



Symbolic Interpretation Of The Wolf Image In English And Uzbek Folktales

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Abstract: This article provides a comprehensive analysis of the symbolic interpretation of the wolf image in English and Uzbek folk tales. In ancient mythological and folkloric layers, the wolf appears not only as a predatory animal, but also as a symbol of danger, threat, and nonconformity to social norms. In English fairy tales, especially in well-known plots such as Little Red Riding Hood, the wolf emerges as a metaphor for male violence and manipulation within gendered and social contexts. In Uzbek fairy tales, however, the wolf is more often depicted as a deceived or defeated figure, usually opposed to a cunning fox or wiser animals. Drawing on theoretical approaches by scholars such as Zipes, Warner, Bettelheim, Jung, Freud, and Butler, the study explores psychoanalytic, anthropomorphic, and gendered interpretations of the wolf. The research also highlights the wolf's association with the forest, its role as a liminal space, and its function as a threat to social and moral order. In conclusion, the wolf image in folk narratives is shown to be a symbolic embodiment of human inner fears and desires, as well as the complex tensions between society and culture.

Keywords: Wolf image, English folktales, Uzbek folktales, folklore, mythology, anthropomorphism, psychoanalysis, gender interpretation, archetype, liminal space, social control, moral lesson, manipulation, patriarchal violence, cultural context, symbolic metaphor.

Introduction: In English folk tales, the image of the wolf embodies ancient and complex layers of symbolism as a representation of malevolent forces. It signifies not only physical danger or animalistic violence but also notions of transgression, resistance to social norms, and the lurking threat within. From a historical perspective, the wolf has long been embedded in human memory as a

figure of evil, independence, and uncontrollable power.

For instance, Jack Zipes (2002), in his monumental study *The Great Fairy Tale Tradition*, refers to the wolf as “an anthropomorphic emblem of evil” and notes: “The wolf in fairy tales rarely functions as a mere predator. Instead, it is a social metaphor for the outsider, the disruptive other, whose very presence calls the community’s norms into question” (Zipes, 2002, p. 134).

In one of the most famous tales of English folklore, *Little Red Riding Hood*, the wolf serves as the overt carrier of social threat. He endangers not only the child’s body but also her chastity, the trust in social structures, and the stability of the family. Marina Warner (1995), analyzing the tale from a gendered perspective, stresses: “The wolf is not merely a beast of the forest, but an encoded figure of male violence cloaked in fur and fangs” (Warner, 1995, p. 212). According to her, the wolf functions as a symbolic representation of patriarchal violence.

The symbolic burden of the wolf is not confined to a single tale. In numerous English fairy tales, he appears in disguised forms — as a thief, deceiver, liar, or aggressor. Frequently, the wolf speaks human language, employs cunning tricks, and acts with calculated intelligence, which transforms him from a natural predator into a cultural emblem of evil. Bruno Bettelheim (1976) describes such figures as “the child’s unconscious fears projected onto monstrous but speakable creatures” (Bettelheim, 1976, p. 142). In his view, children rely on the figure of the wolf to confront and overcome their own unconscious fears.

The wolf in fairy tales often inhabits the threshold between forest (nature) and village (culture). It transgresses boundaries and embodies the collective anxieties of society. This is particularly salient in English folklore, where the wolf signifies the dark, mysterious, and uncontrollable forces of the forest.

One of the most fascinating aspects of the wolf in English tales is its anthropomorphism — its endowment with human traits. The wolf speaks, deceives, wears clothes, and frequently imitates social roles. Such representations reinforce its function not only as an animalistic predator but also as a moral and social warning. Jack Zipes (1999) emphasizes this point: “The fairy-tale wolf walks upright, wears spectacles, and knows how to manipulate language — he is not an animal, but an embodiment of the human capacity for deception and violence” (Zipes, 1999, p. 86). According to Zipes, the greatest threat embodied by the wolf lies in its humanness; it is less an animal than an almost-human figure — specifically, a figure of human evil.

This anthropomorphism leaves a profound imprint on the child’s mind. The fairy tale is, in essence, a child’s attempt to comprehend the external world, to name danger, and to understand it through symbols. Bruno Bettelheim (1976), in *The Uses of Enchantment*, states: “The wolf, by taking on human features, becomes all the more terrifying for the child — he can no longer be confined to the forest. He could be anywhere” (p. 145). In other words, the anthropomorphic wolf frightens the child not only from the wilderness but also from the internal and even domestic environment. For example, in the tale *The Wolf and the Seven Young Kids*, the wolf is portrayed not only as cunning but also as a shape-shifter who changes his voice and disguises himself in multiple forms. He symbolizes a dangerous force that misrepresents itself and abuses trust. In English literature, this figure frequently appears as a “false teacher” or “evil advisor,” particularly in religious tales and didactic narratives.

The representation of the wolf as both dangerous and alluring to children reflects its dual nature. On one hand, it embodies aggression, fear, and unpredictability; on the other, it symbolizes freedom, independence from society, and obedience to its own laws. Marina Warner (1994) comments on this ambivalence: “The wolf is both seductive and deadly — a mirror of the repressed wildness within human nature” (Warner, 1994, p. 231). Such an approach suggests that the fairy-tale wolf should not be studied merely as an antagonistic animal, but as a figure endowed with complex layers of symbolic meaning. The wolf often operates as a projection of human desires and fears, assisting the child in shaping the concept of the “Self” and in negotiating the boundary between safety and danger.

The strong metaphorical significance of the wolf in English fairy tales is directly linked to social and moral norms. It frequently embodies the external force that threatens the system of values upheld by society. For this reason, the wolf functions not only as a symbol for children but also as a figure with powerful moral and political semantics in the adult imagination. Moreover, the wolf is particularly employed to represent those who act against societal order. Drawing on Judith Butler’s (1990) *Performative Acts and Gender Constitution*, the fairy-tale wolf sometimes embodies identities that subvert gender norms. It appears in a male guise, but operates through deception and manipulative practices coded as feminine — thereby destabilizing traditional gender stereotypes.

Another dimension of the wolf’s role as a symbol of social threat is its frequent portrayal as a liar and an untrustworthy figure. This is especially evident in oral folklore. In English legends, the phrase “a wolf in sheep’s clothing” has become widespread, functioning as a

metaphor for moral duplicity. The image is widely applied to describe morally corrupt individuals — for instance, hypocritical politicians or deceitful tricksters. As J.R.R. Tolkien remarks in his essay *On Fairy-Stories*: “Fairy tale monsters are shadows of ourselves — distorted, magnified, but revealing our own fears, desires, and failures” (Tolkien, 1947). Thus, the wolf represents the external manifestation of an inner “social danger,” a symbolic expression of the conflict between the individual and society. The symbolic interpretation of the wolf is not limited to general notions of social threat but is also intricately tied to gender relations and sexual politics. In English fairy tales in particular, the wolf frequently becomes a symbol of masculine power, embodying violent desires and threats directed at women. This is especially evident in tales featuring female protagonists, such as *Little Red Riding Hood*.

Marina Warner (1995) observes: “The Big Bad Wolf has a long pedigree as the archetype of male predation. His interest in the girl is not culinary but sexual, and his cunning is a parable of grooming” (p. 214). According to this perspective, the wolf is not merely a bestial predator but a metaphor for patriarchal masculinity. He becomes a symbolic instrument of desire, control, and the manipulation of women. For this reason, *Little Red Riding Hood* is interpreted not only as a cautionary tale for children but also as a metaphorical text of gender politics. The girl’s solitary journey through the forest, the wolf’s persuasive advice along the path, and his subsequent assault — all function as encoded cultural messages within patriarchal society, reinforcing norms such as “be cautious,” “do not trust men,” and “do not stray from the path.”

Moreover, the wolf constantly tests the fixed position of the “female” image — passive, obedient, and fearful. The female protagonist (*Little Red Riding Hood*) is saved only when the male rescuer (the huntsman) intervenes, thus reaffirming an archetypal structure of gender roles. As Christina Bacchilega (1997) notes in *Postmodern Fairy Tales*: “Fairy tales encode patriarchal gender politics through the opposition of female passivity and male rescue — the wolf serves as the shadow of both” (p. 83). In addition, the wolf is sometimes linked to the opposition between “beauty and monstrosity.” In variations of the *Beauty and the Beast* cycle, the wolf (or wolf-like beast) is occasionally reimagined as a “potential male” — not inherently evil but capable of becoming humanized through love. In such cases, the symbolic burden of the wolf is transformed, yet the centrality of gender remains intact. As a result, in English fairy tales the wolf represents the symbol of male threat in patriarchal society, a means of reinforcing gender

roles, and a metaphor for social control over women’s will. To fully grasp the deep metaphorical interpretation of the wolf’s image in English fairy tales, a psychoanalytic approach serves as a crucial theoretical foundation. Sigmund Freud and his followers connect archetypal images in fairy tales with the unconscious (id), inner repressions, and subconscious desires. Within this context, the wolf embodies “an uncontrollable instinct,” the projection of animalistic drives and irrational fears. Freud (1900), in *The Interpretation of Dreams*, emphasized that animals in dreams, particularly predatory ones, often symbolize repressed sexual desires or paternal figures. Applying this theory to English fairy tales, the wolf may be viewed as the external manifestation of the child’s inner aggression — the symbol of the “frightening father.” Especially in *Little Red Riding Hood*, the wolf’s actions directed against the red-clad heroine correspond to this strong metaphorical interpretation.

Bruno Bettelheim (1976), in *The Uses of Enchantment*, analyzed fairy tales as instruments that facilitate the child’s psychological growth, writing: “The wolf is not merely a danger to the child — it is a dramatization of the child’s unprocessed inner drives. In fearing the wolf, the child externalizes his own fear of uncontrolled desire and destruction.” (Bettelheim, 1976, p. 143). According to Bettelheim, the wolf’s cruelty and cunning allow the child to confront and manage inner conflicts. Through the fear of the wolf, the child symbolically encounters and consciously struggles with his or her own “wild” desires and destructive impulses.

The psychoanalytic approach also explains the wolf’s mutable and disguised nature. The wolf often imitates another character (e.g., dressing as the grandmother), alters its voice, and uses deception — which corresponds with Carl Jung’s concept of the shadow archetype. According to Jung, individuals project their unconscious, socially unacceptable impulses onto external figures through artistic imagery. In this sense, the wolf emerges as a manifestation of the darkness within the human psyche. Moreover, the wolf’s existence in the forest, from a psychoanalytic perspective, signifies a liminal space — the boundary between culture and wilderness. In this space, social norms lose their authority, compelling the child to establish personal life paths and moral standards independently. This deepens the metaphorical meaning of the wolf as a symbol of trial, growth, and inner awakening. The metaphorical interpretation of the wolf is inseparable from its association with the forest. In Western folklore, and particularly in English fairy tales, the forest is conceived as an “unknown,” “boundless,” and “potentially dangerous” space. The wolf embodies the most active and threatening presence of this

territory. The opposition between nature and civilization, conveyed through fairy tales, helps children to distinguish between the socialized and perilous aspects of life.

Jack Zipes (1983), in *Fairy Tales and the Art of Subversion*, defines the forest as follows: "The forest in fairy tales is not simply a setting — it is a psychological territory where rules are suspended and monsters like wolves thrive to challenge the identity of the child" (p. 104). Thus, the forest is not merely a physical location, but an unfamiliar psychological domain free from social control, where the child faces the necessity of self-discovery and testing. In this environment, the wolf functions as a force opposing cultural norms. It does not live in the village or town but specifically inhabits the forest, which positions it as a power "outside civilization." In *Little Red Riding Hood*, the girl travels through the forest situated between her home and her grandmother's house — two cultural centers — and it is precisely along this path that she encounters the wolf. Within this context, the forest represents a dangerous transitional stage (liminal phase), and the wolf symbolizes the embodiment of that initiatory trial.

Mary Douglas (1966), in her seminal work *Purity and Danger*, interprets such oppositions as "moral boundaries," writing: "The symbolic power of wilderness in stories — especially when embodied in wolves — is that it represents disorder, the outside of the known structure, where taboo is not just broken, but irrelevant" (p. 129). The wolf, therefore, is not only a force that violates norms, but one that negates the very notion of "order."

Another example is *Peter and the Wolf* (composed by Sergey Prokofiev but based on Western fairy-tale elements), where the wolf symbolizes not merely physical force but also the will that threatens order. It is defeated through Peter's courageous act — a vivid illustration of the motif of "the child overcoming his natural fear." The wolf's association with the forest expresses humanity's vulnerability to nature, fear of chaos, and subconscious relationship to external powers. The wolf embodies not only physical danger but also behaviors, desires, and thoughts located outside the realm of social control. In this sense, the wolf becomes "the archetypal enemy of culture." Through oral tradition, it functions in the child's imagination as a tool to reinforce social norms and to warn against disorder.

It is equally important to interpret the wolf not only as a biological or sexual symbol, but also as a representation of social power relations. In English fairy tales, the wolf is often depicted as a powerful

adversary desiring wealth, strength, and authority, attempting to seize them through force. It thus becomes an image that questions social hierarchies and the struggle for resources. Raymond Williams (1977), in *Marxism and Literature*, observes: "In popular narratives, animals — and particularly wolves — are often the stand-ins for oppressive institutions or those excluded from institutional power, depending on the narrator's perspective" (p. 65). Accordingly, the wolf may appear either as a representative of authority or as a rejected, marginal force excluded from the system. Among the poor and ordinary people, however, it often emerges as a symbol of vigilance and power.

In *The Three Little Pigs*, the wolf is portrayed as a destructive force that devastates the homes and labor of small, vulnerable characters. Within this context, the wolf symbolizes social injustice — the force that seeks to appropriate the labor of the weaker classes. Its failure to destroy the sturdy house of the diligent pig reflects the triumph of labor and perseverance over brute power. Terry Eagleton (1983) comments: "The fairy-tale villain often functions as a displaced aristocrat — a power-seeking figure who invades the egalitarian space of the home or community" (p. 93). From this perspective, the wolf represents the unjust power of the aristocracy, opposed by the collective will of the people.

The continual evolution of the wolf's image demonstrates that it is a flexible metaphor capable of embodying the social, cultural, and moral problems of its time. Especially in 21st-century literature, the wolf is no longer an emblem of traditional evil, but rather a symbol of marginalized, misunderstood forces excluded from society. From a pedagogical perspective, the metaphorical interpretation of the wolf serves as a powerful didactic tool in developing children's cognition, social awareness, and moral reasoning. Through the figure of the wolf, the child learns not only to distinguish between good and evil but also to grasp the relativity and contextual variability of these concepts.

Marina Warner (1995) explains this mutability with the principle that "folklore is a living system, and its images transform in accordance with the development of society." Thus, the wolf is not a fixed category or force, but an archetypal signifier that may acquire distinct meanings for each era, society, and even individual.

In conclusion, analyzing the image of the wolf in English fairy tales is not only a matter of literary interpretation, but also a crucial research direction for understanding the complex interrelations between human beings, society, and culture.

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