

The Art of Chingiz Aitmatov's Stories

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Chingiz Aitmatov and Manaschi Saiakbai Karalaev

Introduction

In Europe and Russia, communism was comprehensible to the enlightened proletariat populations. Communism in Central Asia, however, faced a number of problems. To begin with, the majority of the population having traditionally obeyed *amirs*, *khans*, and *bais*, they lacked experience with the concepts of sharing land, water, means of production, and power.¹ Indeed, harnessing the means of production for the good of all meant very little to them. Being predominantly Muslim, the Central Asians believed in Allah, the *Qur'an*, and the teachings of Prophet Muhammad. This meant that, generally, they obeyed the *Shari'a* law, followed the customary tribal laws (*adat*), and were submissive to the dictates of Fate. Furthermore, they held steadfast to the Muslim code of honor, which required that all social, political, and economic affairs be settled within the community by Muslim jurists. Marriage with outsiders was not permitted. Neither were playing of musical instruments, depiction of the human form, and drinking of alcoholic beverages² (cf., Slobin, 1976).

Yet, these factors had direct bearing on the future of socialism and, eventually, on communism as its ideologies endeavored to change the face of Central Asia. From 1922 to about 1929, early Communist strategists in

¹ Amir is a political title used by rulers and governors; khan is a title of nobility; bai is an influential land owner. The use of these titles was forbidden by Soviet law.

² Opinions regarding the stance of the Qur'an, the Prophet, and the ahadith (words and deeds of the Prophet) with respect to music, painting, and the consumption of alcoholic drinks vary depending on circumstances, types, and amount, respectively. Our concern, however, is limited to the existence of the general prohibition [I think this is what you mean]. See Mark Slobin's *Music in the Culture of Afghanistan*, Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 1976. pp. 25-26.

Central Asia, seeking ways to reach the working masses, distinguished the Muslim honor code as the mainstay of the family and of the tribal hierarchy. Undermining the family, they hypothesized, would lead to defections, especially among the youth, girls in particular. This defection to the Soviets, they thought, would ultimately lead to the dissolution of the family unit. The dissolution of the family unit would increase the importance of the communist organizations in people's lives.

The strategy of targeting segments of society for change was implemented in the late 1920s, when the *khujum* program emphasized education, especially for girls, and when ABC schools, local courts of law, and art and craft centers emerged in considerable numbers.³ In fact, the arts became one of the major avenues of development for reshaping Central Asia into a vibrant socialist society, especially when their promoters took the Central Asians' taste for lyrics played on the *Komuz*,⁴ into consideration gave Soviet promoters the "in" they sought for capturing the attention of the populace. In time, along with collectivization, dekulakization,⁵ and rapid industrialization, this special type of education absorbed large numbers of women into the Soviet system. In his *Jamila*, for instance, Aitmatov employs the tradition of the *akin* musician, embodied in the figure of Daniyar, to illustrate the process of gradual urbanization of the population.⁶ As if destined, Jamila loses interest in her rustic roots, even in her husband, and follows Daniyar, a romantic figure, into an uncertain future.

American readers should be introduced to a number of talented, non-Russian Soviet writers because of these writers' wide-reaching political and artistic influence on the region. Foremost among them are Sadriiddin Aini, Mukhtar Auevov, and Chingiz Aitmatov. To understand any of these writers, we must become familiar not only with the milieu from which they emerge but with the spectrum of themes placed at their disposal by the culture, and with the survival mechanisms embedded in cultural mores themselves. To understand Aitmatov's themes, therefore, it is necessary to understand the Kyrgyz social milieu from which he emerges, the cultural ties that have honed the Kyrgyz culture over centuries, and the concerns that fuel the perpetuation

³ For a discussion of *Khujum* (also spelled *khudzhum*), see Massell, pp. 226-246.

⁴ *Komuz*, a three-stringed, fretted lute, is a favorite instrument among the Kyrgyz.

⁵ Dekulakization was the process by which the properties of the Kulaks—mostly landlords and mullahs—were confiscated and given to the State. Most of the individuals were sent to Siberia for a term of 7 years and more. Many did not return.

⁶ *Akin* musicians are expected to display eclecticism in repertoire, instrumental virtuosity, and a good memory. The focus here is on the role that their art played in raising the consciousness of the peoples of Soviet Central Asia, especially among the Kazakh and the Kyrgyz.

and evolution of that culture when placed under the strain of new, even alien, trends.

A major theme in Aitmatov's stories concerns the inequality that exists among the male and female members of the traditional Central Asian society. Aitmatov's background, as is evident from his biography,⁷ particularly qualifies him to comment on this situation. The subthemes that emerge in story after story include oppression of women by men, *bais* (landlords), and *mullahs*; lack of access to education, especially in rural areas and particularly for girls; treatment of women as commodities; and polygamy. Aitmatov confronts these issues head on and creates a number of memorable women characters like Jamila in *Jamila*, Jaidar in *Goodbye, Gyulsary!*, and Altynai, in *Duishen*. These strong-willed women break with tradition and set forth new trends for their fellow sufferers. Aitmatov evinces similar sentiments towards orphans, especially fatherless boys.⁸

Another theme that concerns Aitmatov is the conflict between good and evil, especially his conviction that good nearly always triumphs over evil. Intertwined with ideology and politics, this theme is often interpreted as the inevitable triumph of socialism over capitalism. To the development of this theme, Aitmatov brings not only his experiences as the Vice-Chairman of the Committee on Solidarity, Delegate (1981) of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union, and member of the Writers Union of the USSR, but other, more global and perennial concerns like the tragedy of the world wars, the growing battles for national identity, and the nuclear threat, and a hopeful awareness of the many peace movements. Ascribing the rapid growth of technology to the west's preoccupation with reason, Aitmatov views technology as a facilitator of human beings' exploitation of other humans and of natural resources. Although exploitation begins with the misdeeds of a few leaders at the top, according to Aitmatov, it ultimately filters down and corrupts the masses.⁹

Over the past three decades, Aitmatov has dealt with the full spectrum of the interactions of Soviet culture with the indigenous cultures of Central Asia. We can trace the development of this trend from an excessive praise of the Soviet way (e.g., in *Jamila*, 1973) to an utter condemnation of the same e.g., in *I dol'she Veka Dlitsia Den'* (*The Day Lasts More Than A Century*, 1986). On the one side of this spectrum is the uneducated view of socialism and its attraction for the working classes (cf., *Jamila*, for instance), while on the other

⁷ See Aitmatov's Biography--Central Asia, Kyrgyzstan, or Special Features/Biographies, on this site.

⁸ Cf., the hero of *The White Steamship*, for instance.

⁹ The best illustration for this statement appears in the lives of three protagonists in *Farewell, Gyulsary!*

side lies the views of those with a better grasp of reality. As a realist writer true to his profession, Aitmatov could hardly ignore the discrepancy and, had he ignored it, he could hardly remain a viable commentator. Being open to change, he says, is the best indicator of a writer's loyalty to his craft.¹⁰ This openness can, of course, be easily confused with vacillation. But Aitmatov's record of the past two decades supports the conclusion that he has been steady, informed, and loyal to his craft. Furthermore, he believes in Gorky's assessment of the contribution of the writer. Gorky specifies that the writer, rather than listening to the echo of his own soul, must himself or herself become an echo of the soul of society.

In order to echo the spirit of the culture, a writer must have an intimate understanding of it. In addition to detailed knowledge, Aitmatov's writing reflects a deep respect for tribal traditions. These traditions include those of the *akin* musicians, *Buzkashi*, and the tradition of the hunters of Kyrgyzstan. These traditions play pivotal roles in communicating Aitmatov's message of love and dedication, on the one hand, and loss of dignity and humanity, on the other. Traditions also play crucial roles in *Belyi Parokhod* (The White Steamship) and *I Dol'she Veka dlitsia Den'*, mentioned above.

Aitmatov believes that mankind's socio-political, economic, and ideological, even environmental, problems would disappear if education could be advanced beyond rote memorization, and if a true communal concern, a true love, could meld humans and nature. Aitmatov's dialectics of love view man for what he is rather than for what he seems to be. *Jamila's* memorable character, Daniyar, epitomizes Aitmatov's ideal of the unassuming yet deliberate and effectual man. In *Farewell, Gyulsary!*, Tanabai Bakasov reveals the darker side of the spectrum, wherein an individual is systematically deprived of reaching his potential in life.

Finally, Aitmatov uses an array of devices to convey his ideas: historical accounts (especially World War II reminiscences), Kyrgyz legends and folklore, space-age technology, art, and fantasy. He also uses techniques like allegory and symbolism to comment on the human condition. Since these devices and techniques are story specific--in *Belyi Parokhod*, for instance, he employs legend and allegory, while in *I Dol'she Veka dlitsia Den'* he combines symbolism with space-age technology and folklore

¹⁰ Aitmatov, 1987, p. 172

See also:

Articles by Iraj Bashiri:

[Aitmatov's Life](#)

[Aitmatov's Jamila: An Analysis](#)

[Aitmatov's Farewell, Gyulsary!: A Structural Analysis](#)

Stories by Chingiz Aitmatov:

[Jamila](#)

[Farewell, Gyulsary!](#)

[To Have and to Lose](#)

[Piebald Dog Running Along the Shore](#)

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