

**A CROSS-CULTURAL COMPARATIVE STUDY OF MYTH,  
MODERNITY, AND HUMAN FREEDOM IN JAMES JOYCE'S  
ULYSSES AND CHINGIZ AYTMATOV'S JAMILA**

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**ABSTRACT**

This article provides an extended comparative literary analysis of James Joyce's modernist masterpiece *Ulysses* (1922) and Chingiz Aytmatov's lyrical novella *Jamila* (1958). Despite their distinct cultural origins—urban Irish modernity and rural Soviet Kyrgyzstan—both works transform ordinary human experiences into narratives of mythic resonance, exploring universal themes of identity, freedom, tradition, and moral choice. Joyce employs complex interior monologue, intertextual mythic structuring, and linguistic experimentation to elevate the mundane into the epic. Aytmatov, through lyrical realism and emotional narrative clarity, transforms a simple wartime love story into a timeless symbol of courage and authenticity. The research demonstrates that comparative literary analysis not only bridges cultural and stylistic divides but also enriches the interpretation of each text by highlighting shared humanistic concerns.

**KEYWORDS:** Comparative literature, modernism, lyrical realism, literary devices, myth, identity, freedom

**INTRODUCTION**

Comparative literature serves as a vital academic discipline that transcends national, linguistic, and historical boundaries to uncover both universal human experiences and culturally specific expressions. By examining

texts from disparate traditions, scholars can identify recurring thematic patterns, narrative strategies, and philosophical inquiries that define the human condition across time and space (Bassnett, 1993). This study engages in such a cross-cultural dialogue by juxtaposing two seminal works: James Joyce's *Ulysses*, a cornerstone of high modernism, and Chingiz Aytmatov's *Jamila*, a celebrated work of Soviet-era Central Asian realism.

*Ulysses*, published in 1922, reimagines Homer's *Odyssey* within the confines of a single day in Dublin. Through the stream-of-consciousness technique, fragmented narrative, and dense intertextuality, Joyce transforms the ordinary journeys of Leopold Bloom, Stephen Dedalus, and Molly Bloom into a modern epic of psychological depth and existential inquiry. In contrast, *Jamila*, published in 1958, is set in a Kyrgyz village during World War II. Told through the recollections of a young boy named Seit, it narrates the story of Jamila, a woman who defies social convention by choosing love over duty, thereby embodying a quiet but powerful form of moral and emotional rebellion. Aytmatov's prose is marked by lyrical simplicity, vivid natural imagery, and a profound ethical sensibility.

At first glance, these works appear radically different—one is a lengthy, experimental novel of urban consciousness, the other a concise, emotionally direct rural tale. However, both share a fundamental literary ambition: to elevate everyday life into the realm of myth. They explore how individuals construct identity, assert freedom, and find meaning within—and often against—the constraints of their social worlds. This article argues that through their distinct myth-making strategies, both Joyce and Aytmatov address universal questions of autonomy, dignity, and the human capacity for transformation.

This approach ensures analytical rigor, clarity, and a systematic exploration of thematic, stylistic, and contextual layers in both texts, making

the complex interplay between modernity and tradition, individualism and community, accessible to a broad academic audience.

## METHODS

To achieve a nuanced and systematic comparison, this research employs a qualitative comparative literary analysis guided by four interrelated methodological components:

1. Close Reading: A detailed, line-by-line examination of selected key passages from both Ulysses and Jamila was conducted. This focused analysis aimed to uncover core themes, characterize narrative voice and structure, identify symbolic patterns, and elucidate each author's unique stylistic signature (Guerin, 2011).

2. Comparative Framework: A structured matrix of comparison was developed to analyze the texts side-by-side across several conceptual axes:

- Modernism vs. Lyrical Realism: Contrasting the literary movements that shape each work.

- Interior Identity vs. Socially Embedded Identity: Examining how selfhood is constructed—through internal consciousness in Joyce, and through relationships and ethical action in Aytmatov.

- Intellectual vs. Emotional Myth-Making: Analyzing the different processes by which ordinary experience is mythologized.

- Thematic Focus: Systematically comparing central themes such as freedom, wandering, tradition, moral choice, and the search for home/meaning.

3. Contextual Analysis: The study situates each text within its specific historical and cultural milieu to understand authorial intent and reader reception. For Ulysses, this involves the context of Irish nationalism, European modernism, and literary censorship. For Jamila, the analysis considers postwar Soviet society, Kyrgyz cultural traditions, and the status of women in a collectivist, rural setting.

4. Theoretical Foundation: The comparative analysis is underpinned by key theories from the field of comparative literature. Concepts from Susan Bassnett (on cross-cultural translation of meaning), David Damrosch (on “world literature” as a mode of circulation and reading), and René Wellek & Austin Warren (on the relationship between literature, society, and myth) provide a robust theoretical framework for justifying and deepening the cross-cultural connections drawn (Bassnett, 1993; Damrosch, 2003; Wellek & Warren, 1956).

This multi-faceted methodology ensures that the comparison maintains textual fidelity while achieving broad interpretive and philosophical depth, allowing the unique voice of each work to be heard within a dialogue of shared human concerns.

## RESULTS

The application of the above methodology found several key findings, organized thematically:

### **1. Themes: The Locus of Freedom and Identity**

In Ulysses, freedom is internal. Bloom constantly negotiates personal identity, shaped through thought, memory, and imagination. For example, Bloom’s moment of introspection, “Think you’re escaping and run into yourself. Longest way round is the shortest way home.”—reflects the novel’s theme of psychological freedom.

While in Jamila, freedom is enacted through choice. When Jamila says, “I cannot live without love,” she defies all social expectations. Her choice to leave Sadik and follow Daniyar becomes a symbolic act of moral liberation. Unlike Bloom’s internal journey, Jamila’s freedom takes physical form in her decision to walk away from the village.

### **2. Characterization: Consciousness vs. Conscience**

Joyce’s characters are defined by the “stream of consciousness” technique. So characters are constructed from within. Stephen Dedalus’

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intellectual struggle is expressed through fragmented thoughts: “A day of dappled seaborne clouds.” Such a highly poetic interior monologue reveals Stephen’s artistic turmoil.

In contrast, Aytmatov’s style favors emotional and ethical clarity. Daniyar is described through Seit’s eyes: “He sang so softly, yet the whole world seemed to grow quiet to listen.” This simple but powerful depiction shows Daniyar’s spiritual depth. Jamila’s character is revealed through decisive action: “She walked ahead, not once looking back.” This single line symbolizes her strength and moral resolve.

**3. Symbolism:** Intertextual Complexity vs. Lyrical Purity

Joyce employs a dense, intertextual symbolic system. The sea represents both life and oblivion; Bloom’s wandering echoes Odysseus’s epic journey; everyday objects accrue metaphysical significance. Symbolism is often intellectual, requiring decoding.

Aytmatov uses natural and sensory symbols rooted in the Kyrgyz landscape. The endless road symbolizes possibility and escape; the vast sky reflects emotional and spiritual openness; Daniyar’s songs become vessels of pure feeling and cultural memory. Symbolism is immediate and emotionally resonant.

For example, Joyce elevates Leopold Bloom’s ordinary walk through Dublin into a symbolic return-home journey, echoing Odysseus. Bloom’s reflections such as, “Yes, because he thought me so weak,” show the emotional depth of a man grappling with rejection and purpose. Meanwhile, Aytmatov elevates a simple wartime love story into a mythic narrative through Seit’s reflections: “Jamila was the first woman I had ever truly admired. She walked like she commanded the steppe.” These examples illustrate how each author mythologizes the ordinary.

**4. Narrative Technique:** Experimental Fragmentation vs. Lyrical Unity

Joyce's narrative is famously heterogeneous, shifting styles with each chapter to mirror the fragmentation of modern experience. He uses parody, pastiche, and radical shifts in perspective to dismantle traditional storytelling.

Meanwhile Aytmatov's narrative is cohesive and lyrical. Employing a first-person retrospective frame (Seit's memory), the story flows with a folkloric rhythm. The prose is simple, evocative, and visually potent, creating a unified emotional impact.

### **5. Myth Formation: Two Modes of Elevating the Ordinary**

Joyce constructs myth by overlaying Homeric structure onto Dublin life. Bloom becomes a modern Odysseus, Molly a modern Penelope, and Stephen a Telemachus figure. The myth is intellectual and structural.

Aytmatov constructs myth through memory and emotional truth. Jamila becomes a legendary figure in Seit's artistic imagination. The novella ends with the revelation that Seit has painted Jamila and Daniyar, immortalizing them: "And there she stood on the canvas—free, proud, beautiful."

## **DISCUSSION**

The comparative analysis reveals that the process of myth-making in 20th-century literature is not monolithic but culturally and stylistically mediated. Joyce and Aytmatov both seek to immortalize human experience, but they do so through opposing yet complementary aesthetic philosophies.

Joyce's mythic method is one of excavation and overlay. He burrows into the subconscious of his characters while overlaying their day with an ancient epic template. This creates a rich tension between the chaos of modern life and the order of classical myth, suggesting that meaning in the modern world must be actively, intellectually constructed from fragments. Freedom for Bloom is not political or even social, but existential—the freedom to think, to feel, to endure with compassion.

In contrast, Aytmatov's mythic method is one of distillation and elevation. He takes a specific, emotionally charged story and strips it to its essential moral

and emotional core, using lyrical language to give it a timeless, universal quality. Freedom for Jamila is concrete and action-based—the freedom to choose one's own emotional destiny, even at great social cost. Her myth is one of courage, not complexity.

This divergence highlights a central insight: the concept of “freedom” is intimately tied to the narrative form used to express it. Joyce’s formal experimentation embodies the struggle for cognitive and emotional freedom in a fragmented world. Aytmatov’s lyrical clarity embodies the struggle for moral and emotional freedom within a restrictive social order. Despite these different emphases, both ultimately link freedom to authenticity—Bloom’s authentic humanity and Jamila’s authentic love.

Furthermore, the role of the observer/narrator is crucial in both myths. In Ulysses, the reader is the active observer, piecing together the myth from textual clues. In Jamila, Seit is the witness whose artistic sensibility transforms the event into a lasting story. Both texts, therefore, are also about the act of storytelling itself as a means of preserving human truth.

## CONCLUSION

This extended comparative study of James Joyce’s Ulysses and Chingiz Aytmatov’s Jamila demonstrates that profound literary dialogue is possible across vast cultural and formal divides. Though one is a labyrinth of modernist consciousness and the other a crystal of lyrical realism, both works are fundamentally concerned with how human beings create meaning, assert dignity, and achieve a form of freedom within the confines of their respective worlds.

Joyce looks inward, using the myth of Odysseus to frame a deep exploration of the modern psyche, finding heroism in endurance and humane thought. Aytmatov looks outward, using the raw materials of folk tradition and social reality to craft a new myth of emotional courage and moral choice. Their contrasting techniques: fragmentation versus unity, intellectual allusion versus

emotional evocation—serve the same essential purpose: to show that ordinary lives, when rendered with artistic truth and depth, contain the seeds of the epic.

This analysis reaffirms the value of comparative literature as a discipline that expands our understanding of individual texts by placing them in a global context. It shows that themes of identity, freedom, and the search for meaning are not confined to any one culture or literary style but are adaptable, enduring concerns that great writers mold to their unique visions. Future research could build on this foundation by exploring gender dynamics in these myths, conducting deeper intertextual studies with their respective cultural traditions (e.g., Irish folklore, Kyrgyz Manas epic), or examining their reception in global literary markets, further illuminating the processes of cross-cultural literary interpretation and value.

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