

**OPEN ACCESS**

SUBMITTED 31 July 2025

ACCEPTED 28 August 2025

PUBLISHED 30 September 2025

VOLUME Vol.05 Issue 09 2025

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“What Did The Flower Do To Sanubar?” The Persian Folk Tale And Uzbek Folklore

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Abstract: "What the Rose did to the Cypress?" is a Persian folk tale that emerged in the 13th–14th centuries and gained widespread popularity across Central Asia. In Uzbekistan, this literary epic exists in both lithographic and manuscript forms under various titles such as “Qissai Sanobar”, “Gul and Sanobar”, “Kitobi Sanobar”, “Shahzoda Sanobar”. This article explores the plot of the written epic and offers a comparative analysis with the epic Zevaxxon.

Keywords: Sanobar, Simurgh, epic, fairy tale, Kitobi Sanobar, legend, Zevaxxon.

Introduction: Folklore and its expressions serve as a vital form of art that preserves the cultural heritage of nations and transmits it to future generations. Across the world, there are many peoples and nations, each with its own unique folklore traditions. Yet every piece of folklore, regardless of its origin, serves as a mirror reflecting the era and identity of its people. Epic narratives, in particular, as outstanding examples of the epic genre, represent the clearest and most vivid of these mirrors. When a work originates from a specific nation, it reflects that nation's way of life, culture, and moral values. However, when it is adapted or absorbed into the tradition of another people, it takes on new layers—expressing the time, social realities, and worldview of that adopting culture.

The Zevaxxon epic, which forms part of the repertoire of Uzbek epic storytellers, emerged within the Uzbek literary environment. It is regarded as a version of a well-known bookish narrative that gained wide popularity under various titles, including “Qissai Sanobar”, “Gul va Sanobar”, “Kitobi Sanobar”, and

"Shahzoda Sanobar", circulated extensively in both lithographed editions and manuscript copies. Moreover, in the field of Uzbek folkloristics, the origins of this narrative are linked to the Persian folk tale "Gul va Sanobar". [6, 288] A folk narrative titled "Gul ba Sanubar che kard?" (What Did the Flower Do to Sanubar?), which gained widespread recognition under the names Gul and Sanobar, emerged within the creative tradition of Persian-speaking peoples during the 13th–14th centuries. The storyline of this narrative was not only prominent within the Persian literary milieu of its time, but also became widely disseminated among the peoples of Central Asia. Through the process of becoming a migratory plot, it entered the literary environments of various culturally, linguistically, and geographically related communities—leaving a notable imprint on their folklore and literary traditions.

In Iranian sources, the tale appears under various titles, such as "Gul and Sanobar", "Gul and Sarv", "Gul Sanobarga nima qildi?" (What Did the Flower Do to Sanubar?), and "A Tale about Gul and Sanobar" [9]. The narrative has not only spread across neighboring regions under different names, but has also been translated into several Western languages, including English, French, and German. Notably, an English translation by Andrew Lang was published in 1904 under the title "What the Rose Did to the Cypress" [1] in his anthology "The Brown Fairy Book". The tale was translated into French by Joseph Garcin de Tassy in 1876 under the title "Rose et Cyprus" [3], and is also referred to as an "Indian fairy tale." In German, it was published by Felix Liebrecht under the title *Rose und Cypresse* [2] in the collection "Orient und Occident" ("East and West").

The original version of this tale has not survived in its entirety. The form currently available was documented and published in the 1960s–1970s by the Iranian folklorist Seyyed Qāsem Anjavi Shirazi [4, 351–362], based on oral traditions. By the time the tale was recorded, several variants and versions had already taken shape, which were presented in the format of "First Narrative," "Second Narrative," and so forth. We have also chosen to adopt this approach in a manner faithful to the original. The version found in published sources structurally resembles a fairy tale, beginning with a traditional formulaic expression such as: "Once there was, once there wasn't, there was no one except God..." This type of opening, along with the presence of fairy tale–like motifs in the plot and the fact that only a shortened version of the story has been preserved, may explain why the work has been classified as a "fairy tale" in European translations.

Both narratives are based on a shared storyline

centered around the hero—either a prince or Malik Muhammad—and his love for a legendary fairy maiden who resides in an unknown realm. The tale depicts the complex trials and riddles he must overcome in order to attain her. At the heart of the narrative lies a central enigma that must be solved: What did the Flower do to Sanubar? or What did Sanubar do to the Flower? In the first version, the plot is relatively concise and takes the form of a traditional fairy tale. The storyline revolves around key motifs such as the breaking of a prohibition, love from afar, a perilous journey, riddles, betrayal, loyalty, vengeance, and the intervention of a magical helper (usually a bird) or enchanted objects. Although the narrative is structurally simplified, the fundamental moral, symbolic, and philosophical dimensions of the story are carefully preserved. The protagonist undergoes a single epic trial—solving the riddle "What did the Flower do to Sanubar?"—and the entire plot unfolds around this central quest.

The widely known "First Narrative" is relatively brief in length. In contrast, the "Second Narrative" presents a more complex and multi-layered plot structure. It features three sons, each with an individually described fate. This version includes a greater number of mythological elements—such as a man in green garments, a fish, magical objects, a demon (*dev*), and the *Simurg* bird. The richness of motifs and the expanded structural framework suggest that this version has been preserved more fully within the oral tradition. Thus, it may be regarded as the more complete variant, retaining a broader range of plot components and narrative elements.

In order to determine the role of the narrative "What Did the Flower Do to Sanubar?" in the formation of the epic "Zevaxxon", we turn to the lithographic editions of "Qissai Sanobar", which is considered one of the primary source texts. The "Sanobar" epic has been transmitted in three main forms: manuscripts, lithographic editions, and oral variants. Among these, the manuscript and lithographed versions hold particular source value, as they serve as the primary textual materials for analysis. Several copies of these are currently preserved in the archives of research institutions and libraries across Uzbekistan. The majority of manuscript and lithographic copies of "Kitobi Sanobar" are housed in the Manuscript Fund of the Institute of Oriental Studies named after Abu Rayhan Beruniy, Academy of Sciences of Uzbekistan. For our analysis, we have selected the 1906 edition as the primary text, as it is the most comprehensive in terms of length and features well-developed prose and verse sections. This edition was published by Solih Xoja Bukhari, measures 23x15 cm, consists of 95 pages, and is preserved under inventory number No 4035.

The opening of the “Kitobi Sanobar” follows a traditional formulaic structure: “But the narrators and transmitters of traditions, and the recorders of stories and the scribes of legends have said: They have related that in the city of China, there was a king named Xurshid shoh. And he had a son named Sanobar, who was exceedingly handsome and exceptionally intelligent”. [7,3] This conventional opening, along with the portrayal of the protagonist as the king’s only son, already signals a compositional divergence from the Persian folk version. Although the “Zevaxxon” epic begins differently, the main characters—Zevaxxon (Fozil Yo’ldosh o’g’li) and Sanobar (Rahmatulla Yusuf o’g’li)—are likewise described as the only sons of kings, indicating a thematic parallel despite structural variation.

In “Kitobi Sanobar”, the first encounter between Sanobar and Gulparizod takes place through the traditional dream motif, which serves as a strong narrative impulse for the subsequent plot development. This motif is absent in the version by Fozil Yo’ldosh o’g’li, but it is present in the rendition by Rahmatulla Yusuf o’g’li. What is particularly noteworthy is that in both versions of the Persian folk narrative “What Did the Flower Do to Sanubar?”, although the first meeting with the fairy maidens takes place in a garden, the dream motif is entirely absent. In “Kitobi Sanobar” and “Zevaxxon” (as narrated by Rahmatulla Yusuf o’g’li), the dream motif plays a crucial role, serving as the driving force that propels the plot forward. In these versions, the motif is not merely decorative, but structurally essential to the unfolding of the narrative. By contrast, in the Persian variants, no explanation is given for the presence of the fairy maidens in the garden during the initial encounter; their appearance is accepted without question, and their existence is presented as an assumed part of the narrative reality.

In “Kitobi Sanobar”, Sanobar’s father—Xurshid shoh—attempts to dissuade his son from embarking on a long and dangerous journey, issuing a grave warning: “That is the land of fairies. Though the path is distant, it is a journey of three hundred years. Your life may not suffice for such a distance. If you die in vain along the way and no one brings news of you to me, would you not bring shame upon me?”. [7,16–17] Yet Sanobar remains unwavering in his decision. If the course of events had followed the will of the father instead of the son, the story itself would not have come into being. For this reason, the episode is crucial to the progression of the narrative. A comparable situation occurs in the version of the epic recorded by Fozil Yo’ldosh o’g’li. While such epic opposition or father–son conflict is a common structural element in Uzbek

folk epics, it is notably absent in the Persian versions of the tale, where no such resistance or dialogic tension between parent and child is present.

In “Kitobi Sanobar”, there is a motif in which Sanobar is transformed into a wild deer by a sorceress residing in a castle. A similar motif appears in the second version of the Persian tale. In that narrative, the protagonist Sa’d is first transformed into a dog by his wife. Later, after being restored to his human form by the butcher’s wife—who is also his cousin—the cycle of magical transformation continues: Sa’d, using a slender stick resembling a branch of a cypress tree (given to him by his cousin), transforms his wife into a donkey. What draws particular attention here is the fact that neither Sa’d’s wife nor his cousin (who is also her sister) are depicted as fairies or sorceresses. Yet, they possess the ability to perform acts of magic, with no explanation provided within the narrative. The tale offers no account as to how or why such supernatural powers are attributed to them.

A motif common to both “Kitobi Sanobar” and the Persian narrative is the presence of the Simurg’ bird. In “Kitobi Sanobar”, Sanobar clings to the leg of the Simurg’, who resides in a mountain cave, and travels with it through the air. In this context, the Simurg’ functions as an agent of reward, assisting the hero in reaching his goal. The Simurg’ is a well-established figure in Eastern folklore, typically appearing as a magical helper who aids a hero—often one who has rescued its offspring from a dragon or monstrous creature—in completing a difficult task tied to a faraway land. In “Kitobi Sanobar”, this motif is employed in accordance with that tradition, framing the Simurg’ as a vehicle of transcendence and resolution.

In “Kitobi Sanobar”, this episode may have been partially omitted or altered, as it does not depict how Sanobar assists the Simurg’. Rather, the narrative presents him simply clinging to the bird’s leg and flying away. This absence of a reciprocal act of aid—typically a prerequisite for receiving help from the Simurg’ in traditional tales—suggests a deviation from the full motif structure. Moreover, the scene in which Sanobar flies by holding onto the Simurg’s leg bears a striking resemblance to an episode in the renowned “One Thousand and One Nights”, in which Sindbad the Sailor [8,264] ties himself to the leg of the Rukh (a giant mystical bird) in order to reach an inaccessible highland. The way this scene is portrayed in “Kitobi Sanobar” may well reflect the influence of “One Thousand and One Nights”, particularly the Sindbad-Rukh narrative.

In the second version of the Persian tale, the Simurg’ is portrayed in accordance with traditional conventions: it assists Malik Muhammad as a reward for saving its

offspring. In the first version, however, the Simurg' enters the narrative in a different manner—through a feather given to the young man by an old ascetic. When the feather is set alight, the Simurg' appears. In our view, the first version of the tale has undergone narrative compression over time, and the episode involving the rescue of the Simurgh's young has likely been omitted. Thus, although the Simurg' figure is present in all three sources, its role, narrative function, and mediating significance vary significantly across versions.

One particularly striking episode in the second version of the Persian tale involves Malik Muhammad's journey to the land of the fairies, following the path revealed to him by the Simurg', in pursuit of the fairy maiden taken away by his father. Along the way, he encounters three divs (demons) who are fighting over three magical objects: a carpet that once belonged to Sulayman ibn Dawud (Solomon), an invisibility cap, and a shell-tipped bow and arrow. The demons ask Malik Muhammad to fairly divide the items among them. He proposes a competition: whichever of them retrieves the arrow he will shoot first will gain ownership of the items. As the demons rush off to chase the arrow, Malik Muhammad mounts the magical carpet, dons the cap, takes the bow and arrow, and flies to rejoin the fairy maiden. A nearly identical episode occurs in the "Zevaxxon" epic as well, suggesting a shared folkloric motif with local adaptations. In "Zevaxxon", it is not Zevaxxon himself but Malika Xubon (in the version by Fozil Yo'ldosh o'g'li) and Sanobar (in the version by Rahmatulla Yusuf o'g'li) who fall into the hands of bandits—or rebels, as they are called in Rahmatulla Yusuf o'g'li's version. In both cases, the female protagonists disguise themselves in men's clothing, mount a miraculous camel, and escape by shooting arrows (or sibqon) from a bow—demonstrating courage and agency. This motif is absent in "Kitobi Sanobar", where the fairy maiden Parizod is depicted as the Queen of the Fairies, not as an active agent but rather as a symbolic reward to be attained by the male hero. In contrast, the "Zevaxxon" epic contains a distinct narrative line focused on the adventures of Malika Xubon and Sanobar. We argue that this storyline likely draws from the corpus of Uzbek folk tales, where strong, action-oriented female protagonists are more common.

A comparative analysis was conducted of "Kitobi Sanobar", which exists in both manuscript and lithographic editions, and the Persian folk tale "What Did the Flower Do to Sanubar?", which has long been regarded as its primary source. Based on our examination of ideological content, compositional structure, narrative design, and the nature of character

portrayals, we conclude that the Persian tale "What Did the Flower Do to Sanubar?" cannot be considered a direct source for "Kitobi Sanobar";

- In both versions of the Persian narrative, the plot is concise, with the riddle positioned at the center of the storyline, and the primary objective appears to be the conveyance of moral instruction;
- In contrast, "Kitobi Sanobar" is distinguished by its epic quest structure, prolonged journey, and action-driven narrative—all characteristic features of Uzbek oral epic tradition;
- Motifs and episodes such as the dream, river catastrophe, a bull carrying a pearl in its mouth, rōdapolars (mystical beings), and divine intervention—all of which are absent in the Persian versions—form the core narrative structure of "Kitobi Sanobar" and serve as key drivers of the plot;
- The nature of character portrayal also differs significantly: in the Persian narrative, the figures of Sa'd, Gul, and Sanubar primarily carry symbolic and moral connotations. In contrast, in "Kitobi Sanobar", characters such as Sanobar and Gulparizod are actively situated at the center of the plot, embodying complex emotional and ethical dimensions such as love, struggle, patience, loyalty, and devotion;
- Whereas the central focus of the Persian tale lies in the resolution of a riddle, the narrative arc of "Kitobi Sanobar" is driven by a spiritual and moral journey toward inner maturity and self-realization.

In conclusion, "Kitobi Sanobar" possesses an independent epic structure, a composition rooted in oral folk tradition, and a distinct system of themes and character construction. It should not be regarded as a simplified or localized version of the Persian tale "What Did the Flower Do to Sanubar?". Although the two works share certain common folkloric motifs, "Kitobi Sanobar" operates within a different epic layer, shaped by a separate structural, symbolic, and ideological framework. Its narrative structure, character system, and thematic depth are all characteristic of traditional Uzbek folk epics. Therefore, "Kitobi Sanobar" should be considered a romantic-adventurous epic that emerged within the performance context of folk bards (bakhshis). In our view, the symbolic resonance of the title "What Did the Flower Do to Sanubar?" in the Persian tale may have led bakhshi storytellers to incorporate the names "Gul" and "Sanobar" into their oral repertoires—eventually shaping what came to be known as the "Gul va Sanobar" epic.

Among Uzbek folk tales, there exists a story titled "What Did the Flower Do to Sanobar, and What Did Sanobar Do to the Flower?". In terms of narrative structure and

content, this tale closely parallels the first version of the Persian narrative. The similarities are not limited to general themes but extend to plot progression, motif sequencing, and the manner in which events are narrated. In both texts, the central storyline revolves around a young man—the youngest son of a king in the folk tale, and Malik Muhammad in the Persian version—who falls in love with a beautiful maiden in a

garden. To attain her, he must overcome a series of difficult trials and ultimately solve a riddle to reach his goal. This narrative archetype is reproduced in nearly identical form in both versions. A comparative table has been provided to highlight the structural and motivational differences between the folk tale and the Persian narrative.

Element	First Version	Folk Tale
Protagonist	The only son of a wealthy man	The king's youngest son
Prohibition	Forbidden to enter the garden	Warned not to take the "Borsa-Kelmas" and "Borsa-Gumon" roads (no-return paths)
The Deer	Transforms into a fairy girl	Leads to the garden where the girl lives (not a fairy)
Marriage Condition	Solve the riddle: " <i>What did the Flower do to Sanubarg?</i> "	Win a chess game against the girl
Who sets the condition?	The fairy girl	The girl's father
Helper Figure	Simurgh bird	Eagle
Punishment	The girl (Sanubarg) is kept in a cage	Sanobar turns Gul into a bird and cages him
Ending	The hero takes revenge and punishes the girl; lives happily but does not marry	The hero marries the girl; a happy ending

In the Persian narrative, the plot centers around the only child of a wealthy man, whereas in the Uzbek folk tale, we observe the traditional archetype of a king with three sons—a structure grounded in the widely recognized "triadic system" of Uzbek folk narratives (the eldest, the middle, and the youngest son). Additionally, the forbidden garden motif in the Persian tale is expanded in the folk tale: the sons are warned by their father—prior to his death—not to venture onto the perilous roads known as "borsa-kelmas" or "borsa-gumon" (paths of no return or uncertainty). In the Persian version, the riddle—"What did the Flower do to Sanubar?"—is introduced by the girl as a precondition for marriage. In contrast, in the folk tale, the girl initially tests the hero through a game of chess, and it is her father who sets the condition of answering the riddle—an element that aligns more closely with cultural norms of paternal consent in Uzbek tradition. A noteworthy point is the presence of an eagle as the helper bird in the folk tale, which may appear debatable, since the Simurg' is more commonly featured as the magical bird-helper in tales across many cultures, including Uzbek folk traditions. Both narratives carry a moral verdict, which is nearly identical in tone and function. However, the folk tale includes a distinctive moral intensification: "Later, he

placed the leftovers from the dog's meal before the bird, and what remained from the bird's meal he placed before the head. If the head refused to eat, it would be struck with a fist." [5,1735] In this context, the act of striking the head (kalla) functions as a heightened form of moral punishment, reinforcing the ethical judgment embedded in the narrative.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, the Persian folk tale "What Did the Flower Do to Sanubar?" appears to have undergone localization within Uzbek literature, preserving the core plot while adapting to the traditional structure and character system of Uzbek folk tales. The tale titled "What Did the Flower Do to Sanobar, and What Did Sanobar Do to the Flower?" may be regarded as a reconstructed variant within the sphere of Uzbek oral tradition, likely based on the first version of the Persian narrative. This folk tale exemplifies not only the creative power of oral tradition, but also how migratory plots are reimagined to acquire new forms and meanings within different cultural contexts. Rather than entering Uzbek oral culture in the form of "Kitobi Sanobar" or the "Gul va Sanobar" epic, the 13th–14th century Persian narrative "What Did the Flower Do to Sanubar?" seems to have been absorbed as a folk tale titled "What Did the Flower Do to Sanobar, and What Did Sanobar Do to the Flower?"—ultimately

finding a place in the treasury of Uzbek oral heritage.

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