

THEORETICAL ASPECTS OF STUDYING BYLINAS AND DASTANS

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Abstract

This paper explores the theoretical frameworks and methodologies pertinent to the study of bylinas and dastans—epic narratives integral to Russian and Turkic oral traditions, respectively. Bylinas, rooted in Russian folklore, and dastans, prevalent in Central Asian cultures, both serve as vessels of historical memory, cultural values, and collective identity. The research delves into the structural, thematic, and performative elements of these epics, highlighting their roles in preserving linguistic heritage and societal norms. Comparative analysis underscores the significance of interdisciplinary approaches, incorporating philology, anthropology, and literary criticism, to fully appreciate the complexities of these narratives. The study also addresses contemporary challenges in the preservation and interpretation of oral epics amidst globalization and cultural homogenization.

Keywords: Bylina, Dastan, Oral Tradition, Epic Narrative, Folklore Studies, Cultural Heritage, Comparative Literature, Philology, Ethnopoetics, Narrative Structure

Introduction

Epic narratives have long been a cornerstone in the cultural and historical consciousness of societies, serving as conduits for transmitting values, beliefs, and collective experiences across generations. Among these, bylinas and dastans stand out as prominent examples within Russian and Turkic traditions, respectively. Bylinas, derived from the Russian word "byl" meaning "was," are traditional Russian oral epic poems that recount heroic deeds and historical events, often embellished with folkloric elements. Dastans, on the other hand, are long narrative poems or prose tales prevalent in Turkic cultures, particularly in Central Asia, encapsulating themes of heroism, love, and moral dilemmas.

The study of these epic forms is not merely an academic exercise but a vital endeavor to preserve and understand the intangible cultural heritage they represent. Bylinas and dastans are more than literary artifacts; they are living traditions that

reflect the ethos of their respective cultures. Their narratives offer insights into the societal structures, historical contexts, and moral frameworks of the communities from which they originate.

The theoretical exploration of bylinas and dastans necessitates an interdisciplinary approach, drawing from fields such as philology, anthropology, literary criticism, and ethnomusicology. Philological analysis allows for the examination of language, style, and textual variations, shedding light on the evolution and transmission of these narratives. Anthropological perspectives provide context regarding the societal functions of these epics, including their roles in rituals, education, and community cohesion. Literary criticism offers tools to dissect narrative structures, character development, and thematic motifs, while ethnomusicology examines the performative aspects, including melody, rhythm, and instrumentation, which are integral to the oral delivery of these tales.

One of the critical theoretical considerations in studying bylinas and dastans is understanding their oral nature. Unlike written literature, these epics are transmitted orally, leading to variations in content and form across different regions and performers. This fluidity challenges the notion of a fixed "text" and requires scholars to consider multiple versions and performances to grasp the full scope of the narrative tradition. The concept of "oral-formulaic composition," introduced by scholars like Milman Parry and Albert Lord, becomes pertinent here, suggesting that oral poets use a repertoire of formulas and themes to construct their narratives dynamically during performance.

Furthermore, the performative context of these epics is crucial. Bylinas and dastans are traditionally performed in communal settings, often accompanied by musical instruments like the gusli in Russia or the dutar in Central Asia. The interaction between the performer and the audience, the setting, and the occasion all influence the rendition of the epic. Understanding these dynamics is essential for a comprehensive analysis of the narratives.

Comparative studies between bylinas and dastans reveal both similarities and differences that enrich our understanding of epic traditions. Both forms often feature heroic figures who embody the ideals of their cultures, engage in battles against

formidable foes, and undergo trials that test their virtues. However, the narrative structures, thematic emphases, and cultural contexts differ, reflecting the unique historical and societal developments of Russian and Turkic peoples. For instance, while bylinas often emphasize loyalty to the state and collective identity, dastans may focus more on individual honor and personal relationships.

In contemporary times, the preservation and study of bylinas and dastans face several challenges. Globalization, urbanization, and the decline of traditional oral transmission threaten the continuity of these epic traditions. Efforts to document, archive, and analyze these narratives are crucial to safeguarding this intangible heritage. Digital technologies offer new avenues for recording and disseminating performances, while academic collaborations can foster cross-cultural understanding and appreciation.

This paper aims to delve into the theoretical aspects of studying bylinas and dastans, highlighting the methodologies, challenges, and significance of these epic traditions. By examining their structures, themes, and cultural roles, we can gain deeper insights into the societies that produced them and the enduring power of oral narratives in shaping human experience.

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