

Children's Storybooks as Tools of Nation-Building: A Thematic Study of Government-Sanctioned Texts, 1992-2024.

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Abstract: Since independence in 1991, Uzbekistan has used primary-school storybooks as instruments of civic socialization and the construction of national identity. The article provides diachronic thematic and visual-semiotic analysis of 40 state-sanctioned Uzbek children's storybooks produced between 1992 and 2024. Applying a mixed-methods framework that encompasses qualitative coding, semiotic illustrative analysis, and light topic modeling, this study maps the shifting nation-building narratives manifested through three political epochs: early independence (1992–2000), late Karimov era (2001–2016), and Mirziyoyev reform period (2017–2024). In contrast to overt post-Soviet rupture and the symbolism of patriotism in the beginning years, themes now include economic modernization, multicultural inclusion, and environmental stewardship. Female protagonists in STEM roles are depicted only after 2018. Findings as retreat how storybooks can be iteratively instruments of state pedagogy reflecting transitions in leadership as well as pressures from globalization. It also adds to post-colonial knowledge with replicable frameworks for textbook analyses.

Keywords: Uzbekistan; children's literature; nation-building; civic education; visual semiotics; post-Soviet identity; textbook analysis.

1. Introduction

Each September, the first graders in all the provinces of Uzbekistan receive freshly printed storybooks packed with colorful illustrations and well-crafted texts. The characters they encounter are far from being incidental; an Alisher Navai reciting verses, a girl programming a robot bee, and siblings planting saxaul trees to save the Aral Sea. These characters are deliberately selected so that children instill values of good citizenship, national identity, and civic responsibility in the younger generation. Since the independence of 1991, Uzbekistan has realized that children's literature is one of the very important tools in nation-building storybooks as cultural infrastructure project no less important than bricks-and-mortar development investments.

This strategic use of educational media aligns with scholarly understandings of nations as “imagined communities” (Anderson, 1983), where identity is forged through shared narratives as much as through territorial borders. In Uzbekistan, this identity formation is deeply shaped by the post-Soviet imperative to reclaim indigenous language, culture, and values following decades of Russification. Storybooks read in early classrooms—often aloud and communally—serve as early entry points for these national narratives, embedding ideological messages at a critical stage of cognitive and emotional development.

The urgency of this cultural project is further reflected in state initiatives such as the Uzbekistan-2030 Strategy, which seeks to cultivate five million “young book lovers.” However, storybooks do not simply transmit static ideals; they evolve alongside political leadership and national priorities. While the 1990s texts were saturated with patriotic imagery and historical rupture, those of the 2000s emphasized securitized modernity and national development. More recently, books produced during the Mirziyoyev era have introduced characters and themes that reflect a more inclusive and globally oriented nationalism—highlighting diversity, environmental awareness, and technological aspirations.

This study asks: How have the themes, symbols, and visual rhetorics of state-approved children’s storybooks in Uzbekistan evolved between 1992 and 2024, and what do these shifts reveal about the state’s nation-building priorities? By analyzing a longitudinal corpus of 40 officially approved storybooks, this research traces the ideological trajectories embedded in early-grade fiction. Combining qualitative thematic coding with visual-semiotic analysis, the study uncovers how state-sponsored literature constructs civic identity and adapts its pedagogical strategies in response to shifting domestic and global contexts.

2. Literature Review

Nation-building is widely viewed as a conscious effort by states to cultivate shared identities and loyalties among their populations, often through symbolic, educational, and cultural institutions (Anderson, 1983; Hobsbawm, 1990; Smith, 1991). In a post-colonial and post-imperial setting, the process of nation-building often entails strategic reconfigurations in history, language, and cultural memory to engender nation cohesion and legitimacy. Besides, with Uzbekistan canvassing a state-centric reconstitution of national identity after the dissolution of the USSR in 1991, the case emerges as compelling (Akbarzadeh, 2018; Shukurov, 2020).

Within this larger strategizing of nation-building, children’s literature takes on a very critical and seldom discussed function. Children’s media scholars note that storybooks act as ideological tools of socialization, shaping moral values, historical consciousness, and emotions tied to national identity (Nodelman, 2008; Stephens, 1992). Thus, the texts become one of the first sets of pedagogical tools in which political, cultural, and linguistic norms are naturalized—not so overtly, through narrative and visual tactics (Barton & Hamilton, 1998; Kress & van Leeuwen, 1996).

The studies pursued in post-socialist and post-colonial contexts show how the states utilize children’s literature to frame official memory, praise chosen historical persons, and suppress competing narratives (Ivanova, 2015; Geisler & Kinsella, 2013). These works have thus foregrounded the importance of both the text and the visual imagery in the intergenerational transmission of national ideology. In this respect, visual semiotics—theory of meaning formation through image—has become one of the main approaches to unpacking the layered symbolism imparted by children’s books. Considering this, the control of educational content in Uzbekistan has continued stringent. Elementary school textbooks have been approved and disseminated by the Ministry of Preschool and School Education (MoPSE) at the center, assuring that all unfold in consonance with the politicocultural narrative of the time (Darieva, 2011; MoPSE, 2024). Post-independence storybooks at first praised Uzbek language revival and national heroes; with the passing of time and the ascension of Mirziyoyev to power, the newer editions have shifted more toward topics of multiculturalism, environment, and technology (Abdullaev, 2021). But it is unknown how exactly the storybooks get approval, and the series of changes that characterizes their contents thereby poses serious problems for any further attempts to map ideological transformations over time (Liu, 2015; Shukurov, 2020).

While increasingly academic interest is being directed toward educational media in Central Asia and identity politics therein, longitudinal studies of children's literature remain few. Most analyses concern themselves with high-school curricula, political rhetoric, or adult fiction, thereby forgetting the elementary role early-grade storybooks play in building civic consciousness. In addition, very few studies combine both textual and visual analysis, and thus a considerably significant area remains underexplored concerning the ways these media build and occasionally revise the national narratives of a country through time.

This study addresses these lacunae by embarking on a thorough thematic and semiotic analysis of 40 state-approved Uzbek children's storybooks spanning three decades. In doing so, it presents the sole opportunity for scholars interested in cultural pedagogy, political socialization, and nation-building in the post-Soviet contexts.

3. Methodology

3.1 Corpus Selection

This research is based on a sample of 40 officially approved children's books issued in Uzbekistan from 1992 to 2024. The selection criteria demanded that texts be officially sanctioned by the Ministry of Preschool and School Education (MoPSE) for Grades 1 to 4, issued in Uzbek or Russian, and representative of major political periods since independence. Sources were physical archives at the National Library of Uzbekistan and the Tashkent State Children's Library, and digital catalogs held by MoPSE. The final sample was stratified into three temporal cohorts to address political changes: (1) early independence (1992–2000), (2) the late Karimov period (2001–2013), and (3) the Mirziyoyev reform era (2014–2024), each represented by about an equal number.

3.2 Coding Framework Development

A deductive–inductive hybrid coding approach informed thematic analysis. Codes were derived deductively from literature on nation-building, educational discourse, and children's literature, including categories like patriotism, historical memory, linguistic representation, gender roles, and civic values. Inductive codes were derived from a pilot analysis of five storybooks, allowing for the retrieval of context-dependent motifs—like environmental responsibility, multilingual conversation, and allegorical animal personas—that had not been pre-specified. This iterative coding enabled theoretical sensitivity while also leaving room for unforeseen thematic patterns.

3.3 Reliability and Validity

To enhance reliability, two trained coders independently analyzed all 40 storybooks using a shared codebook. Inter-coder reliability was calculated using Cohen's Kappa, with agreement scores consistently exceeding 0.80—indicating substantial concordance. Coders maintained reflexivity journals to document interpretive decisions and mitigate potential biases. Regular calibration sessions were held to resolve discrepancies and refine code definitions, enhancing transparency and methodological rigor.

3.4 Analytic Procedures

Data were analyzed using NVivo 12 software to facilitate thematic organization and visual pattern tracking. The analysis proceeded in two layers: (1) a quantitative tally of code frequency across the three political periods, and (2) qualitative interpretation of narrative and visual content.

Visual-semiotic analysis followed the framework of Kress and van Leeuwen (1996), focusing on compositional elements such as color symbolism, spatial layout, gaze direction, and intermodality between image and text. Particular attention was paid to how illustrations reinforce or challenge textual themes and how visual strategies evolved in response to shifting ideological priorities.

3.5 Limitations

While the sample size allows for in-depth qualitative analysis, it may not capture the full range of state-approved storybooks, particularly regionally distributed or supplementary materials. Accessibility limitations also restricted the inclusion of some early post-independence publications. The interpretive nature of visual-semiotic analysis introduces a degree of subjectivity, though this was mitigated through coder training and methodological triangulation. Future research could benefit from expanding the corpus, incorporating regional editions, and including reception studies involving children, educators, and parents to assess the real-world impact of these narratives.

4. Findings

4.1 Core Nation-Building Themes

Analysis of the corpus revealed four overarching thematic strands that consistently serve the Uzbek state's nation-building agenda:

- **Unity-in-Diversity:** Across the corpus, storybooks promote a cohesive Uzbek identity while acknowledging the country's multiethnic composition. Characters from Uzbek, Tajik, Kazakh, and other backgrounds are often portrayed as cooperating harmoniously, reinforcing state narratives of ethnic inclusivity.
- **Heroic Past:** Continuity with the past is highlighted through repeated allusions to cultural idols such as Alisher Navai and Amir Temur. They are represented as moral standards and anchors of civilization, connecting current values with a sanctified past.
- **Developmentalism:** Narratives often revolve around economic development, technological advancement, and ecological responsibility. Children characters busy themselves coding, inventing, or planting trees representing a forward-looking patriotism based on productivity and innovation.
- **Moral Citizenship:** Virtues such as honesty, respect for elders, and community responsibility are framed as essential traits of the "ideal Uzbek child." These values reflect an underlying civic pedagogy aimed at cultivating disciplined, socially cohesive citizens.

4.2 Temporal Shifts in Content

A comparison across three political periods reveals significant shifts in narrative tone and thematic emphasis:

- **1992–2000 (Early Independence):** Storybooks during this time are characterized by explicit nationalism and breaking away from Soviet symbolism. National flags, maps, and patriotic slogans overwhelm visual material. Revival of language and purification of culture are in the foreground, with a focus on monolingual Uzbek prose and folkloric themes.
- **2001–2013 (Late Karimov Era):** A security-first developmentalism during this time is apparent. Characters are frequently acted in roles that legitimize economic modernization, with industrial, agricultural, and scientific advance presented as civic responsibilities. Images depict infrastructure, factories, and military salutes—traces of a securitized state vision.

- 2014–2024 (Mirziyoyev Era): There is a significant liberalization both in narrative structure and content. Multicultural characters, eco-feminist themes, and gender-balanced roles come into view. Women protagonists are more frequently represented as active agents within STEM and public life, although complete gender equality eludes us. Visuals take on a softer look with the addition of nature imagery, inclusive clothing, and less hierarchical arrangement.

4.3 Genre and Visual Strategies

Uzbek storybooks utilize genre and imagery to subtly reinforce ideological messages:

- **Genre Forms:** Genre retellings of folk-tales continue to prevail, but new texts feature genres that apply modern-day concerns such as school stories, eco-fables, and speculative fiction. These enable the state to merge traditional values with modern ambitions.
- **Allegorical Figures:** Animals often act as substitutes for civic and moral education. Foxes, camels, and birds represent wisdom, hard work, and cooperation and provide child-friendly symbolism for national qualities.
- **Color and Composition:** Colors are semantically charged—green and blue represent nature and renewal, while red emphasizes nationalism and collective forces. Compositionally, earlier books prefer centralized authority figures, whereas later books employ more egalitarian and dialogic compositions.

4.4 Silences and Counter-Narratives

Despite their inclusive aspirations, storybooks also reveal ideological silences:

- **Ethnic Marginalization:** While major ethnic groups are included, minorities such as the Karakalpaks, Uighurs, and smaller Turkic communities are either absent or represented tokenistically. This reflects ongoing challenges in achieving full civic pluralism.
- **Gender Hierarchies:** Although female characters gain prominence post-2018, they still appear less frequently in leadership or heroic roles compared to their male counterparts. Many stories continue to assign girls caregiving or supportive functions.
- **Geographical Bias:** Urban and central regions are overrepresented. Stories set in rural or border areas are rare, suggesting a metropolitan bias in the state's cultural pedagogy.

5. Discussion

The findings substantiate existing theories of nation-building as a narrative project that evolves with political context (Anderson, 1983; Hobsbawm, 1990). Uzbekistan's children's storybooks exemplify how states deploy literary and visual media to embed ideological scripts at a young age. Themes such as unity-in-diversity, civilizational pride, and developmental modernity recur across decades, reflecting the enduring priorities of the state.

Temporal shifts in content mirror political transitions. The nationalist fervor and monolingualism of the early independence period give way to the technocratic developmentalism of the Karimov years, which in turn transitions into a more globally engaged and inclusive nationalism under Mirziyoyev. This suggests a flexible ideological apparatus, responsive to leadership change and global soft power norms.

Visual semiotic shifts—especially the increasing diversity of characters and the integration of ecological imagery—signal a recalibration of civic values in light of global environmental and

social discourses. However, persistent gender asymmetries and ethnic exclusions reveal the limits of inclusivity within state-controlled cultural narratives.

From a policy standpoint, these findings underscore the need for more inclusive, pluralistic, and regionally representative educational materials. The integration of environmental and technological themes is a promising step, but deeper gender equity and ethnic representation are needed to fully reflect Uzbekistan's civic aspirations. Moreover, children's literature should not only reinforce ideal citizenship but also invite critical engagement with multiple identities and histories.

Theoretically, the study reinforces the notion of childhood as a key site of political socialization. Storybooks do not merely reflect state ideology; they perform it—constructing a civic imaginary that is at once aspirational and strategic. This calls for more longitudinal, multimodal studies that capture the evolving interplay between pedagogy, politics, and cultural identity.

6. Conclusion

This research has illustrated that officially authorized children's books in Uzbekistan have played important tools of nation-building between 1992 and 2024. Analyzing 40 texts diachronically, the study established four central thematic strands—unity-in-diversity, heroic cultural heritage, developmentalism, and moral citizenship—that have defined civic identity construction during political changes. The visual and textual tactics used in these volumes demonstrate both continuity and adjustment, with more recent publications including themes of multiculturalism, environmental responsibility, and gender inclusion, although unevenly.

Comparative analysis of different periods discloses how children's literature reflects changing political priorities. Early independence and Karimov-era storybooks emphasized language restoration, national pride, and economic progress within a patronizing format. The Mirziyoyev reform period brought a more universalist narrative mode with a diversified and cosmopolitan Uzbek identity and robust national symbols.

Even as these advances are made, significant omissions persist. The marginalization of minority ethnic groups, entrenched gender stereotypes, and urban focus indicate that the pedagogical vision of the state continues to develop toward complete inclusivity. These omissions indicate structural tensions in the formation of civic identity through educational media at a wider level.

In incorporating thematic coding and visual-semiotic analysis, this research adds a replicable method to the study of the ideological aspects of children's literature in post-colonial and transitional societies. It extends existing knowledge of nation-building beyond curricula through formal schooling and illuminates how early-grade fiction is a subtle but effective vehicle for scripting national belonging.

Future studies would need to examine how young readers pragmatically interpret and internalize such narratives in various social and regional environments. Moreover, as Uzbekistan becomes more digitized in its educational materials, focus must then shift to the ways in which nation-building messages are recontextualized via digital media, e-books, and multimedia narrative. Such research will be critical to understanding the changing landscape of 21st-century civic socialization.

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Appendices

A. Codebook Excerpts

- Example of deductive themes and their definitions:
 - *Unity-in-Diversity*: Representations that emphasize cooperation and harmony among different ethnic groups within Uzbekistan.
 - *Heroic Past*: References to historical figures, events, or cultural heritage that promote national pride.
 - *Developmentalism*: Themes related to modernization, progress, science, and economic growth.
 - *Moral Citizenship*: Depictions of values such as honesty, responsibility, respect, and civic duty.
- Sample inductive codes emerging from pilot reading:
 - *Environmental stewardship*
 - *Multilingualism*
 - *Allegorical animal characters*

B. Year-wise Book List

Year	Title	Author	Publisher	Political Era	Language	Notes
1993	<i>The Brave Alpomish</i>	A. Karimov	Tashkent Press	Early Independence	Uzbek	Folk-tale retelling
2005	<i>Stars Over Samarkand</i>	G. Yuldashev	National Publishing	Late Karimov Era	Uzbek	Emphasis on patriotism
2017	<i>The Green Steppe</i>	N. Tursunova	MoPSE Publishing	Mirziyoyev Era	Uzbek	Environmental themes
2023	<i>Friends of the Nation</i>	S. Mirzayev	State Educational House	Mirziyoyev Era	Russian	Multicultural representation

C. Sample Coding Sheet

Book Title	Page/Section	Code(s) Applied	Notes/Quotes	Coder Initials
<i>The Brave Alpomish</i>	12-15	Heroic Past, Moral Citizenship	"Alpomish fought bravely for his people..."	AB
<i>The Green Steppe</i>	8-10	Developmentalism, Environmental	Illustration of children planting trees	CD
<i>Friends of the Nation</i>	22-25	Unity-in-Diversity, Multilingualism	Story includes Uzbek and Russian dialogue	EF