

LOVE AS ETHICAL CHOICE, SOCIAL CONTRACT, AND MYSTICAL QUEST: THE “OSHIQLIK” MOTIF IN FRENCH AND UZBEK LITERATURE

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Abstract: This article examines how oshiqlik (the experience of being in love, loverhood, and love’s ethical/psychological burdens) is represented in French and Uzbek literary traditions from medieval to modern periods. Using a comparative literary approach, it traces how love becomes (1) a socially coded practice in medieval French fin’amor (courtly love), (2) a conflict between passion and duty in French classical and realist narratives, (3) a mystical and moral pathway in Uzbek classical poetics shaped by Sufi-inflected ideas of ishq (love), and (4) a site of modernity debates in early Uzbek prose where love confronts tradition, gender norms, and social change. The discussion highlights shared plot structures (forbidden love, tests, sacrifice) but emphasizes different cultural “logics” of love: French literature often treats love as a tension between individual desire and social institutions, while Uzbek literature frequently frames love as a movement between earthly attachment and spiritual meaning, and later as a critique of restrictive social customs. The article concludes that “oshiqlik” functions as a highly productive cultural code in both traditions—yet its dominant meanings shift according to historical transformations in marriage systems, moral philosophy, and concepts of the self.

Keywords: French literature; Uzbek literature; love motif; oshiqlik; ishq; courtly love; Sufism; realism; comparative literature; cultural codes

Discussion

1. Conceptualizing “Oshiqlik” in a comparative frame

In Uzbek usage, oshiqlik carries more than “romance.” It implies a state of devotion, a lover’s identity (oshiq), and often a set of emotional-ethical trials: loyalty, longing (hijron), patience, and self-transformation. In many classical texts, love is not only interpersonal; it can become a ladder toward spiritual refinement, especially where ishq is interpreted as both worldly (majazi) and divine (haqiqi) love. This duality is central in Sufi literary thought and is frequently discussed in scholarship on ishq traditions.

In the French tradition, the semantics of love are also layered but historically crystallize in distinct cultural-literary models. Medieval courtly love (often linked to Occitan fin’amor) frames desire as disciplined service, secrecy, and moral elevation—an “art” governed by social rules and performance. Later, French literature repeatedly re-tests love against institutions (marriage, class, reputation), producing a strong tradition of narratives where love is ethically meaningful precisely because it conflicts with social order—an axis especially visible from the seventeenth-century moral-psychological novel to nineteenth-century realism.

A comparative approach, therefore, should not ask only “How do they portray love?” but “What does love do inside each culture’s narrative logic?” In both literatures, oshiqlik is not a decorative theme; it is a structuring device that organizes plot, character growth, and moral argument.

2. Medieval French love: fin’amor and the choreography of desire

Medieval French and Occitan lyric traditions develop a recognizable model of love tied to courtly culture. Courtly love is characterized by stylized devotion, the lover’s humility, trials undertaken in the beloved’s name, and a strong emphasis on secrecy and social constraint. In this model, love is not simply a feeling but a ritualized relationship that trains the subject: the lover becomes refined through longing, restraint, and the performance of loyalty.



Yet medieval love discourse is not uniform. Scholarship on early troubadours notes that some poems speak openly in sensual terms, reminding us that “courtly love” can include physical desire rather than pure idealization. This matters for comparison with Uzbek classical traditions: both cultures can present love as ethically elevating, but French courtly forms often emphasize social performance (status, vassal-like devotion), whereas Uzbek classical epic and ghazal traditions often emphasize inner states (burning longing, metaphysical yearning) that can exceed social categories.

A key medieval French narrative test-case is the Tristan and Iseult legend: love appears as both irresistible and socially destructive. In many versions, a love potion initiates a forbidden bond that clashes with marriage and political order. Here love becomes fate-like and tragic: even when guilt is softened by the potion device, the story still dramatizes love as a force that destabilizes feudal loyalty and marital legitimacy.

Comparative bridge: Tristan and Iseult resembles Eastern tragic love plots (including Layli–Majnun traditions) in its focus on impossible love and the collision between private devotion and public obligation. But where Tristan often foregrounds the conflict between passion and feudal-marital structure, Layli–Majnun frequently turns the lover’s suffering into a moral-spiritual narrative of transformation.

3. Uzbek classical love: Navoiy’s Layli va Majnun and the ethics of longing

Alisher Navoiy’s “Layli va Majnun” (1484), part of the Khamsa, is a foundational Uzbek/Turkic articulation of the Layli–Majnun story and is frequently described as a major reworking of the traditional plot with new spirit and meaning. The story is widely read not only as romantic tragedy but also as a meditation on the lover’s inner refinement—Majnun’s “madness” becomes a sign of total devotion, where worldly attachment can open toward a more metaphysical horizon.

Modern scholarship discussing Navoiy often emphasizes that *ishq* in his poetics is not reducible to bodily desire; rather, it can indicate a purifying love requiring moral discipline and a sensitive heart. Another line of interpretation stresses that worldly love (*majazi ishq*) may be treated as a manifestation or pathway toward divine love (*ilohiy ishq*), a frequent Sufi-inflected framing in analyses of Navoiy’s ghazals and allegorical references.

From a narratological viewpoint, Layli va Majnun turns love into a curriculum of suffering: separation (*hijron*) is not merely misfortune but a mechanism that intensifies inner truthfulness. This is where “*oshiqlik*” gains its distinctive Uzbek-classical profile: the lover is ethically measured by fidelity, patience, the ability to endure social rejection, and the willingness to dissolve ego.

Comparative insight: French courtly love also values discipline and trials, but the end differs. Courtly trials typically validate status, honor, and refined desire within a worldly courtly framework. In Navoiy’s tradition, trials can point beyond the world toward meaning-making that is spiritual and existential.

4. French classical and realist love: duty, confession, and the institution of marriage

By the seventeenth century, French prose develops a powerful “moral psychology” mode in which love is analyzed as ethical choice under social surveillance. Madame de Lafayette’s “La Princesse de Clèves” (1678) famously dramatizes a married woman’s love for another man and frames the conflict through duty, reputation, and interior truth. Summaries of the novel emphasize that the heroine and the Duke de Nemours fall in love but restrain action; the narrative turns on confession, suspicion, and the costly consequences of desire within court society.

This tradition matters for the concept of “*oshiqlik*” because it redefines love as an ethical problem. Love is not validated by intensity alone; it becomes meaningful when filtered through



moral reflection, self-control, and social consequences. In this framework, the lover's suffering is not necessarily sanctified; it is evaluated.

Nineteenth-century realism intensifies the critique: love becomes entangled with illusion, consumption, and social ambition. Here a helpful theoretical lens is René Girard's idea of **mimetic desire**—desire shaped by models and rivalry—developed through readings of European novels. Although Girard writes across multiple traditions, the relevance to French realism is clear: love may mask imitation, envy, and social comparison. In such narratives, oshiqlik can shift from sacred devotion to **psychological and social misrecognition**.

A complementary lens is Roland Barthes's *A Lover's Discourse*, which treats love as a language of "figures" and repeated gestures—waiting, jealousy, idealization—rather than a single stable essence. This is useful for comparison because Uzbek classical lyric also works through recurrent motifs (fire, separation, night, tears), but often anchors them in a metaphysical moral universe, whereas Barthes's framework highlights love's discursivity and fragmentation in modern subjectivity.

5. Uzbek modern prose: love as critique of tradition and gender constraint

In early twentieth-century Uzbek prose, love is frequently linked to modernization debates: education, women's agency, and the tension between personal choice and customary structures. Abdulla Qodiriy's "O'tkan kunlar" is widely presented as a landmark early Uzbek novel, serialized in the magazine *Inqilob* across the early 1920s and associated with the emergence of indigenous Uzbek novelistic form.

In broad terms, the love plot in *O'tkan kunlar* does not exist "for romance." It becomes a social diagnostic tool: the lovers' happiness is threatened by expectations around marriage, family authority, and tradition. Modern critical commentary underscores the novel's intertwining of love with political and cultural change, where the personal story reveals wider structural conflicts.

Likewise, discussions of Cho'lpon's *Kecha va Kunduz* in recent Uzbek literary scholarship often highlight arranged marriage pressures and women's constrained romantic agency as part of broader critiques of gender and social inequality.

Comparative insight: In French literature, the institution of marriage is also a central pressure-point (as in *La Princesse de Clèves*), but Uzbek modern prose often frames the conflict with an explicit modernization agenda: love becomes evidence for the need to reform education, family relations, and women's rights.

6. Shared structures, different "cultural work" of love

Across both traditions, several narrative patterns recur:

1. **Forbidden or socially obstructed love**
 - Tristan–Iseult: illicit love versus marriage/politics.
 - Layli–Majnun: love blocked by social norms; separation becomes destiny.
 - *La Princesse de Clèves*: love constrained by marriage, reputation, court morality.
 - *O'tkan kunlar*: love constrained by family/tradition and competing marriage arrangements.
2. **Love as trial and transformation**
 - Courtly love: tests and service refine the lover.
 - Navoiy: longing refines the self; love can move from *majazi* to *ilohiy*.
3. **Love as discourse and self-interpretation**
 - French modern thought (Barthes): love is a set of recurring "figures," language acts.
 - Uzbek lyric heritage: love is expressed through stable symbolic lexicons (fire, tears, night), often mapped to spiritual registers in scholarship on *ishq*.

Key difference:



- In much French narrative tradition, love repeatedly becomes a debate about **the individual versus institutions** (court, marriage, reputation), where ethical action is judged by restraint or confession.
- In Uzbek classical tradition, love often becomes an education of the soul, where suffering can be meaningful and spiritually productive—an idea reinforced by scholarship on *ishq* categories and Navoiy's mystical interpretations.
- In Uzbek modern prose, love becomes a **social critique**, targeting oppressive customs and gendered limitations, aligning romantic choice with modernization and reform.

7. A focused comparative reading: "Love versus order"

A compact way to summarize the comparative logic is to view love as a confrontation with "order":

- **Order as courtly code** (medieval France): love is stylized within aristocratic etiquette; even transgression is narrated through refined convention.
- **Order as feudal-marital law** (Tristan): love becomes tragic because it contradicts political kinship and marriage legitimacy.
- **Order as moral reputation** (Lafayette): love is tested by virtue, confession, and interior discipline.
- **Order as metaphysical horizon** (Navoiy): love's "order" is ultimately the transformation of self; the lover's burning is part of meaning-making.
- **Order as tradition and patriarchy** (Qodiriy/Cho'lpon scholarship): love exposes social injustice and pushes the narrative toward reform.

Thus, "oshiqlik" is not one universal constant. It is a **cultural instrument**: each tradition uses love to test what it most needs to test—honor, virtue, mystical truth, or social justice.

Conclusion

The comparative study of **oshiqlik** in French and Uzbek literature shows that love functions as a major cultural code whose meanings shift with historical context. In medieval French *fin'amor*, love is a disciplined, rule-governed performance tied to courtly refinement. In the Tristan tradition, love becomes tragic because it collides with feudal-marital order. In French classical narrative, love is morally evaluated through duty, confession, and social surveillance, exemplified by *La Princesse de Clèves*.

In Uzbek classical literature—particularly Navoiy's *Layli va Majnun*—love becomes an inner education, where longing and suffering can serve spiritual refinement, and where worldly love may be read as a path toward divine love. In Uzbek modern prose, love often turns into a critique of restrictive traditions and gendered constraints, linking romantic choice to social change.

Overall, both traditions treat love as a high-stakes human problem—yet they assign it different dominant tasks: French literature frequently analyzes love as the conflict between personal desire and social institutions, while Uzbek literature powerfully develops love as a path of devotion, moral endurance, and (later) social critique. The enduring relevance of "oshiqlik" lies in this flexibility: it remains a central narrative engine precisely because it can carry ethics, psychology, spirituality, and politics at once.

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