linguistic embodiment and compositional organization remain distinct.

COMPARATIVE SUMMARY

Aspect	Gulkhani's "Zarbulmasal"	Aesop's fables
Primary didactic form	Extended allegorical structure enriched by dialogue, satire, proverbs and embedded fable episodes	Compact narrative centered on a single conflict or ethical problem
Moral authority	Frequently reinforced by folk wisdom and proverbial speech	Frequently produced by narrative consequence and a concise moral inference
Animal imagery	Part of a broad social and satirical system	Economical character types used to stage a focused lesson
Major shared motifs	Wisdom, responsibility, justice, criticism of pride and selfishness	Wisdom, responsibility, justice, criticism of pride and selfishness
Cultural emphasis	Strong integration of Uzbek oral and proverbial tradition	Highly portable fable patterns shaped by a long classical and later transmission history

CONCLUSION

The comparative analysis shows that "Zarbulmasal" and Aesop's fables share a fundamental belief in the educational power of indirect representation. Both transform human

behavior into allegorical action and use recognizable character types to make moral judgment concrete. Their recurring motifs include wisdom versus pride, responsibility versus carelessness, justice versus arbitrary power, gratitude versus ingratitude, and honest self-knowledge versus self-deception.

At the same time, their didactic poetics are not identical. Aesopic fables characteristically compress an ethical problem into a short narrative whose consequence can be generalized into a practical lesson. "Zarbulmasal" develops moral meaning through a broader network of dialogue, satire, embedded narrative, and proverbial expression. In Gulkhani's work, folk wisdom is not merely a conclusion but an active component of the literary texture.

These differences strengthen rather than weaken the comparative value of the works. They demonstrate how distinct literary cultures can employ the fable and allegory to answer a common artistic need: to criticize human faults, preserve collective experience, and make ethical knowledge memorable. The comparison therefore supports the study of "Zarbulmasal" within a wider history of didactic and allegorical literature while also preserving the specifically Uzbek cultural and linguistic features that give the work its distinctive form.

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