

The Concept of “Manguurt” in Ethnography and its Literary Transformation

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Abstract

This article analyzes the idea of “Manguurt” in Aitmatov’s works, comparing it to historical events in Central Asia and the world, as well as to similar themes in global literature. Aitmatov’s “Manguurt” concept carries a profound philosophical meaning. By giving a new meaning to this term, Aitmatov highlights the inner cries of the Central Asian peoples who were part of the former Soviet Union. Their inherent self-awareness, distinctive language, and traditions were swallowed up by the red empire, turning them into a nation with a bleak future. This resulted in the formation of a generation that put Soviet ideology above the interests of its own people.

Keywords: *Manguurt, Blindness, Freedom, Consciousness Closure, National Apathy, Language, Soul, National Identity, Traditions.*

Introduction

Since the dawn of humanity, competition has been an inherent part of our existence. Throughout history, countless wars and conquests driven by the pursuit of dominance and absolute power serve as evidence of this ongoing struggle.

However, as time progressed and humanity’s intellect matured, reaching tribal, clan, and national levels, alongside reason, cunning, and wickedness began to emerge in various forms. One such example is the practice of treating prisoners of war as property, a new invention of the human mind. From that point onward, exploiting the weak, enslaving their labor, became a recurring theme. Thus, the slave-owning society came into being. A slave is a person stripped of their rights, a citizen of another nation or tribe captured during conflict. Controlling and punishing slaves is a simple task, as they lack a voice and are not accountable to anyone. Yet, despite their captivity, citizens of other nations found ways to unite and resist this cruelty. Fearing such resistance, medieval empires and khanates devised new methods of exploiting their spoils of war, particularly humans, in the form of slavery.

Historical Examples

The use of humans for heavy labor is a recurring theme in the history of civilizations worldwide. In ancient Africa, people resorted to unimaginable cruelty to secure free slaves. For instance, they would capture and poison individuals by mixing the venomous spine of a double-toothed fish with their food. This would cause the victim to convulse and die within 4-5 days. Their bodies were then exhumed, and shamans would perform mysterious rituals on them, resurrecting them through secret remedies and concealing the entire process from the world. However, the resurrected individual, although physically healthy, became a mindless, empty shell, forgetting their identity and origins. (Aitmatov, 1997:124) This method of obtaining

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free labor led to the enslavement of robust and powerful individuals. This crime was not confined to Africa; it was also prevalent among Australian Aboriginals.

The English writer Graham Greene vividly depicts this in his novel "The Comedians" (Aitmatov, 1997:124). Ethnographic evidence suggests that Austrian sorcerers-healers would personally choose their future victims. They would tie their limbs, lay them on their sides, and pierce their hearts with fish bones or thin spears, temporarily killing them. Upon resurrection, the individual would be robbed of their past, becoming a living corpse. While this brutal practice was rampant in Africa and Australia, the khanates that ruled Central Asia in the Middle Ages were not exempt from such wickedness.

Central Asia

The punishment of depriving a person of their intellect was also practiced in ancient times in Central Asia. In the history of the Kazakh people, who inhabited Central Asia from the 15th to the 18th centuries, this form of cruelty was prevalent. Particularly, the Jungar Khanate, initially known as the Oirat, which emerged in 1645 from the partial unification of tribes, and the Turkmen people inhabiting South Basti, who aimed to eradicate the Kazakh people and take control of the vast steppes, frequently employed such brutality.

The Jungars and Turkmen captured strong Kazakh men, often leaders, either by surprise or in fierce battles, to use them as free labor and soldiers. They devised various cruel methods to turn captured Kazakh warriors into tools against their own people. A person subjected to this cruelty would never know their true heritage and would live as a slave to their master for life. The peoples of Central Asia called such a slave a "mankurt." A mankurt, similar to a person enslaved by African tribes through poisoning with fish bones, would lose their identity, heritage, and people, becoming an individual who blindly followed the orders of someone who claimed, "I am your master. If you disobey, I will remove your headgear."

Regarding mankurts, Berdibay (2005: 53) states, "They only have a soul in their chests, and are able to eat and do some odd jobs. They cannot distinguish between close and distant, benefits and harms, and can even shoot their own mother as an enemy. Therefore, the nation called them migula, mangurt, who cannot remember anything."

To turn a captive into a mankurt, they were subjected to significant torture. Not everyone could endure this suffering. To create a mankurt, the Jungars and Turkmen would first shave the captive's head, then bind it with a freshly skinned camel hide, tying it so it couldn't be removed. These individuals were then taken far from their homes, bound hand and foot, and left under the scorching sun without water. The dried camel hide would start to tighten in the sun, and as the captive's hair grew, it would be forced to grow inward because it couldn't penetrate the tough hide. This led to skull and brain damage, causing excruciating pain over several days. Writer Aitmatov describes, "Even an enemy should not be subjected to such torment. The final result of this torture is a complete mental breakdown. On the fifth day, the tormentors would check which captives were still alive. If even one survived, the goal was considered achieved" (2005:115).

Those who survived this ordeal would become living creatures who didn't know their heritage and only followed their master's commands. The Jungars and Turkmen resorted to this because a person deprived of reason posed no threat to their master or thoughts of escape. Such individuals, as long as they were fed, would comply without question. From another perspective, they were safe; there was no fear of rebellion. "Thus, a mankurt was considered a valuable slave, worth as much as ten ordinary slaves. In fact, among the nomads, there was an understanding that if a mankurt-slave died in conflict, it was a significant loss, valued at three times the price of a free man" (Aitmatov Sh. 2005:115). Researcher Ormakhanova suggests, "The 'mankurtism' is a synonym for slavery. However, it implies not a physical but a mental concept. In general, human mind control is inevitable. Any government endeavors to win over public opinion and predispose it to support the pursued policy" (Ormakhanova Y. 2021:225).

Thus, a mankurt is a person who has forgotten their history, culture, language, and national values, fully assimilated into a foreign culture. The concept of mankurtism often refers to losing one's national identity and spiritual values. The notion of mankurtism was widely popularized in Chingiz Aitmatov's novel "The

Day Lasts More Than a Hundred Years." In this novel, mankurtism is described as a method used by conquerors to subjugate their victims spiritually and culturally. A person turned into a mankurt forgets their past, parents, and homeland, obeying only their new masters. The concept of mankurtism remains relevant in modern society. Globalization, cultural assimilation, and the expansion of information spaces can lead many to lose their national identity. This phenomenon is especially noticeable among the youth, who might become fascinated by foreign cultures and forget their own national values. Therefore, exploring its portrayal and depiction in literary works remains significant.

Methodology

The article employs comparative text analysis and discourse analysis methods. The main literary work analyzed in the article is the works of Sh. Aitmatov, as the concept and understanding of "mankurt" were widely propagated through his writings. Additionally, the understandings and applications of mankurtism in the works of A. Kekilbayev and the epic "Manas" are also examined.

A comprehensive discourse analysis was conducted to fully reveal the concept of mankurt. Through discourse analysis, it is possible to identify linguistic usages in literary texts, the ideological stances, meanings, and applications of words within the context of the era's pressing issues. Discourse analysis demonstrates that language is not just a tool for conveying information but also a form of social action. This method helps understand the specific meanings and implications of words in texts. For example, discourse analysis can explore power relations in political dialogues, ideological stances in literary texts, or social norms in everyday conversations.

Throughout human history, the form of slavery involving severe torture has gradually become a major theme in literature. Initially present in ethnography, this phenomenon is found in one of the oldest epics, the renowned "Manas" epic, shared by the Kazakh and Kyrgyz people (Manas, 1962: 200). In the epic, the Kyrgyz people, who were once colonized by the Kara-Khitans, wish to return to their homeland and write a letter to Manas the hero. Manas, unwilling to leave his compatriots in enemy territory, consults with his fellow villagers and brings them back from the Kara-Khitans. However, the Kyrgyz who had lived in a foreign land for many years forget their native customs and cannot accept them. Academic Rakhmanqul Berdibay described this extensively in his work (Elmuradov N. 2016: 2).

Following this, one of the classic Kazakh writers, Abish Kekilbayev, depicts the lives of Turkmen and Kazakhs in his novella "Kui" (1999:10). In the story, Joneyit captures the ancestors of a Kazakh village in retaliation for the death of the Turkmen Kokbory at the hands of the Kazakh warrior Duimkara. The captured Kazakh children, whose heads were shaved, were used as tools for revenge. "The captive children, unable to comprehend what was happening, looked around in confusion. The older men pulled the edges of the leather tightly around their heads, making them unbearably heavy. The warm leather began to constrict their temples" (Kekilbayev A. 1999:15). After the children's heads were wrapped in camel skin and their hands were shackled, they were driven far from the village. Unable to wipe the sweat from their eyes in the scorching sun, the children soon felt the leather tightening around their heads, causing excruciating pain. "They screamed and moaned for a week. Then, as their hair grew, unable to penetrate the camel hide, it grew inward, piercing their scalps. The six captives turned into mankurts, not knowing their homeland or language" (Kekilbayev A. 1999:15). Thus, the Turkmen managed to create slaves who were completely obedient to their masters.

This type of cruelty inflicted on humans is not only depicted in Central Asian literature but also found in English literature. English writer Graham Greene, while writing his novel "The Comedians," extensively researched zombification, which was called the "Crime of the Century," in the African Haitian tribe (Aitmatov Sh. 1997:124). Among the works on this topic, Sh. Aitmatov's novel "The Day Lasts More Than a Hundred Years" (The Stormy Station) holds a special place and has drawn the attention of the world. In this work, Aitmatov introduces mankurtism from a new perspective. This novel played a significant role in awakening the consciousness of many peoples.

Results and Discussion

Similarities and Differences in Works: Main Characteristics in Sh. Aitmatov's Descriptions

Aitmatov develops the term "mankurt" with a renewed significance. In his works, he places a high value on respecting one's homeland, native language, and nation, drawing particular attention to these aspects. To vividly depict the true face of society, Aitmatov bases his stories on ancient legends. He enriches his narratives by comparing the characters from the ancient legend of Nayman-ana, such as Zholaman, with modern individuals who can be fully described as educated and highly positioned (Aitmatov, Sh. 2005: 7). Though the story is set in a small, stormy station with only a few houses and the experiences of the station's employees, the author, with just a handful of characters, manages to captivate the attention of the entire world.

The central theme in Aitmatov's works revolves around maternal love. In his novel, he juxtaposes ancient myths with fantastical elements to expose the actions of people towards nature and their homeland. Aitmatov uses the ancient legend of Nayman-ana, where heroes who defended their homeland are made to forget it through cruel actions, to illustrate the advanced control methods of the Soviet Union over its people. He contrasts this with the erroneous actions of modern descendants towards their homeland, presenting this through a fantastical narrative involving alien beings who preserve their natural surroundings. This serves as a model for us to protect our own nature. The behavior of the unknown extraterrestrial beings, who strive together to solve any issue, is compared to earthly events, provoking thought among readers.

In the novel, the region inhabited by the aliens in Orman-Tosht is described as being threatened by a desert expanding to the size of the Sahara, endangering their existence. The aliens are depicted as using their immense scientific and material resources to combat this desolation. Aitmatov reflects on this by asking, "If such a devastating time were to come, what would be the fate of Earth? Would the inhabitants of Earth, perpetually misunderstanding and quarreling with each other, realize that they have missed out on much in the path of intellectual growth?" (Aitmatov, Sh. 2005: 110). He highlights that this situation arises from the lack of a shared consciousness among the people of Earth and their view of scientific civilization as merely a competition.

In the myth, Zholaman, a hero who loses his sanity after having a camel skin cap affixed to his head, ends up shooting his own mother. This mirrors the way today's youth, indoctrinated by the values of the Soviet regime, turn away from their ancestral traditions. This contrast is clearly depicted in the novel, where the older generation, represented by Edige, who embodies the customs of their ancestors, feels alienated from the younger generation.

In the story, Edige, a veteran railway worker who has served at the station for over 40 years, requests leave to mourn the death of Kanagap, another long-serving railwayman. However, he is met with a dismissive response from Shaymerden, a high-ranking official managing the station from a central office:

"Listen, dear Edige, don't trouble me with your requests. If he's dead, he's dead... I don't have anyone to replace you with. Sitting by his side won't bring the dead back to life" (Aitmatov, 2005:12).

This insensitivity shocks Edige. Additionally, Sabitjan, an educated and modern individual from the central office who comes to take his father on his final journey, displays a similar disregard for tradition. He suggests:

"Why bother wandering to the distant Ana-Beyit? Isn't the barren steppe of Saryozek stretching out right from your doorstep enough? Isn't there enough land here? You can bury him on a small hill by the railway" (Aitmatov, 2005:24).

Edige is horrified by their eagerness to quickly dispose of his father's body. He reflects:

"If they don't respect the dead, how can they value life? Why are they even living? What is the meaning of life for them?" Torn by these questions, Edige cannot accept the actions of the younger generation. He is deeply troubled, recalling how Kazangap had tirelessly transported him by horse to a distant boarding school, striving to provide him with an education. Edige laments the lost achievements of Kazangap's efforts, feeling disillusioned by the new generation, which is disconnected from their traditions and shaped by the dominant ideology of the USSR.

Edige's distress stems from the rising generation's absorption of Soviet ideology, which leaves them ignorant of their ancestral traditions.

In the past, the red empire employed various devious methods to fundamentally separate the peoples within its domain. Just looking at Kazakh history, the shift in alphabet three times in the 20th century alone serves as proof. Aside from historical distortions aimed at isolating the people's consciousness, separating children barely weaned from their parents and raising them in institutions also had its own insidious purpose. This is reflected in the novel where Kazanagap expresses his concerns: "...My son has become distant since going to the boarding school. He is no longer as close to the family, to his parents, he's becoming more cold and aloof." (Aitmatov, 2005: 114). This fear expressed by Kazanagap clearly shows the new reality shaped by the USSR.

It is for this reason that we see a parallel between the tragic fate of Jolaman, a character from legend, and the story of Sabitjan, a man with a keen mind. While Jolaman was forced against his will into this state by the cruel hand of oppression, Sabitjan, without any coercion, voluntarily transforms into a living "manguirt" (a mindless person). While the mythical Jolaman's misfortune stemmed from the actions of the Jungars, the present-day Sabitjan's similar fate is heavily influenced by the past communist society.

Jolaman's capture and torture by the enemy are a reflection of the most insidious methods devised by the enemies of the people to utilize captured prisoners as forced labor. One such method was to strip them of their reason and turn them into "manguirts" – a horrifying tragedy deep within the annals of history. The author's reflection on this issue states: "The worst punishment in the world is to rob a person of their sanity. Reason - it is the only treasure a person keeps with them until their last breath." (Aitmatov, 2005: 115). The policy of the former USSR to mentally enslave the people is portrayed through the mouth of the educated and sophisticated character Sabitjan: "The day will come when people will be controlled by radio! Just as they control those machines, so they will control people. Do you understand - old or young, everyone will be controlled by radio. There are already scientific results. Science has found a way for this, for the greater good."

Through the narrative of the character Sabitjan, this story portrays the actions taken to eradicate the roots of the smaller nations within that society. The story depicts people stripped of their ability to think, to truly see and comprehend. Even the innocent words of children barely weaned, "We are the happiest children in the world because the astronauts are flying from our land into space," are evidence of the indoctrination by the red society.

The author masterfully uses the setting of the Sarozek steppe and psychological parallelism to reveal the true image of the society he lives in through his characters. The author skillfully connects the character of Edigen, a worker at the storm station, with the stark landscape of Sarozek to highlight his simple nature, his loyalty to friendship and trust.

"As soon as the cold settled in, Karanar went mad again. A tempestuous force seized his entire being, he howled, roared, raged, and churned, turning his surroundings into chaos." (Aitmatov, 2005: 214). This description by the author highlights Karanar's resilience, mirroring Edigen's steadfastness in enduring the harsh conditions of Sarozek.

The novel also features Abutalip, a family that arrives at the storm station later. He is passionate about Kazakh literature and history. He takes up his pen and writes down his observations, keeps a journal detailing the history of place names, and generously shares his knowledge with the village elders. However,

these actions are deemed unacceptable by the communist ideology, and he is persecuted and later dies in prison.

To illustrate the fate of individuals like Abutalip in a supposedly civilized society, the author incorporates the ancient legend of Raimala-aga into the novel. Raimala, once a beloved member of the community, was accused of being possessed and hanged from a tree, ultimately succumbing to the cruel actions of the village's influential figures. This echoes the events of 1956 in the Soviet Union, further emphasizing the tragedy.

Regarding the issue of “manguirt” in Aitmatov’s novel, G.M. Grutz in his academic article states: “...Thanks to Chingiz Aitmatov’s novel, this word [manguirt] came into active use in the second half of the 1980s - the time of “perestroika and glasnost” - because it was then that a critical reassessment began of the historical attempt to “breed” a new breed of “Soviet man” (homo sovieticus, “Soviet people”) by destroying national consciousness and memory and instilling the so-called Marxist-Leninist worldview. However, in our time, the use of this word is becoming relevant again. We believe that it should be used in a broad sense - a person without ethnic (national) culture and national historical memory, without religious consciousness and ethics, and even broader - without cultural-civilizational self-identification.” (Grutz, 2015: 143).

Dandiyak Iskakov further emphasizes the renewed relevance of Aitmatov’s concept of “manguirt” in today’s context: “...In the works of the Kyrgyz writer, the manifestation of “manguirt” has become more frequent, and its consequences affect not only him but others, society, and new spiritual “manguirts” of the new era are emerging and developing within society itself.” (Iskakov, 2018: 7).

The novel’s plot tension is heightened by the events surrounding Kazanagap’s journey to Ana-Beyit. Edigen, grappling with the shallow mentality of his son Sabitjan, chooses to fulfill his promise to his friend Kazanagap.

Driven by the desire to honor his friend’s final wish, Edigen arrives at Ana-Beyit, only to find himself barred from entering. The area has been cordoned off, placed under government control. The reason: a decision has been made to build a “Cosmodrome” there. Edigen is denied access, forbidden from bringing Kazanagap’s remains to their resting place. Despite his efforts, he is unable to fulfill his friend’s last wish, a source of immense anguish.

This event also highlights how even those tasked with defending the nation have forgotten their native language and history. Lieutenant Tansykbayev tells Edigen:

“– Comrade, you are a stranger, speak to me in Russian. I am a man on duty.”

This forceful tone reveals his ignorance of his mother tongue, a language that should be ingrained in his soul since birth. Even the words “stranger” used by the lieutenant seem to imply that Edigen, a true son of the land who has dedicated himself to its service, is actually an orphan.

Tansykbayev’s curt dismissal:

“– What is right, what is wrong, I am not authorized to question the higher orders. I was ordered to tell you this, remember it: this graveyard is to be destroyed.” (Aitmatov, 2005: 270)

Plagued by many questions, Edigen turns to Sabitjan, hoping for help:

“– You’re quick with words, you could help me. We can’t destroy Ana-Beyit. It’s history.” (Aitmatov, 2005: 283)

Edigen wants to protect the ancient graveyard of the Naiman tribe, a significant site in Kazakh history. He wants to bequeath this land, a testament to Kazakh heritage, to future generations.

But Sabitjan, who Edigen hoped would understand, replies:

“...– It’s all fairy tales from long, long ago, Edeka, you understand? Global and cosmic issues are being resolved here. It would be inappropriate for us to talk about some graveyard. For them, it’s a trifle.” (Aitmatov, 2005: 284)

His words expose him as a modern-day “manguirt,” indifferent to the fate of his homeland.

Despite his disappointment in Sabitjan’s reaction, Edigen, hoping his son’s intelligence might be of use, makes another plea. However, his son’s response is a devastating blow.

Edigen, his heart heavy, whispers in anguish:

“– You’re a “manguirt”! You’re a true “manguirt”! (Aitmatov, 2005: 285)

Conclusion

In conclusion, Chingiz Aitmatov, through the characters in his novel, sheds light on the continuing relevance of the term “manguirt” in relation to the contemporary individuals who hold the reins of power. The author, through his story, underscores the impending danger posed by children who forget their homeland and language, ultimately threatening the very existence of their nation.

Aitmatov’s message is reflected in the “kozqaman” (blind) concept from the “Manas” epic, as explained by the renowned scholar R. Berdibayev in his research. Academician Berdibayev asserts that “kozqaman” poses a far greater threat than the “manguirt.”

“Kozqaman is an ancient, terrifying word. It is scarier because, compared to the famous “manguirt,” “kozqaman” is a thousand times more dangerous to the nation, to the people.” (Elmuradov, N. 2016: <https://abai.kz/post/47833>)

Similarly, Aitmatov himself concludes:

“The “manguirt” today is a person who rejects their past, which includes not only national memory, but also the stages of people’s struggle for their rights, for democracy.” (Konstantin D. 2018:

https://rus.lb.ua/blog/konstantin_doroshenko/409427_mankurt_segodnya.html)

The actions of Sabitjan and others in the novel, not only confined to the events at the storm station but also reflecting the realities of contemporary Kazakh society, reinforce this observation. The USSR’s actions towards minorities, though aimed at a past generation, remain relevant today.

The fact that Kazakh citizens are still unable to freely express themselves in their native language, that they are still alienated from their centuries-old identity, and that the neighboring language still holds sway, serves as a stark reminder of the issues raised by Aitmatov.

In conclusion, “manguirt” signifies the loss of a person’s national identity and their spiritual values. This phenomenon is particularly relevant in the current era of globalization and cultural assimilation.

Acknowledgment

The article was written within the framework of the project " The concept of “manguirt” in ethnography and its literary transformation." The authors express their gratitude for the support provided by the science support program. The authors also acknowledge the reception of further financial support for research, authorship, and/or publication of this article. This research has been funded by the Abai Kazakh National Pedagogical University (Order №05-04/377 on 28.05.2024).

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