

A CONTRASTIVE STUDY OF THE FUNCTIONAL AND CULTURAL ROLES OF STAGE PROPS IN ENGLISH AND UZBEK THEATRE

Dinora Ibodullayeva Bahramjanovna,

Teacher at the Department of Foreign Languages and Literature, Termez University of Economics and Service

E-mail: dinora.ibodullayeva@icloud.com

Phone: +998907499977

Superviser: Uralova Oysuluv Payanovna

Annotation. This paper explores the artistic, functional, and cultural significance of stage props in English and Uzbek theatre. While English theatre has developed standardized systems of stage prop design and symbolism through semiotic and technical traditions, Uzbek theatre integrates props as cultural and historical markers reflecting national identity. The research applies a contrastive analysis to identify similarities and differences in the use and meaning of props, drawing on semiotic, descriptive, and comparative methods.

Keywords: stage props, theatre semiotics, cultural identity, Uzbek theatre, contrastive analysis.

Introduction

Stage props constitute an essential component of theatrical production, performing both practical and symbolic functions that shape the visual, emotional, and narrative dimensions of performance. Within the field of theatre studies, a prop is traditionally defined as “*any movable object used on stage to support the dramatic action*” (Pavis, 1998, p. 322). Props are thus more than mere accessories; they operate as semiotic instruments that mediate between the actor, the text, and the audience. Their presence on stage contributes not only to the material realism of a production but also to its conceptual depth, evoking metaphorical and emotional associations that enrich the interpretive experience.

In English theatre, props often serve as symbolic or psychological extensions of character and theme. They are deliberately selected to represent abstract ideas or emotional states, transforming ordinary objects into carriers of meaning. For example, in Shakespeare’s *Hamlet*, the skull functions as a profound symbol of mortality and existential reflection, while in Wilde’s *The Importance of Being Earnest*, personal items such as handbags or diaries become vehicles of irony, identity, and social critique. English theatrical tradition, shaped by the aesthetics of realism and the analytical precision of semiotics, regards props as textual signifiers-elements that articulate the play’s subtext and aesthetic coherence.

Methods

This study employs a contrastive and descriptive research design, integrating principles from comparative linguistics and theatre semiotics to examine how props function as cultural and communicative signs in English and Uzbek theatre traditions. The research is structured around three analytical dimensions:

Functional classification of props, including hand props (objects manipulated by actors), set props (decorative or structural elements such as furniture and curtains), symbolic props

(objects carrying metaphorical or thematic significance), and technical items (mechanical or practical devices such as lamps, doors, or stage machinery).

Cultural interpretation of props, focusing on how material objects convey national values, moral ideals, and social hierarchies within selected English and Uzbek theatrical performances.

Semiotic reading of props as communicative signs, where each prop is understood as a coded symbol that contributes to meaning-making within the theatrical text and performance context.

The theoretical foundation of the study draws from key works in theatre semiotics (Pavis, 1998; Elam, 2002) and comparative linguistics (Leichik, 2006), emphasizing how language and material culture intersect on stage. The corpus of analysis comprises canonical English plays such as *William Shakespeare's Hamlet* and *Oscar Wilde's The Importance of Being Earnest*, which illustrate psychological and symbolic uses of props, alongside Uzbek theatrical works such as *Hamza Hakimzoda Niyoziy's Boy ila xizmatchi* and *Oybek's O'tkan kunlar*, where props embody national identity and moral codes.

Results.

In English theatre, the system of props is highly standardized and meticulously classified according to professional and pedagogical frameworks. The *National Core Arts Standards Glossary* divides props into three primary categories: hand props, which are objects directly manipulated by actors during a performance (such as books, cups, or weapons); set props, which include furniture and decorative items that establish spatial context; and practical props, which are functional objects integrated into the stage environment, such as lamps, clocks, or doors. This classification reflects the precision of Western stagecraft, where every prop functions as a semiotic unit—a visual element that enhances narrative coherence, character psychology, and thematic symbolism. For instance, in *Hamlet*, the skull serves as a profound existential emblem, representing death, reflection, and the inevitability of human mortality. In contrast, Uzbek theatre also employs similar classifications but merges them with ethnographic and folkloric artefacts, imbuing each object with cultural depth and symbolic resonance. Props such as the *do'ppi* (traditional cap), *lagan* (ceremonial dish), or *supa* (raised platform) transcend their functional purpose and become carriers of collective memory and moral identity. In classical Uzbek dramas like *O'tkan kunlar*, a simple *lagan* placed on the table is not merely a decorative object—it embodies hospitality, respect, and social ethics, reflecting centuries-old values of generosity and kinship. Similarly, a *belbog'* (sash) can represent masculinity, dignity, and honor, serving as both a prop and a moral symbol.

Discussion

The contrastive analysis reveals that stage props in English and Uzbek theatres differ not only in their material composition but also in their semiotic depth, cultural symbolism, and interpretive coding. These distinctions emerge from the differing aesthetic philosophies and historical trajectories of each theatrical tradition.

In English theatre, props are primarily conceived as aesthetic signifiers—objects that contribute to the visual and emotional architecture of the performance. They function as intentional components within a semiotic system, where every item on stage carries potential interpretive meaning. The minimalistic design of props in many modern English productions underscores the emphasis on symbolic abstraction and conceptual expression, aligning with broader trends in European dramaturgy. Props thus act as visual metaphors, shaping audience perception and reinforcing textual subtext. For instance, the selective use of a single object—a

skull in *Hamlet* or a letter in *King Lear*-can encapsulate the central existential or moral tension of the play, demonstrating the analytical precision characteristic of English dramatic semiotics.

Conversely, Uzbek theatre approaches props as cultural semiotic symbols that encapsulate collective identity, historical continuity, and moral values. The integration of traditional artefacts-such as *non* (bread), *lagan* (ceremonial dish), or *supa* (raised platform)-infuses performances with ethnographic resonance and social meaning. These objects are embedded in ritual and moral consciousness, transforming everyday items into carriers of sacred and ethical symbolism. For example, bread (*non*) in an Uzbek play transcends its material function as food: it signifies sacredness, sustenance, and the continuity of life, rooted in ancient traditions of reverence and hospitality. Props thus become not only functional elements of mise-en-scène but also embodied expressions of national memory.

Conclusion.

Props in English and Uzbek theatres reveal distinct functional, linguistic, and cultural paradigms that reflect the divergent historical and semiotic development of both traditions. In English theatre, stage props are treated as semiotic instruments-objects that carry symbolic and interpretive value within the framework of performance. They often serve to visualize metaphorical meanings, reinforce the psychological depth of characters, and enhance the dramaturgical coherence of the play. The design, color, and spatial placement of props in the English stage are consciously planned to produce aesthetic harmony and conceptual clarity, emphasizing the semiotic precision of theatrical language. In contrast, Uzbek theatre adopts a more integrative and culturally embedded approach. Props here are not merely aesthetic elements but bearers of cultural memory, moral symbolism, and collective values. Traditional Uzbek performances, influenced by folk drama, oral storytelling (*dostonchilik*), and moral allegory (*tamsil*), employ stage objects as mediators between the real and the spiritual worlds. A simple household item on stage-a teapot, carpet, or musical instrument-may embody broader notions of family, hospitality, or national identity. Thus, props in Uzbek theatre are not isolated artistic signs, but components of a narrative and ethical continuum that connect performance with lived cultural experience. Developing a unified bilingual glossary of Uzbek stage terminology, together with a systematic documentation of prop typologies, would contribute significantly to the preservation of national theatrical heritage. Such a glossary would provide a linguistic framework for cross-referencing Uzbek and English theatre terms, facilitating academic dialogue, translation accuracy, and comparative semiotic research.

Ultimately, stage props in both traditions function as artistic and linguistic signs – they embody the creative consciousness of a nation, shape audience perception, and serve as a mirror of the society's moral and aesthetic ideals. Through their symbolic power, props reveal how theatre transcends language boundaries, transforming cultural values into visual narratives that communicate universally yet remain deeply rooted in local identity.

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