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The Evolving Integration of Environmental, Traditional, and Moral Themes in Three Works by Chingiz Aitmatov

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Abstract. This article looks at ecological themes in three novels by the Soviet Kyrgyz writer Chingiz Aitmatov. The three works are *The White Steamship* (1970), *The Day Lasts More than a Hundred Years* (1980), and *The Executioner's Block* or *Plakha* (1987). Within and between the three works there is a complex and changing interplay between environmental, moral, and cultural concerns relating primarily to Central Asian society but also indirectly to the Soviet Union. Aitmatov's ability to critique the Soviet system and its literary theory evolved over time, from the stagnation of Brezhnev's stabilisation to the optimism of Gorbachev's *perestroika*. Within the political constraints of the day and as a minority author within a Russian-dominated literary edifice, Aitmatov argued for greater concern for the environment as well as the need to respect the worldviews of indigenous peoples. The social imaginaries he constructed initially emphasised the role of Central Asian cultures as guardians of sacred lands and ecosystems, but these later gave way to a moral and cultural ecological imperative applicable to all people in the Soviet Union. In *The White Steamship*, Aitmatov draws on traditional Kyrgyz myths to stress the importance of the forest and the animals within it, reminding his readers of the danger of losing their roots in the face of Soviet communism. His focus in *The Day Lasts More than a Hundred Years* is the seizing of traditional sacred Kazakh lands and marginalisation of Kazakh cultural values by the Soviets. Finally, in *Plakha*, sensitive and intelligent wolves are juxtaposed with destructive human beings, who hunt vast numbers of animals to fulfil Soviet production quotas. The inclusion of a Russian hero confirms the broadened scope of Aitmatov's notion of ecologically and morally responsible traditions. For Aitmatov, respect for the environment, the rights of minorities, and pride in non-Russian cultures and traditions formed an integrated whole which critiqued communist materialism and its modernist emphasis on human agency and power. From *The White Steamship to Plakha* Aitmatov's interest shifts from a narrow ethnic scope to a broader interrogation of

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Soviet civilisation. While Aitmatov's works were focused on the Soviet state's attitude to the natural world and its non-Russian peoples, his combination of ethnic moralities and ecological concern remains relevant for today.

Keywords: Aitmatov, ecocriticism, social imaginary, Central Asia, tradition, environment, postcolonialism.

Introduction

The works of Chingiz Aitmatov are a window into the lives of Central Asian peoples in the Soviet Union over a period of around half a century. As a non-Russian author and enthusiast for his own Kyrgyz culture, Aitmatov played a unique role in the literary world of the USSR. He was also a social commentator and his novels provide insights into a changing Central Asia in the Brezhnev and Gorbachev periods. Aitmatov wrote on sensitive issues of ethnic identity within a Soviet system whose dominant language and culture were Russian. He also paid particular attention to the natural world and its vulnerability to Soviet modernisation and materialism.

In three of his most famous works, *The White Steamship* (1972), *The Day Lasts More than a Hundred Years* (1983), and *The Place of the Skull* (1989) (also known as *Plakha* or *The Executioner's Block*), there exists a quadrilateral relationship between moral goodness, religious tradition in a broad sense, a positive attitude to nature, and affirmation of one's ethnic culture. The scope of the four elements increases from *The White Steamship* to *Plakha*, with the developing freedom for Soviet authors as Brezhnev's stagnation gave way to Gorbachev's *glasnost'* and Aitmatov's growing appreciation of cultural diversity and the growing environmental crisis. In *The White Steamship*, Aitmatov's focus is the culture and activities of a small group of people in a corner of the Kyrgyz republic, yet *Plakha* is concerned with a larger area of Soviet Central Asia and the moral and ecological attitudes of Soviet citizens in general, irrespective of ethnicity and religious tradition.

The study employs ideas from ecocriticism, supplementing them with the social imaginary and postcolonial theory. After introducing Aitmatov and locating him within the Soviet literary tradition, the article traces the expanding cultural and spatial scope of the complex elements mentioned above. Within this governing theme, the paper looks at the three works in turn, before bringing the conclusions together in an integrative commentary.

Chingiz Aitmatov

The celebrated Kyrgyz author Chingiz Aitmatov was born in 1928 in Kyrgyzstan. He grew up in a large family and was familiar with his own ethnic legends and traditions, yet his parents also taught him Russian language and literature as an investment for the future. When he was only nine years old his father, a loyal communist, was arrested and shot during a Stalinist purge of Central Asians suspected of politically deviant tendencies (Djagolov 2009).

Before becoming an author, Aitmatov trained for a career in agriculture and then became a journalist for Pravda. He was steeped in the culture and daily life of the Kyrgyz people, and familiar with the successes and failings of the Soviet system. He eventually became an adviser to Gorbachev and ambassador to Belgium. His dual Kyrgyz and Soviet persona, a 'hybrid' (Djagalov 2009, 29), was popular in a country whose leadership seemed very Russian after Stalin (Haber 2003, 109). Igmen (2012, 3) describes the strong influence of Russian language and administrators in the Kyrgyz SSR and Djagalov (2009, 29) argues that there was a dichotomy between Moscow as the 'metropole' and non-Russian regions in the East.

Aitmatov's relationship with the Soviet centre was complex and has been the subject of much debate. For Haber, he was a 'faithful and highly visible member of the Soviet establishment' (2003, 109). Some Kyrgyz saw him as betraying his people and culture for his own ends, while Soviet literary theorists accused him of infidelity to socialist realism (Haber 2003). Other Central Asians praised him for promoting their culture and giving the region a voice in a Soviet Union which to minority peoples seemed very Russian; Kyrgyz intellectuals felt their heritage affirmed in an environment which characterised progress as Russian. Haber (2003) notes the artful weaving of ethnic themes and Soviet ideas in Aitmatov's work, allowing him to skirt controversy while remaining politically orthodox. Olcott (1989) is less charitable, claiming that at a time when the USSR presented itself as a harmonious melting pot of cultures, Aitmatov's position on ethnicity in *The Day Lasts Longer than a Hundred Years* (1980) would have caused an ethnic Russian to be silenced or even jailed.

Aitmatov within Soviet Literary Theory

Aitmatov functioned within the Soviet system's political constraints and needs to be located within the flow of Soviet literary theory. After the Second World War, socialist realism was criticised because authors described the world around them but did not project the idealised soci-

ety required by political propagandists (Shneidman 1979). Although no one dared question the theory openly, a diversity of approaches to literature began to develop (Haber 2003), including a gradual division between the countryside and urban life (Shneidman 1979). It was easier to portray rural life positively, compared with the complexity and alienation of city life. In addition, under Brezhnev, socialist realism tended to elevate Russian culture, at a time when fault lines between a majority Russian population who saw the Soviet Union as a mono-ethnic state and ethnic minorities who feared russification caused the Party to promote the idea of a *Soviet* people (Haber 2003).

The village prose movement was a response to the multiple crises of war, economic difficulty, and Stalinism. It appealed to the alienated population of the Soviet cities by combining nostalgia and traditional (Russian) values and lifestyles in its portrayals of life in the countryside (Haber 2003). The genre was popular in the 60s and early 70s (Shneidman 1979), and although some critics hoped for stronger engagement with social issues, this Russian cultural framework was used to criticise environmental problems caused by Soviet policies, such as the destruction of villages by dams (Haber 2003, 29). Where socialist realism sought to show the wonders of the Soviet system, village prose revealed the reality of a countryside mismanaged by it (Haber 2003).

In a political space which advocated a supra-ethnic Soviet rather than Russian civilisation, the affirmation of traditional (Russian) heritage made it possible for Aitmatov to adapt Russian village prose for his own purposes (Goncharov 2024). Nostalgia and concern for the environment were as powerful among Central Asians as among Russians, and spoke powerfully to marginalised minorities. Aitmatov infused village prose with magical realism (Sigman 1998), including Central Asian myth, legend, and harmony with the environment. In the Soviet period, large numbers of Russians lived in Central Asia's urban centres while most Central Asians were rural dwellers (Guillot, Gavrilova, & Pudrovska 2011). By emphasising ethnic culture, Aitmatov subtly amended the local opposition of Russian village prose to an ethnic one of Central Asian versus Russian.

Three Works from Central Asia

The *povest'* or novella, *The White Steamship* (hereafter *Steamship*) was published in Russian in 1970, roughly halfway through the Brezhnev era. The main character is a sensitive, lonely Kyrgyz boy who lives with a group of relatives who disdain him. His only positive relationship is with his grandfather, and the boy believes in and derives comfort from Kyrgyz

creation myths about the horned mother deer which the old man shares with him. Towards the end of the story, his extended family, including his grandfather, kill and eat a group of deer which the boy identifies with the mother deer. The shocking event precipitates the boy's mental collapse due to betrayal and sadness. The story is both a warning against the loss of Kyrgyz heritage and values and a call to appreciate nature.

The Day Lasts More Than 100 Years (hereafter *The Day*) appeared in 1980, towards the end of Brezhnev's leadership. After the death of their colleague Kazangap, a group of Kazakhs seeks to bury him in accordance with their Islamic and traditional beliefs but cannot enter their ancestral burial grounds because they have become part of a cosmodrome. The man's own son prefers the Russian culture of the Soviet centre, disdaining his Kazakh heritage and seeing no need for a traditional burial, and a Russian-speaking Kazakh army officer turns the burial party away. The novel is complex, with a number of subplots and only relevant aspects are discussed here.

Finally, *The Place of the Skull* or *Plakha* was completed in 1987, a short time into the Gorbachev period. This complicated novel set in Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan describes the mass culling of antelope for meat in order to fulfil Soviet quotas, the illegal drug trade in the USSR, and the unethical treatment of wolves by people. In this more nuanced work, there are honourable people among both Russians and Central Asians.

In *Steamship*, Aitmatov's maturing style moves away from socialist realism as he blends ethnic myths with 'Soviet' themes (Haber, 2003), causing the novella to be criticised and censored. By contrast, *The Day* was praised as an example of socialist realism *and* an ethnic minority interpretation of (Russian) village prose (Haber 2003, 112). Ukubayeva (2016) comments that *Steamship* appeared during a period of strong censorship of Soviet literature and contrasts that with Gorbachev's openness, noting the broad range of social issues mentioned in *Plakha*.

Relevant Literature on Aitmatov

The corpus of secondary literature on Aitmatov and his works is vast and this review is selective. According to Bakashova and Sukhomlinova, nature is a central character in all of his novels (2019, 407). For Akmataliev (2009), the heart of Aitmatov's philosophy is the notion that there is no humankind without nature and no nature without humankind. In their comments on *Plakha*, Sharyafetdinov, Khairullin, and Tairova (2023, 151) see the relationship as a polarity between a cosmos which is wise and spiritual and a chaos caused by human actions. Sydykbekov

and Ibraev take the more positive view that Aitmatov locates this unity not only in specific cultural contexts, but also in the epic-mythological layer (2021, 99), addressing ecological issues by appealing to spiritual and moral values (2021, 98). Concerning our responsibility to the environment, Ashenova and Velitchenko (2021, 82) comment that in Aitmatov's work 'the bright national identity of the characters of the writer's works is organically projected on a multicultural space, where everyone, regardless of ethnicity, must conform with the rules of world peace'.

While such studies helpfully identify Aitmatov's concerns and his way of addressing them, there is neither consideration of ethnic culture or religion as elements of morality nor treatment of the Soviet values and atheist materialism that clearly appear in his works. There is also no sense of progression from the earlier *Steamship* to the later *Plakha*; Aitmatov's positions and the characters through which he represented them are presented as static.

While Smirnova's commentary on Aitmatov does sketch a general movement from an earlier emphasis on Kyrgyz language and cultural motifs to the 'formation of a transcultural polylogue space' (2024, 123) and describes his anxiety about the future of human civilisation, she does not link the changing scope of Aitmatov's concerns about cultural loss with increasingly serious environmental degradation. In addition, there is no explicit acknowledgement of Aitmatov's focus on the relationship between morality and spirituality within an atheistic political space.

In the absence of any single four-way analysis of ecological, cultural, moral, and religious or faith themes in Aitmatov, I propose ecocriticism as a framework to examine the three works.

Ecocriticism as a Principal Lens

Glotfelty tells us that 'ecocriticism is the study of the relationship between literature and the physical environment' (1996, xviii), within which the portrayal of nature, the role of 'physical setting', and other factors such as race (1996, xix) may be significant. Ecocriticism acknowledges the fundamental interconnectedness between the natural world and human cultures, its inherent interdisciplinarity lending itself to this study of Aitmatov's works. In Aitmatov's work, nature is 'never just a background or a stage where the action takes place; it always has a much more important ethical, psychological and mythical role' (Rumpler and Kleimenova 1986, quoted in Roksandic 2002, 93). Brown goes further, asserting that understanding Aitmatov means grasping his 'observant affection for the landscape of Central Asia and its folk tradition' (1993, 53). Although each novel contains characters who respect nature and see

themselves as part of it, there also is a recurring theme of 'environmental plundering' (Haber 2003, 113).

According to Glotfelty (1996), ecocriticism can use various critical theories, such as psychoanalysis and feminism; the content and aims of Aitmatov's works and the cultural and political context of Soviet Central Asia suggest the social imaginary and postcolonial theory as supplemental theories. Rueckert's (1978) initial 'experiment in ecocriticism' sought to understand the role of literature 'in the biosphere' (Glotfelty 1996, xxxviii), yet his contemporary Annette Kolodny was already thinking more broadly. Her study of colonial era American literature produced the 'land-as-woman' metaphor, encapsulating the devaluing of the cultures and lands of ethnic 'others' and the consequent conquest and exploitation (1975, n.p.). This anticipates Loomba's (1998, 152) concept of the feminisation of subordinate cultures as well as physical territory under colonialism. In the post-Soviet context, the term 'colonised' can be controversial. While some Central Asian scholars condemn the Russian and Soviet presence in their region as colonialism, some western commentators would prefer a word which does not evoke western imperialists in Africa and Asia (Ferrari, personal communication, 16 Dec 2023). Indeed, the Kyrgyz scholar Igmen argues that Kyrgyz intellectuals strongly opposed the idea that the 'Soviet state represented a colonial power' (2012, 6).

In his seminal paper on colonialism in the Russian and Soviet context, Moore claims that Central Asia and other parts of the post-Soviet space are 'extraordinarily postcolonial' (2001, 114), even though postcolonial studies are rarely applied to the region. He views Moscow's activities in Central Asia as 'brutal Russian domination' (2001, 115), arguing that imperial Russian and Soviet policies were coherent with settler and neighbour colonisation. The first refers to the movement of significant numbers of people from a powerful, colonising nation into a sparsely populated land; consider the westward expansions of the United States and Australia. In neighbour colonisation a powerful country encroaches upon and expands into the territory of a weaker country with which it shares a border. Moore's overall conclusion is that 'Russia and then the Soviet Union exercised powerful colonial control over much of the earth for from fifty to two hundred years' (2001, 123). For Yusupova, 'the violent history of Russian/Soviet colonialism' (2023, 683) and its attitudes of superiority and exploitation echo the practices and policies of the north Atlantic imperial powers. A generation after Rueckert and Kolodny, Huggan and Tiffin's monograph on the coming together of postcolonialism and ecocriticism describes the powerful combination of 'environmental imperialism' and marginalisation of 'indigenous cultures, philosophies and worldviews' (2010, 7) among settler colonists.

The term *social imaginary* is defined simply by Canadian philosopher Charles Taylor: 'the ways we are able to think or imagine the whole of society (2007, 156). Social imaginaries go beyond the primarily intellectual and include the 'deeper normative notions and images' (Taylor 2007, 171) and shared cultural heritage (Taylor 2004, 23) which connect people in a given society. Steger agrees that social imaginaries explain how people, 'members of a community – fit together' (2009, p.6) and claims that they are normative in that they represent and convey certain expectations. Taylor (2007, 172) adds that they contain a shared sense of how things should be. Social practices not only help form the social imaginary but are also influenced by it; in Taylor and Steger, ideas and practices of the past continue to shape present social imaginaries (James 2017, 41). Steger (2009) explores the tension between past and present and concludes that social imaginaries are far from permanent and can change quickly. In addition, Steger's (2009) discussion of what he calls the *global imaginary* argues that modern imaginaries work in diverse and extended cultural spaces and at different social levels, uniting on the one hand the rich elites who drive and benefit from globalisation and on the other impoverished migrants.

The study looks at each book in turn through an ecocritical lens informed by the idea of the social imaginary and postcolonial theory. In terms of environment and elements in the social imaginary the scope of the three works expands as we move from *Steamship* to *Plakha*. Contemporary ecocriticism's ideas of 'scale' and 'complex geographical imaginaries' (LeMenager, Shewry & Hiltner 2011, p.1) allow us to move beyond the spatial or natural environment and consider politics, economics, and even time and memory, as factors in ecocritical analysis (LeMenager, Shewry, & Hiltner 2011, p.10).

In this study, *environment* refers to three separate, interrelated concepts. The first is the spatial settings for sequences of a novel. Aitmatov chooses small, rural settlements, with some reference to urban centres. *Environment* can also indicate physical or natural surroundings, and each novel describes the negative effects of human beings on their immediate ecosystems. The final referent is political and cultural location, the three works' shared focus on Soviet Central Asia highlighting the self-understanding of its people as neo-colonised vis-à-vis the dominant Soviet mainstream. In each work Aitmatov creates a similar social imaginary, a combination of moral character, cultural belonging, some kind of faith tradition, and attitude to nature. These overlapping themes constitute a 'good person' and also allow the construction of characters who fall short in some way. There is a clear evolution of the social imaginary across the works. These twin themes are now applied to the three works, beginning with *Steamship*.

Steamship

The novella is set in a small forest station (a 'cordon', *Steamship*, 7) and surrounding woodland in Kyrgyzstan's San-Tash valley. The tragic hero divides his time between the idyllic forest and countryside and an unloving extended family homestead. He has a powerful imagination and gives nicknames to animals, plants, and even rocks.

The men work at the station and in the forest, while the women are occupied primarily in the home. The forest is both environment and livelihood, and local Kyrgyz people run the station with no immediate Russian colonising or dominating presence. Caspian red deer or *marals* are important both as a source of meat and as part of the ancestral beliefs of traditionally minded Kyrgyz.

The boys' grandfather, Momun, tells him the Kyrgyz creation story and its traditional values (Shneidman 1979). In his loneliness, the boy's attachment to the legend brings him solace and he appeals to the horned mother deer for guidance and protection. He is captivated by the traditional sense of harmony between people and nature (Shneidman 1979, 37), which for Sigman (1998) is the foundation of the whole story.

The men at the forest station chop down and sell trees illegally. At the end of the story they kill and eat many *marals* in an orgy of hunting, killing, and butchering. The boy and his grandfather are the only ones with a positive and integrated view of nature. By contrast, the evil Orozkul, whose work is to maintain the forest as a source of sustainable timber, sees the natural world purely in terms of resources (Muratov 2018, 30); rather than protecting nature, he and his friends destroy it (Shneidman 1979). The scale of environmental damage in *Steamship* is small, yet from a tale about a few people in a remote forest location Aitmatov links ecology and culture strongly. For Roksandic (2002, 93), Aitmatov's use of the horned deer myth – and Orozkul's dismissal of it – is an appeal for peaceful coexistence between people and nature and a warning that hurting nature means hurting ourselves.

While Aitmatov spends a whole chapter recounting the Kyrgyz origin myth and their journey from their ancestral home in Siberia, there is nothing in *Steamship* about their Islamic heritage. Commenting on this, Roksandic believes that Aitmatov's use of animistic tradition reflects his view that humanity is part of nature while his apparent indifference to Islam suggests an antipathy to 'ideological essentialism with totalitarian pretensions of possessing the final truth' (2002, 99).

The characters in the novella are almost all Kyrgyz and there are no Russians. Within this narrow ethnic frame, two characters represent different attitudes to their culture. The grandfather, Momun, is steeped in

tradition, decent but weak. He is a non-Russian village prose hero (Haber 2003). The boy and his grandfather stand in contrast with the selfish people at the forest station, but particularly Momun's son-in-law Orozkul, who is violent and dismissive of his own culture, a 'product of the October revolution…one whom the Soviet system has failed with regard to his moral development (Shneidman 1979, 32). Orozkul, whose name can be translated 'slave of the Russians', is head of the forest station but dreams of a Russian-like life in the city. He envies those whose children 'speak only Russian at home, instead of stuffing their heads with village lingo' (*Steamship*, 77). This deeply unhappy and angry man beats his wife and treats Momun poorly; he represents the failure of a system with brutality rather than progress at its heart (Ozdek 2008, 101) and the danger of losing one's ethnic identity. When the boy comes across a young Kazakh lorry driver who does not know the generations of his ancestors, he warns him that such ignorance causes moral corruption. The response is that the nation is 'marching to Communism [and] flying in space' (*Steamship*, 113).

It is unclear whether the boy's relationship with the horned mother deer is real, his imagination, or the result of fever. The boy sees 'the old man…lying in the dust near Horned Deer-Mother's severed horns' (*Steamship* , 163) after the residents of the cordon kill and eat some deer, which triggers an emotional collapse from which he never recovers. The mass killing of the deer is a violation of traditional Kyrgyz values about humanity's place in nature. Here, Sigman (1998) observes that Orozkul personifies the evil which comes from devaluing life; this is a veiled critique of Soviet materialism rather than Russian culture. Shneidman (1979, 38) sees in *Steamship* negative portrayal of the entry of modern civilisation into a remote Kyrgyz region, However, in his article on 'ethno-pedagogy' in *Steamship,* Muratov (2018) describes the importance that Aitmatov attaches to the Kyrgyz tradition, including its 'moral-ecological norms', while only obliquely mentioning globalisation and never once Russian or Soviet culture. Aitmatov's social imaginary contains a postcolonial warning not about becoming more Russian, but less Kyrgyz.

The Day

The principal location of the second novel is the Boranly-Burannyi railway junction in the vast Sarozek steppe region of the Kazakh SSR. The main protagonists of the story are two families and various others who live and work at the junction, which is a larger physical location than the cordon in *Steamship*. The junction is connected to the rest of Kazakhstan and the USSR by trains, a classic symbol of Soviet progress and integra-

tion (Maltseva 2022). Away from the railway, the people see the steppe as their home and spend time in it, some having moved there from the Aral Sea, due to ecological damage caused by Soviet policies (*The Day,* 49). They understand and respect the harsh climate of the steppe.

Unlike *Steamship*, *The Day* makes use of other, secondary locations. The central character, Yedigei, seeks to bury his deceased friend Kazangap at a traditional Kazakh cemetery. The environment includes the steppe (an undefined *space*) and the burial ground (a delineated *place* with a specific function); for the distinction between *space* and *place* see Tuan (1977). Both spatial entities represent Kazakh culture and tradition. The burial party finds that it is denied access to the cemetery, as it has become part of a Soviet cosmodrome and thus 'russified' (Caffee 2013, 197). The repurposed *place* symbolises the unilateral imposition of Soviet control over Kazakh people and their land (Shneidman 1989, 197) and a contestation of identity and territory more intense than anything in *Steamship*. If we understand the cosmodrome to be Baikonur, then an area of 6800 square kilometres was carved out of the Kazakh steppe which caused Yedigei to wonder, *Perhaps it [the fence] ran for ever!* (*The Day,* 300).

Possibly because the cosmodrome was a sensitive part of the Soviet military-industrial complex, it is not named and there is no discussion of the environmental damage caused by rocket launches. However, at the beginning of the novel, a fox is terrified by the noise, size, and speed of a passing train (*The Day,* 9-11) and later Yedigei is similarly alarmed by the launch of a Soviet space rocket from the cosmodrome (*The Day,* 25-26). Both suffer the ecological effects of technology imposed from outside.

Between *Steamship* and *The Day* the scale of environmental exploitation increases. Rather than a small group of individuals acting almost in defiance of Soviet forestry and wildlife policies, the principal agent of ecological damage is that self-same state. As Nemutlu (2018, 252) puts it in his commentary on Aitmatov: nature has become the object of totalitarian desires. Loomba (1998) would view this as the feminisation of a colonised people and their land.

As before, Aitmatov creates a social imaginary through his characters. In *The Day*, Aitmatov uses a larger group of people than in *Steamship* to characterise the tension between local Central Asian and Soviet-Russian cultures and worldviews, although he remains within the genre of village prose (Goncharov 2024, 121). The protagonists are mostly Kazakh, although a couple of Russians symbolise the power of Moscow, the metropole. Yedigei, the leader at the railway junction, is an old man who respects traditional Kazakh Islam and values. Unlike Momun in *Steamship*, he is influential and appreciated by his family and colleagues. When the 'lonely old man' (*The Day,* 13) Kazangap dies, Yedigei puts together

a funeral party, but is the only one who can perform the correct Islamic burial rituals 'after [...] sixty years of Soviet rule' (*The Day*, 21).

The only person not supportive of a traditional burial is Sabitzhan; the son of the dead man is a strong believer in the Soviet system and his faith in Moscow's technology and progressive mind-set make him antagonistic towards his own heritage. When talking with Yedigei, he proclaims that (traditional) gods were the invention of people and that the real 'gods live right beside us, here, at the cosmodrome, on our Sarozek land' (*The Day,* 45). Sabitzhan is an urbane professional with a deeper understanding of and commitment to the Soviet way than the abusive forest worker Orozkul. While Orozkul only dreams of a 'Russian life', Sabitzhan actually lives in a regional town a day's journey from the junction. The russified urban dweller Sabitzhan represents a tragedy of passivity because men such as Kazangap 'produced successful Soviet children' with no knowledge of or appreciation for their own culture (Haber 2003, 134).

The Russian theme is evident when the burial party are prevented from entering their erstwhile cemetery first by an ethnic Russian soldier. However, while the first denial of ethnic rights occurs at the hands of a Russian representative of the Soviet metropole, the prohibition is confirmed by an ethnic Kazakh lieutenant who insists on speaking Russian to his own people because he is 'on duty' (*The Day,* 328). For Banerjee (2018) this is the use of language to make citizens into outsiders. The Central Asian-Soviet tension in *Steamship* is illustrated by the loss of traditional Kyrgyz values within a very small community and in the absence of Russian cultural influence, but in *The Day* Aitmatov constructs a Russian-Kazakh clash of civilisations on the personal, group, and even official levels.

This asymmetric, neo-colonial relationship is the background to Aitmatov's use of the ancient Central Asian 'mankurt' myth (*The Day,* 124-133). A mankurt is a person who has been physically and mentally tortured to the extent that he or she has forgotten their own roots and identity, becoming a sort of empty shell or zombie, and carrying out their master's instructions. Within Aitmatov social imaginary, the concept is a warning that people who lose their heritage risk 'subjugation and enslavement' (Haber 2003, 135). In *Steamship*, indifference to the horned mother deer myth and the resulting killing of deer show the danger of a self-subalternising neglect of one's own heritage, while in *The Day*, Central Asians who turn away from their own tradition and towards Moscow's Russian-based Soviet culture are considered 'mankurts'. In a state of hatred and pity, Yedigei silently applies the label to Sabitzhan (*The Day,* 348).

There is also a significant development in faith traditions in *The Day*. Although Haber (2003) believes that the heart of the story is the contrast

between Kazakh tradition and the Soviet space programme, and Shneidman (1989, 196) claims that 'Kazakh mythology shapes the worldview' of Yedigei, Aitmatov repeatedly and unapologetically mentions Islam in a book published in the Brezhnev period. The railway junction community wishes to inter Kazangap at a traditional Kazakh cemetery in accordance with Islamic rituals, Yedigei insisting on the correct position for the coffin and appropriate prayers and gestures of supplication before God. The simple Islamic faith of the men stands in marked contrast to the Soviet atheism of Sabitzhan.

In the same way, Yedigei and the community at the junction are presented as decent, moral people, in opposition to Sabitzhan. Yedigei's urge to do 'what is right' sees him serve faithfully at the railway junction, insist on burying Kazangap according to tradition, and deal with first a Russian soldier and then a Kazakh officer at the cosmodrome fence with courtesy. Sabitzhan is weak and contemptuous of his own culture, and in the Central Asian context his most obvious moral failures are lack of respect for his father and indifference about how he is buried. However, the most serious moral questions are associated with the Soviet state's confiscation of Kazakh lands, especially ancestral burial grounds, and their integration into the cosmodrome. If wrongdoing is personal in *Steamship*, it is state-sanctioned in *The Day*. The centrality of morality to Aitmatov's endeavour is proven by Brown's criticism of his 'authorial preaching' as a repudiation of Stalinist values (1993, 55).

The social imaginary of *The Day* thus builds on that of *Steamship*. There is a stronger opposition between Central Asian traditions and Soviet values, morality, and concern for the environment.

Plakha

The third novel involves a much broader environmental scope than the previous two. Most of the narrative is set in Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan, although some sequences are located in Moscow. There are large tracts of mountain, forest, and steppe, as well as hunting grounds for *saigak* antelopes and expanses of *anusha*, a Central Asian relative of marijuana. In this more varied environment, significant numbers of Russians rub shoulders with Central Asians and there is a mixture of herders, scientists, hunters, and drug runners. The protagonists in this large space devastate antelope populations, facilitate trade in drugs, and cause wolves to take revenge for humanity's cruelty.

The killing of antelope in *Plakha* connects back to *Steamship*, yet whereas in the earlier story a relatively small number of deer are killed by

hunters for personal pleasure and consumption, the opening pages of the third novel contain terrifying imagery of helicopters swooping over forest valleys, their passengers shooting hundreds of animals with machine guns (*Plakha*, 3). Again, personal agency, however distasteful, has been replaced by state-sanctioned violence in order to meet quotas established by central planners. There is also a slow but steady process of neo-colonial domestication of the (feminised) virgin lands by 'ordinary men doing ordinary things' (*Plakha*, 13). As in *The Day*, state intervention affects vast areas of territory and those who live near them.

The social imaginary of Plakha is quite distinct from those of the two earlier works. The primary geographical setting and cultural locus remain Central Asia, but among the characters we find many more Russians. Although Central Asians who parrot Soviet ideas remain, the binary opposition between Central Asians and Russians seems to have disappeared. Although in *Steamship* Momun influences his own immediate family and in *The Day* Yedigei impacts a small settlement and its workers, the symbolism of the Russian Avdii as the principal moral figure in *Plakha* extends the location of moral goodness beyond Central Asians. Aitmatov affirms that righteousness can be found anywhere among the Soviet people. Sharshenalieva and Kalieva agree, seeing 'good people' across humanity in the novel (2023, 694).

The failed seminarian goes to Central Asia as an undercover investigator to research the drug trade which links the region with Moscow and Leningrad. He takes a stand against this and the mass killing of antelope by the Soviet state. A secondary character, who condemns the stealing of wolf cubs, is the Kyrgyz man Boston. The two men, one Russian and one Kyrgyz, are upright people whose opposition to the exploitation of nature costs them their lives. Their behaviour and fate fit with Aitmatov's assertion that a person's level of humanity can be assessed by how he or she relates to nature (Shneidman 1979) and Sharshenalieva and Kalieva's analysis that the central issue in *Plakha* is humanity's alienation from nature (2023, 694).

The range of religious tradition increases as we move from *The Day* to *Plakha*. For a book written in the Soviet Union, albeit under Gorbachev, *Plakha* is rich in non-secular, traditional imagery. One important subplot concerns the interaction of people and wolves, the latter functioning almost as the conscience and wisdom of the natural world. The wolves appeal to the wolf god, Byuri-Ana (*Plakha,* 305) and there are mentions of the pre-Islamic 'blue Tengri' (*Plakha,* 299). Shneidman sees a distinction between the mutuality of the wolves, who only kill to eat, and the individualism of people, who 'indiscriminately destroy nature' (1989, 205). For the first time in Aitmatov, Christianity appears in the form of the theolog-

ical student Avdii and his religious morality in opposing the *anusha* trade and the antelope hunting. *Plakha* includes a fictitious extended discussion between Jesus Christ and Pontius Pilate which contributes to Aitmatov's 'moral construction of a good person' (Shneidman 1989, 203). Shneidman argues that this non-secular response to social issues reflects Aitmatov's conviction that human ideologies cannot deal with the evil in the human heart; this 'most moralistic of Aitmatov's works' (1989, 207) is a veiled critique of Marxist orthodoxy. Maryniak (1991) differs slightly, seeing Aitmatov's emphasis on the totemic and animistic as a claim that only a group-oriented or collective worldview can respond to society's complex problems. According to Shevchugova (2019, 196), Aitmatov's sense of the sheer scale of human destruction of the natural world led him to search as widely as possible for spiritual (in the broadest sense) answers. In summary, *Plakha* is a 'critique of the lack of spirituality and moral decline of the Soviet system' (Sigman 1998, 4) within which many of Aitmatov's characters are lonely because their society has 'no regard for tradition' (1998, 25).

Integration and commentary

Across the three works, Aitmatov crafts a consistent link between concern for nature and the environment with 'religion', tradition, and moral goodness in the broadest sense. In the first two books, his ecological social imaginary connects environmental awareness, Central Asian tradition and religion, and moral or upright behaviour. With *Plakha*, care for the environment and morality remain strongly linked, but the narrow association with Central Asian culture and beliefs is expanded to include Russians and the Christian religion. The social imaginary retains its environmental focus but moves from cultural affiliation to individual character, Aitmatov implicitly rejecting the atheistic worldview of the Soviet system.

I wish to bring Aitmatov's fourfold integration of culture, concern for nature, non-atheistic belief system, and morality into dialogue with existing scholarship on the author and his work, which never combines the four factors nor acknowledges Aitmatov's journey from advocate for Central Asian culture and tradition to activist for environmental concern in the USSR and beyond, based on a broad non-atheistic or religious awareness. This aspect of Aitmatov's work has attracted most criticism among scholars, Haber complaining that 'overwhelming moral tone' (2003, 125) affects the quality of his work.

Discussing *Steamship*, Shneidman claims that 'the evil in the story is embodied in the actions of the representatives of the Soviet state, while goodness is personified in those who adhere to old patriarchal values'

(1989, 39). While we may agree with the point about old values – although the word 'patriarchal' is problematic – Orozkul is an employee of the Soviet state without being its representative. In fact, Aitmatov constructs him as morally deficient partly because of his anger and frustration at not having children, but primarily because he has abandoned his own heritage. The cause of the problem is thus not the *presence* of Soviet thinking but the *absence* of Kyrgyz values. Sigman's (1998, 33) similar 'critical connection between legend and moral consciousness' does not include concern for the natural world, despite Aitmatov's virtuous inculcation of the horned mother deer creation myth into the boy and his grandfather.

In *The Day*, Aitmatov's thoughts are evolving. The emphasis on belief and morality remain, with the inclusion of Central Asian Islam, and Aitmatov makes his point more by the presence of tradition and virtue than by their absence. Yedigei, the main character, combines Kazakh values and Islamic belief in his attitude to work and the burial of his friend. The mankurt Sabitzhan is morally suspect like his earlier analogue Orozkul, and both are alcoholics, interpreted as a sign of moral decadence in the latter Soviet period (Chapple 1992). In this story, environmental issues are highlighted by the actions not of Central Asian people but of the Soviet state. The atheistic, neo-colonial materialism of Moscow takes Kazakh territory, and its launching of massive rockets affects the steppe and its residents. Central Asians who combine virtue and belief can do nothing for the environment in the face of the power and resources of the Russian-dominated USSR. Compared to *Steamship*, the situation is reversed; people and their environment suffer not due to the *absence* of Kazakh thought but the *presence* of Soviet ideas. Aitmatov's use of the mankurt is a reminder to Central Asians to retain their values in the face of neo-colonial Soviet hegemony.

In *Plakha*, Aitmatov retains his commitment to belief, morality, and regard for nature, but shifts from his earlier exclusively Central Asian emphasis. Aitmatov includes Christianity in *Plakha* not to commend any particular faith to his readers, but as an appeal to 'universal cultural heritage' (Shneidman 1989, 207). Comparing *Steamship* and *Plakha*, Sigman believes that 'native myths and Christianity' belong to the same category of spirituality and can help in the 'reclaiming [of] moral values of the past' (1998, 61). Although morality and spirituality are inextricably linked in Aitmatov (Sigman 1998, 72), Sigman does not make the connection to environmental issues. The tension between Central Asian and Soviet values of the first two novels, which warns against neglecting ethnic heritage, has been transformed into the affirmation of faith in a general sense which can supplement and challenge Soviet atheistic and materialistic ideology.

The development of Aitmatov's social imaginary reflects his appreciation of diverse cultures and belief systems, partly due to his travel abroad

(Kalmakiev, personal communication) and the ability to discuss them in the relative fresh air of Gorbachev's *perestroika*. It is as if his passion for his subaltern people and their environment has evolved into a concern for the moral and spiritual lives of people all over the Soviet Union and beyond. There are resonances with the broad understanding of ecology advocated by the late-Soviet philosopher Dmitrii Likhachev (1979), who saw humanity and nature as deeply integrated and argued that human and cultural ecologies should be preserved. Perkiömäki (2020) reminds us that such a mindset was strong in traditional Russian thought but neglected in the Soviet period.

The ecological emphases of the three novels and the evolving social imaginary within them show a broadening awareness and sympathy for all traditions which Aitmatov felt could encourage moral behaviour among people and towards the environment in a time of unprecedented openness in a Soviet Union in moral, cultural, and ecological crisis.

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