

Specific Aspects of the Motif of Immortality in Literature

 ¹ Zamin Babazadə,  ² Murad Qənbərov
<https://doi.org/10.69760/aghel.025002114>

Keywords	Abstract
literature immortality mythology comparative analysis artistic and aesthetic values	<p>This article examines the specific characteristics of the motif of immortality, which is widely reflected in the literature of Azerbaijan and world nations. The primary objective of the research is to explore the manifestations of the idea of immortality in literary texts, its mythological, religious, and philosophical contexts, and to identify the distinctive features of this theme in various literary traditions.</p> <p>The article analyzes examples in which the concept of immortality is embodied in both world and Azerbaijani literature, focusing on their ideological and thematic aspects. The motif of immortality is studied comparatively in oral folklore—particularly in epics and legends—as well as in written literature, including epic, lyrical, and dramatic genres. The study employs hermeneutic, comparative-historical, and structural-semiotic methods to examine the dynamic development of this theme across different periods and literary movements.</p> <p>The results indicate that the theme of immortality has a universal character and manifests in various literary traditions within different mythological, religious, and philosophical contexts. The article compares the similarities and differences in the treatment of this idea in different national literatures and analyzes the artistic and aesthetic values of the concept of immortality.</p>

Immortality, in its literal sense, refers to the concept of humans being deathless and attaining eternal life. It is the desire to perpetuate the joy of existence, born from the magnificence of life itself. However, the idea of a life without death is unimaginable, and for this reason, achieving it in real life is impossible. Immortality is a distant, unattainable, and elusive concept that everyone desires but cannot grasp. It is primarily sought after by kings, leaders, high-ranking officials, those who wield influence over the masses, and especially by cruel and dark-hearted individuals. This is because those who dedicate their lives to goodness and live with a clear conscience do not crave eternal life; instead, they embrace death when the

¹ Babazadə, Z. Nakhchivan State University. Email: zaminbabazade92@gmail.com. ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0009-0003-1395-2545>.

² Qənbərov, M. Nakhchivan State University. Email: qenberovmurad742@gmail.com. ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0009-0002-5709-280X>.



This is an open access article under the
 Creative Commons Attribution-
 NonCommercial 4.0 International License

Acta Globalis Humanitatis et Linguarum
 ISSN 3030-1718

time comes and depart from this world. On the other hand, those with dark hearts, cowards, ancient rulers, courtiers, and materialistic individuals constantly seek immortality, wishing to live forever in this world.

Although immortality does not exist in real life, it finds its reflection in epics, tales, legends, stories, poetic works, and even written literature. Works that explore the theme of immortality reflect the mindset and worldview of the people of their time, offering insight into human imagination. In these works, the characters who are immortal or seek immortality are often kings or individuals holding high positions in the state. However, as noted earlier, those who desire immortality are not always kings or state officials. Wealthy individuals and the materially affluent also join this quest. Yet, it is an undeniable truth that immortality is more crucial for kings and their courtiers. Every king wishes to rule their kingdom eternally, unwilling to leave behind their wealth, power, and throne. Therefore, in works where immortality is a theme, it is usually high-ranking individuals who strive to become immortal.

Among the immortal and eternal concepts in humanity, goodness and evil, purity and corruption, cruelty and injustice, honesty and integrity, courage and faith, humanity, and similar positive and negative qualities stand at the forefront. These concepts will always exist until the end of the world, which is why they are considered immortal. Death is a law that applies not only to physical beings but also to qualities. In both real life and literature, people sometimes suppress their inner feelings and act against their conscience. However, those feelings do not die; they transform, moving from positive to negative, and are reborn. This phenomenon is confirmed in both world literature and Azerbaijani literature. In literature, emotions and feelings play a significant role, making this theme more pronounced. Even if a character in a work does not possess eternal life, they carry immortality within themselves through their conscience and moral sentiments.

Another concept that embodies immortality is literature itself. Each work added to it extends its lifespan and brings novelty. In this sense, we can say that writers and poets never truly die; they live on through their creations, becoming immortal. This idea in literature is often referred to as spiritual immortality. The immortality of a poet or writer depends on the magnificence of their works. If a person is always remembered, they do not die and continue to live in hearts. However, the immortality we discuss in this article manifests in a completely different aspect. The immortality we refer to here is the eternal life achieved by characters in literary works.

Whether it is the characters we encounter in folklore (such as demons, knights, jinn, gods, dragons, and creatures of the underworld and the earthly realm) or the characters in written literature, they symbolize power and seek immortality. This leads to the conclusion that those who possess power have either contemplated immortality or have been attributed this trait. If an immortal being is human, they tend to be cruel; if not, they embody savagery. Therefore, although positive legendary characters in literature often live longer, they can never achieve complete immortality. This is because infinite power in human hands darkens the heart, clouds the mind, and erases purity. In human thought and perception, everything created is destined to die, but this is not the case in religious motifs. In various religions, some beings are immortal. However, since this is not universally accepted, it remains unconfirmed. The acceptance and proof of immortality's existence are impossible. This is because people sometimes fail to grasp religious views and reject ideas that are reflected in religion. If we divide society into believers and non-believers on this topic, we see that non-believers outnumber believers. There are several reasons for this, but the most important



one is the development of science and technology and the increase in the level of worldview. The difference between people's thoughts a hundred years ago and today, that is, the gradual disappearance of ignorance, proves this. Where there is denial, there is no room for ignorance. Progress always requires science and proof.

The above ideas can be agreed upon, but it should be noted that the confirmation of immortality's existence is possible in literary fiction. Here, immortality manifests itself in the imaginations of writers or in the generalized versions of popular thought. In this regard, we can say that eternal life, perpetuity, and immortality are reflected in Azerbaijani oral folk literature, written literature, the oral literature of world nations, as well as in global philosophical thought.

Some works, such as the epic "*Kitab-i Dədə Qorqud*", "*Ural Batur*", "*Maaday Kara*", "*Yaradılış*", "*Bilqamış*", "*San qızı*", "*The Tale of Igor's Campaign*", the legend of "*Achilles' Heel*", the legend of "*Səməndər Quşu*", the work "*Ucubılıx*", "*Qarğa*", "*Avesta*", Nizami Ganjavi's poem "*İsgəndərnamə*", Shah Ismail Khatai's poem "*Dəhnamə*", and Hüseyn Cavid's work "*İblis*", contain motifs of immortality, which is why we deemed it appropriate to include them in our research.

This motif is depicted in various forms in many common Turkic epics. The "*Ural Batur*" epic is one of the valuable works that addresses the theme of immortality. This epic carries mythological and epic characteristics. In "*Ural Batur*", the main theme is the refusal to accept death and the search for the secret of eternal life. Like "*Dəli Domrul*", "*Ural Batur*" also refuses to reconcile with human mortality, striving to free humanity from the fear of death by fighting and defeating "*Əzrəki*" (the personification of death). The idea of seeking a cure for death and achieving immortality is widely reflected in the "*Ural Batur*" epic.

In the "*Basatın Təpəgözü öldürdüyü boy*" (The Chapter of Basat Killing the One-Eyed Giant) from the "*Kitab-i Dədə Qorqud*" epic, the character of Təpəgöz (the One-Eyed Giant) is an immortal being, which is why the motifs of immortality are noted in this chapter. Here, Təpəgöz becomes immortal through a ring given to him by his fairy mother, and he can only be harmed through his eye. This is because, as stated in the epic, the only fleshy part of his body is his eye. However, it should also be noted that Təpəgöz gives his ring to Basat, after which he loses his immortality. Basat then destroys Təpəgöz's eye and kills him with a sharp sword.

The theme of immortality is not only reflected in smaller works but also in larger, more voluminous works. From this, we can conclude that the theme of immortality is primarily reflected in epics and poems.

Another epic containing motifs of immortality is the "*Maaday Kara*" epic. Here, the story revolves around "*Kөгüdey Mergen*", who tries to save his father, Maaday Kara, and his mother, Qızıl Tarqay, from the world of the dead and give them the water of eternal life. In all such works, the main protagonist does not easily achieve eternal life and must endure great suffering. This can also be seen in the "*Bilqamış*" epic.

Another epic that touches on the theme of immortality is "*Yaradılış*" (The Creation), a common example of Turkic literature. In this epic, the character "*Qara Xan*" is immortal and resides in the seventh layer of the sky, ruling over the world. The reason for his immortality is his divine nature. According to ancient Turkic mythology, gods and goddesses never die; they are born with eternal life. From the "*Yaradılış*" epic, we can conclude that the idea of immortality is present in Turkic mythology and has been a desire of people. In



general, the number seven in Turkic mythology symbolizes infinity. It is no coincidence that in the epic, "*Qara Xan*" resides in the seventh layer of the sky, ruling the world.

In many sources, it is possible to encounter numerous ideas related to immortality. In his article "*The Search for Immortality – Gilgamesh and Us*", literary scholar Nicat Həşimzadə states that the first creations of God were immortal. Adam and Eve lived painlessly in the same place as God. However, because they ate the forbidden fruit, they were punished by God and became mortal. The results of our research support this idea, as it can be found in the "*Bible*", the "*Quran*", and the "*Türk Yaradılışı*" (Turkic Creation) epic.

One of the epics where the motifs of immortality are present is the "*Bilqamiş*" (Gilgamesh) epic. The main character, Bilqamiş, is noted as a historical figure. Among the kings who ruled in Sumer, his name is mentioned, and it is said that he ruled for 126 years. However, this duration of rule does not reflect reality, proving that Bilqamiş is a mythical or mythologized character. The entire plot of the epic revolves around Bilqamiş's heroism, his search for immortality, and his invincibility. In the work, it is said that Bilqamiş is the son of the goddess Ninsun. This explains that Bilqamiş, from the moment of his birth, is a demigod, meaning he possesses a certain degree of immortality. However, in the work, he himself states, "*I am two-thirds god, that is, a fragment of a god, and one-third human.*" He realizes this after the gods punish him by killing his friend Enkidu with a magical illness, and a new era begins in his life—the search for immortality. The gods gift him a meeting with two humans who have gained eternal life. These two humans are Utnapiştım and his wife, who survived the great flood. It should also be noted that Utnapiştım is one of the ancient ancestors of Noah, well-known to all, and shares the same characteristics.

Bilqamiş begins his search for eternal life and arrives at a place. The owner of that place tells him: "*Bilqamiş! Where are you going? You will not find the life you seek! When the gods created humans, they also bestowed death upon them. Our lives are in their hands. You, Bilqamiş, rejoice day and night. Make every day a celebration, dance, and sing! Let your clothes be light, wash your hair with sacred water! See how children hold onto a person's hand, you too embrace your friend and make him happy! This is the only task of humans!*"

The ideas expressed above indeed carry a very instructive function. From this, we can conclude that the purpose of human life is happiness and leaving a positive mark on this life through good deeds. The issue is not striving for immortality but living the given, or rather, the bestowed life meaningfully.

In other parts of the work, it is revealed that Bilqamiş finds Utnapiştım. They discuss the great flood, and Utnapiştım tells him that the eternal life granted to him and his wife is an exception among the living. Bilqamiş learns that his only way out is to find a magical flower that will restore his youth after he grows old. After great suffering, Bilqamiş finds the flower called the "*flower of youth*" and takes it to his homeland, Uruk. However, as he is very tired on the way, he decides to bathe in a river, and while he is bathing, a snake eats the flower, and the immortality that was not destined for Bilqamiş is bestowed upon the snake.

As a result, although Bilqamiş cannot find eternal life, he achieves spiritual immortality by rebuilding and recreating the city of Uruk. As long as the city exists, he lives on and is always remembered.

The conclusion drawn from this magnificent work of ancient Sumerian culture is that a king, no matter how powerful, can never possess a divine attribute. He is deprived of the elixir of immortality. Ultimately, the



king is also a human, and his life must have an end. Although Bilqamış (Gilgamesh) was two-thirds god, he still carries one-third human traits. This is the inevitable and undeniable truth about Bilqamış.

Among the epics that deal with the theme of immortality are "*Şan Qızı*" and "*The Tale of Igor's Campaign*". The idea in these two epics is entirely the same. The main characters here are immortal and can grant eternal life to the people. Similar to the "*Bilqamış*" epic, in "*Şan Qızı*" and "*The Tale of Igor's Campaign*", it is stated that humans are created to die, and the heroes who are created as immortal do not grant eternal life to humans or allow them to become immortal.

Another work containing motifs of immortality is "*Avesta*", the sacred book of Zoroastrianism. In the "*Vendidad*" section of "*Avesta*", the rule of "*divs*" (demons) is discussed. These divs are also immortal beings. For this reason, it is emphasized that traces of immortality are present in "*Avesta*". In general, in oral folk literature, beings such as "*div*" (demon), "*cin*" (jinn), "*ifrit*" (ifrit), "*cadu*" (witch), and "*əjdaha*" (dragon) are entirely immortal.

As mentioned earlier, we encounter motifs of immortality mostly in large-scale works, but this does not mean that smaller works lack this idea. In the genre of legends within oral folk literature, this idea can be found. This is because the foundation of the legend genre is based on fantastical events. Here, non-realistic events occur. For example, let us take the legend of "*Səməndər Quşu*" (The Simurgh Bird). In this legend, immortality belongs not to humans but to an animal. The "*Səməndər Quşu*" sees its chicks flying and sets itself on fire, burning to ashes. However, it is then reborn from its ashes. From this, we conclude that the idea of immortality appears in many genres of our literature.

Another work with legendary characteristics and motifs of immortality is "*Axillesin Dabanı*" (Achilles' Heel) by Vaqif Ələkbəroğlu, based on Greek mythology. In the work, "*Fedita*" (Thetis), the sea goddess and mother of "*Axilles*" (Achilles), wanted her son to be immortal like the gods. For this reason, she dipped him into the waters of the "*underworld realm*" by holding him by his heel, making him immortal. It is said that any part of the body touched by this water becomes invulnerable. When "*Fedita*" dipped "*Axilles*" into the water, she held him by his heel. Therefore, it was only possible to kill "*Axilles*" by striking his heel.

The theme of immortality in this work coincides with the idea in the "*Basatın Təpəgözü öldürdüyü boy*" (The Chapter of Basat Killing the One-Eyed Giant) from the "*Kitab-i Dədə Qorqud*" epic. In that story, Təpəgöz's fairy mother made him immortal by placing a magical ring on his finger.

As examples of oral folk literature that reflect the theme of immortality, we can point to the works "*Ucubılıx*" and "*Qarğa*" (The Crow) included in Yusif Səfərov's book "*Folklor Örnəkləri*" (Examples of Folklore).

In "*Ucubılıx*", it is said: "*Ucubılıx was a giant man. He lived for three hundred years*" (7). The phrase "three hundred years" here carries a symbolic meaning. The main point of interest is his escape from death and his eventual death due to a simple cause. Even though death occurs in the end, it is noted as partial immortality because of his extraordinarily long life. A similar figure is the famous Prophet Noah, who is said to have lived for approximately a thousand years, though this is unconfirmed. However, these numbers still signify long life and immortality.



Motifs related to immortality are also frequently encountered in stories about Khidr or Khizr (a prophetic figure in Islamic tradition). Generally, the concepts of time and space associated with Khizr are quite intriguing. In one legend, there is a text that says: *"Khizr went into the darkness, drank the water of life, and then filled a cup with it to bring back so that people could drink and live long. However, the vessel containing the water of life shattered and spilled. A crow drank this water and became immortal."* The interesting point here is that Khizr is portrayed as a human who found and drank the water of life, gaining eternal existence. However, in such texts, even if the water cannot be drunk by others, divine beings or entities with supernatural powers often play a role.

As seen, motifs of immortality are also found in these two works. The difference between them lies in the fact that in *"Ucubilix"*, the character is immortal from birth, while in *"Qargā"*, the character gains immortality later. It is true that in *"Ucubilix"*, death exists within immortality—that is, it is immortality in a narrow sense, as the character eventually closes his eyes to this life. This cannot be overlooked, but as mentioned earlier, it is considered immortality because it contradicts the normal human lifespan.

In the *"Sharafnama"* section of Nizami Ganjavi's *"Iskandarnama"* (The Book of Alexander), the story of Alexander's search for the Water of Life is described. In this story, Alexander learns about the existence of the Water of Life and desires to find it. An old man at a gathering tells Alexander that there is a land untouched by darkness where the Water of Life flows. He explains that treasures and glory cannot extend one's life, but in that land, the Water of Life exists. If Alexander wishes to prolong his life, he must seek this water. The gathering is left in awe, wondering how life could exist in such darkness. Alexander questions whether this is a riddle or some hidden wisdom, but the old man insists that the Water of Life is real and located in a dark place called Zulmat, near the North Pole. Whoever drinks from it will find joy and be freed from death and illness. The old man urges Alexander to seek the water if he doubts his words.

Later in the poem, in the sections titled *"Iskandar's Journey into Darkness"* and *"Iskandar's Emergence from Darkness,"* Alexander's search for the Water of Life is described. Despite his efforts, Alexander fails to find the water. The reason for his failure is that the Water of Life is destined for Khidr (Khizr), a prophetic figure, leaving Alexander deprived. Nizami describes how Khidr finds the Water of Life, drinks from it, and achieves eternal life. He even bathes his horse in the water and pours it into a silver cup. However, when Alexander arrives, the fountain vanishes, and Khidr disappears, leaving Alexander without the Water of Life.

From this, we can conclude that even though Alexander searches for the Water of Life, he cannot find it and is unable to benefit from it in any way. Khidr's immortality, on the other hand, confirms the immortality of another character in the work. It is noteworthy that the great poet, in his work, grants immortality not only to a human (Khidr) but also to an animal (Khidr's horse). The theme of immortality in *"Iskandarnama"*—where the character does not achieve immortality but seeks it—is also reflected in the *"Epic of Gilgamesh"*. In the epic, Gilgamesh, much like Alexander in Nizami's *"Iskandarnama"*, embarks on a quest to find the Water of Life.

Another example of written literature that explores the motifs of immortality is Hüseyin Cavid's work *"İblis"* (The Devil). In this work, the characters of *"Mələk"* (The Angel) and *"İblis"* (The Devil) are portrayed as completely immortal. Generally, mythical characters are born with eternal life, and when they appear in oral or written literature, they retain their characteristics. However, it should be noted that in oral



literature, there are instances where these characters can lose their immortality. This is because oral literature is entirely a product of folk imagination.

Another example of written literature where traces of immortality can be found is Shah Ismail Khatai's poem "*Dəhnamə*". One of the main characters, "*Məşuqə*" (The Beloved), and the "*cənnət oğlanları*" (youths of paradise) who protect her, are entirely immortal beings. They are granted eternal life from the moment of their creation. Additionally, in the poem, the "*ah*" (sigh), "*səbə*" (breeze), and "*göz yaşı*" (tear), which carry the letters of the lover (*Aşiq*) to the beloved (*Məşuqə*), are also immortal entities. These can be found in sections of the poem such as "*baz gəştənə-aşeq əz dəre-məşuq be tələbə-səbə*", "*rəftənə-səbə bexabqəhe-xod ke fərda beyayəd*", "*ozr xastənə-aşeq əz səbə və cəvab dadən beərəbi*", "*nameyi-əvvəl. Rəftənə-səbə besuye-məşuq*", "*nameye-şəşsom. Rəftənə-name Behəmrəhiye-ah Besuye-məşuq*", "*nameye-həftom. Rəftənə-aşq besuye-məşuq*", and others.

The common feature of both works mentioned above is that their main characters are immortal beings. In both works, the central entities possess immortality and are granted eternal life from the moment of their creation.

CONCLUSION

The theme of immortality, stemming from humanity's fear of death and the desire to prolong or eternalize life, has been widely explored in both oral folk literature and written literature. This theme is regarded as a symbol of humanity's struggle against nature and mortality, manifesting in various forms across different cultures, religious beliefs, and literary works. The findings of our research can be summarized as follows:

1. The idea of immortality is not confined to a single culture or era; it has found its reflection in the literature of all world civilizations. It represents the natural human fear of death and the desire to continue life. Works such as "*Kitabi-Dədə Qorqud*", "*The Epic of Gilgamesh*", and "*Iskandarnama*" explore this theme from various perspectives.

2. In literature, the quest for immortality is often linked to humanity's desire to find meaning and escape the limitations of mortality. However, the outcome of these quests is almost always the same: humans are mortal, and immortality belongs only to mythical or divine beings. This emphasizes humanity's helplessness in the face of natural laws and the inevitability of death.

3. In literature, immortality is primarily attributed to mythical or divine beings. For example, Utnapishtim in "*The Epic of Gilgamesh*", Khidr in "*Iskandarnama*", and the demons in "*Avesta*" possess eternal life. These beings symbolize humanity's desire for immortality, yet their immortality is not granted to humans. This serves as a confirmation of human mortality and submission to natural laws.

4. In literature, immortality is not only physical but also associated with spiritual values. For instance, in "*The Epic of Gilgamesh*", although the hero fails to obtain the elixir of immortality, he achieves spiritual immortality by rebuilding the city of Uruk. This symbolizes humanity's desire to live on through good deeds and legacies.

5. In ancient times, the theme of immortality was more closely tied to mythical and religious beliefs. In the modern era, however, it carries a more symbolic meaning. People have come to accept the



inevitability of death and now seek immortality through spiritual and scientific progress. This shift is also reflected in literature, where the theme remains relevant.

6. Literature itself is a form of immortality. Writers and poets achieve immortality through their works. Their creativity is passed down through generations, living on in the hearts of people. This demonstrates the profound impact literature has on human life.

LITERATURE

Nağıyev, Cəlil. *Qədim Şərq xalqları ədəbiyyatı tarixi*. Bakı: Asiya, 2009.

Cavid, Hüseyn. *Əsərləri*. Beş cildə. III cild. Bakı: Lider Nəşriyyat, 2005.

Kitabi-Dədə Qorqud. Əsil və sadələşdirilmiş mətnlər. Bakı: Öndər Nəşriyyat, 2004.

Həşimzadə, Nicat. *Ölümsüzlük axtarışı – Gilgameş və biz*. *Ustad Dərgisi*, səh. 3, Bakı, 2019.

Gəncəvi, Nizami. *İskəndərnamə. Şərəfnamə*. Bakı: Lider Nəşriyyat, 2004.

Xətayi, Şah İsmayıl. *Əsərləri*. Bakı: Şərq-Qərb, 2005.

Səfərov, Yusif. *Folklor örnəkləri*. Naxçıvan: Əcəmi, 2008.

Received: 03.04.2025

Revised: 03.12.2025

Accepted: 03.14.2025

Published: 03.16.2025



This is an open access article under the
Creative Commons Attribution-
NonCommercial 4.0 International License

Acta Globalis Humanitatis et Linguarum
ISSN 3030-1718