



COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS OF URBAN POETICS IN UZBEK AND
RUSSIAN SMALL PROSE

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Abstract. This article offers a comparative analysis of urban poetics – the artistic representation of city space, rhythm, sensory experience, and socio-cultural dynamics – in the small prose (short stories and novellas) of Russian and Uzbek literatures during the 20th century. By examining key authors such as Anton Chekhov, Yuri Trifonov, Vladimir Makanin, Ludmila Petrushevskaya in the Russian tradition, and Abdulla Qahhar, Gafur Ghulam, and others in the Uzbek one, the study highlights both shared strategies and culturally specific approaches to depicting urbanization. Small prose emerges as a privileged form for capturing the fragmented, accelerated, and contradictory nature of modern urban life.

Keywords: urban poetics, small prose, city prose (gorodskaya proza), comparative literature, urban experience, Soviet urbanization.

Introduction

Urban poetics encompasses the literary devices, motifs, and narrative structures through which the city is constructed as a textual space: not a neutral backdrop but an active participant in the formation of subjectivity, memory, and social relations. In the context of rapid industrialization and Soviet modernization, small prose proved exceptionally suited to this task. Its brevity allows for concentrated imagery, episodic structure, and open-endedness that mirror the disjointed temporality and spatial density of city life.

Russian urban prose developed against the backdrop of a rich metropolitan literary heritage, evolving into the distinct “city prose” movement of the 1960s–1980s. Uzbek small prose, emerging in a Central Asian context, reflected the unique dynamics of transforming traditional agrarian societies into urban Soviet centers, with Tashkent as a primary locus. This comparative study explores convergences and divergences in their urban poetics, focusing on themes of alienation versus hybridization, memory versus adaptation, and individual versus communal experience.

Drawing on concepts from urban studies and literary theory (such as the “Petersburg text” by V. Toporov and ideas of chronotope by M. Bakhtin), urban poetics here refers to the interplay of spatial representation, temporal fragmentation, sensory details, and ideological undercurrents. Small prose genres enable “snapshot” aesthetics – brief encounters, fleeting impressions, and micro-dramas – that convey the essence of urban modernity more effectively than expansive novels.





Russian literature's engagement with the city traces back to Pushkin, Gogol, and Dostoevsky, but small prose crystallized its modern form in the late 19th and 20th centuries. Anton Chekhov masterfully used understatement and environmental detail. In "The Lady with the Dog," the coastal city of Yalta and the streets of Moscow facilitate anonymous encounters that expose emotional emptiness. Chekhov writes: "And it seemed to them that they were within an inch of arriving at a decision, and that a new and splendid life would begin for them. And they both realized that the end was still far, far away, and that the most complicated and difficult part was only just beginning" (Chekhov, p. 210). The poetics relies on irony, atmospheric description, and the motif of the city as a stage for unfulfilled desires.

The Soviet period saw the flourishing of *gorodskaya proza*. Yuri Trifonov became its central figure. His works, including *The Exchange*, *Preliminary Stocktaking*, and *The House on the Embankment*, portray Moscow as a dense web of historical layers, bureaucratic pressures, and moral compromises. Trifonov's poetics features shifting narrative perspectives, interweaving of past and present, and meticulous attention to domestic spaces. A characteristic passage reads: "People who have a genius for being nothing get far ahead. The essence is that those dealing with them complete and draw on that nothing with everything their desires and fears suggest" (Trifonov, p. 156). The city functions as both witness and accomplice to ethical erosion.

Vladimir Makanin deepens the exploration of urban marginality. In stories like those featuring intellectual outsiders, the city appears as a labyrinth of invisible social hierarchies. His poetics emphasizes psychological introspection and the tension between cultural "soil" and urban superficiality.

Ludmila Petrushevskaya brings a stark, often grotesque realism. Her short stories depict the squalor of communal apartments and panel-block housing estates, using colloquial language and fragmented dialogues. The urban poetics here is visceral and feminist in implication, exposing the bodily and emotional toll of Soviet everyday life.

Andrei Bitov contributes a meta-literary dimension, particularly in his Petersburg narratives, where the city's literary ghosts haunt contemporary protagonists.

Uzbek literature's urban turn was closely tied to Soviet policies of industrialization and the physical rebuilding of cities. Small prose allowed writers to address these transformations while navigating ideological constraints through subtle realism and cultural allusion.

Abdulla Qahhar is widely regarded as a master of the Uzbek short story. His narratives avoid didacticism, favoring evocative details that reveal social undercurrents. Stories set in Tashkent depict the influx of rural migrants, changing gender dynamics, and the persistence of traditional values amid new architecture. Qahhar's poetics integrates sensory urban imagery – bustling bazaars, tram lines, earthquake-damaged neighborhoods – with psychological depth. A recurring idea is the city's erosive yet formative power, likened metaphorically to natural forces shaping human character (Qahhar, p. 67).

The translated collection *A Collection of Uzbek Short Stories* showcases this tradition. In "The Bride from the City," urban modernity clashes with village customs through contrasts





in clothing, language, and expectations. The narrative employs a poetics of cultural translation and quiet irony (Saydumarova, p. 42). Other included works by Gafur Ghulam and Khayriddin Sultonov portray Tashkent as a vibrant, multi-ethnic space where Soviet progress intersects with local customs.

Later Uzbek prose continues this line, often blending realism with lyrical or folk elements to represent post-independence urban realities – migration, market economies, and globalization's impact on city identities.

Comparative Analysis. Similarities: both literatures utilize fragmentation, sensory vividness (sounds of traffic, smells of markets or kitchens), and the chronotope of the apartment or street as microcosms of society. The city frequently acts as a catalyst for personal transformation or crisis.

Differences: Russian poetics tends toward introspection, alienation, and critique of the system. Time is palimpsestic; memory is central (Trifonov, Bitov). The individual often stands in opposition to or is crushed by the urban collective. Uzbek poetics emphasizes communal resilience, cultural synthesis, and forward-looking adaptation. Space is frequently communal (*mahalla* extended into urban neighborhoods), and narratives may carry subtle optimism or nostalgic undertones for pre-urban traditions. These distinctions stem from differing historical experiences: Russia's established metropolitan culture versus Uzbekistan's relatively recent and externally driven urbanization.

Russian texts often employ complex narrative layering and irony; Uzbek stories favor clarity, detail-oriented realism, and integration of oral storytelling traditions.

Conclusion

The urban poetics of Russian and Uzbek small prose offers rich material for understanding 20th-century modernization from distinct cultural vantage points. Russian works probe the existential costs of urban life, while Uzbek narratives celebrate adaptation and hybrid identity. Small prose's flexibility ensures its continued relevance in contemporary literature addressing megacities, migration, and digital urbanism. Further interdisciplinary studies combining literary analysis with urban sociology could yield deeper insights.

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