

## Time Travel and the Social Imaginary of the Steppe in *The Day Lasts More than a Hundred Years*

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### Abstract

Kirghiz author Chinghiz Aitmatov's novel, *The Day Lasts More than a Hundred Years*, contains multiple forms of travel that trace the contours of the Sorozek Steppe. Travel imagery radiates from the "meridian" of the railway line, fueling a social construction of the Steppe from myth and folklore. I use recent work on the formation of a social Imaginary (Castoriades) to examine how incomplete past and present images fuse into a collective narrative that yokes the contradiction of the desire to roam, nomadism, with the desire to settle, pastoralism. The longing to live in a nomadic "natural state" on the unspoiled Steppe is apparent in the interplanetary space travel motif, a utopian call to a purer existence. Contrary to the Socialist aesthetic of the Soviet Cultural Revolution, bodies in the novel matter beyond capacity for work in the realms of family life, sexual attraction, and burial customs, which in Islamic tradition claim body and land together. The novel has value for nation-building since it reclaims nomadic myth and a cultural adaptation of Islam, demonstrating the rich remnant of the Steppe's half-lives in the imagination, even under harsh suppression.

*Keywords:* Aitmatov, Bodies, Diaspora, Islam, Kazakhstan.

### **Time Travel and the Social Imaginary of the Steppe in *The Day Lasts More than a Hundred Years***

*The Day Lasts More than a Hundred Years*, published by Kirghiz author Chinghiz Aitmatov in the Soviet-sanctioned journal *Novyi Mir* in 1980, is centered on lines of multiple and incongruous forms of travel across the landscape of northwest Kazakhstan. These journeys—by tractor, train, camel, and, in an unusual sci-fi sequence, rocket—etch the contours of the Sorozek Steppe, tracing its boundaries and landmarks: the ancient burial ground Ana-Beiit, the depopulated auls, and the receding Aral’ Sea.

Travel in the novel serves as both cause and effect. The rapid changes of russification transformed the terrain of the essentially deserted Steppe and the livelihood of its pre-Islamic nomadic people with numerous robust construction projects, nuclei of railroad junctions, small industrial cities, and the mysterious, walled space complex of Baikonor Cosmodrome. The central characters in the novel, witnessing the development of large parts of the Steppe, express a quixotic fear and an affectionate pride towards these signs of inevitable progress, as if the newly developed Kazakhstan were a counterpart of a necessarily matured, but nevertheless diminished, lost nostalgic self.

#### **Glimpsing the Possible**

Characters in the novel—Buranniy Yedigei, his aging wife Ukubala, and the legendary seer of the Steppe, Buranniy Kazangap—themselves need not actually travel from their settlement in order to construct and embellish a uniquely Kazakhstani travel *Imaginary* centered around the Sorozek Steppe. The requirement to take the recently deceased Kazangap on his final journey to the ancestral burial group located on the Steppe is sufficient cause for characters to review the sequence of events that united them a full generation ago as railway workers at the outpost of Buranly-Buranniy. Their narratives, as Yedigei recalls them, illustrate the definition of imaginary as the interplay of meandering, loosely related dreamscapes of collective national longing, projected onto the imagined landscape.

This fantastical longing radiates, I contend, from the unarguably real “meridian” of the railway line. As trains pass along the central rail, they provide a kind of perceptual chimera before the characters’ eyes. Brief, incomplete images of the Steppe get recycled from their basis in myth and folklore and are churned forward in time and propelled, as cinematic images are, in rapid succession to give the effect of movement and a type of visual reality. The Chimera of Greek legend was a beast composed of the parts of many animals: a lion’s head, goat udders, a snake’s tail, and a goat’s head and body stuck to the middle. When the chimera moved rapidly through the forest, warriors thought they were being besieged by a herd. The source of the word *cinema* may come from a common root meaning “to move,” in this case, moving a succession of images rapidly to give the effect of action. Each day the town’s residents, railway workers “stationary” by the nature of their work, glimpse the faces of strangers from train windows, who in turn glance back at them: depersonalized Steppe commuters reminding the reader of Ezra Pound’s image of fleeting passenger faces, “petals on a wet, black bough” (Pound12).

#### **The Disruption of Rootedness**

This ironic reversal of the rhythms of rootedness and mobility is the central issue of the “day” in the novel; schedules for the moving trains are fixed, while the once stable village and

family routines are in a state of flux and deterioration, especially the burial customs, since the plot concerns Kazangap's burial in full nomadic tradition. Locomotives furnish motifs for the machinery of the state, supplying an image of the new determinism deemed necessary for progress. Epigrams at the end of each chapter emphasize the constancy of the passing trains and how inexorably they, supplied by human labor, mark off the seasons, years—eras even:

Trains in these parts went from East to West, and from West to East. On either side of the railway lines lay the great wide spaces of the desert Sary Ozeki, the Middle lands of the yellow Steppes. And the trains went from East to West, and from West to East. (Aitmatov29)

Chinghiz constructs an imagery of the Steppe that yokes contradictory counter impulses of movement, both geographic and temporal. I use recent work on the formation of a social imaginary to examine how “through the powers of the imagination [to] summon the absent into presence, discordant images coalesce into a composite narrative and become a signifier” (Iser 171).

Jacques Lacan employed the term imaginary to describe the effect of the Other on the way an individual might imagine his or her self through specular identification, that is, by experiencing what another (usually the mother) “sees” and does not “see” as she beholds the child's physical self. She imagines, Lacan suggests, how this child's self will unfold in future life. The gaze of this Other, as it mirrors possibility and brings out difference, sets in play the notion of lack, and a sense of deficiency that then feeds the fantasy of the individual's greater potential (Lacan).

Cornelius Castoriades transfers Lacan's idea of a personal fantasy of becoming from an individual psychological process to a theory of how social organizations are formed around an ideal social state. Questioning the fundamental origins of institutions and nations that come into being, he insists that they form to meet the perceived needs of social units of people. Half-expressed needs; needs still in process of being articulated; resentments; disappointments, comparisons to the past; and dreams of the future are the stuff of the socio-historical *Radical Imaginary* (Castoriades in Iser 204-207) that seeks representation in a continually evolving semiotic. One has only to travel the vastness of the Steppe to find how readily it furnishes counterparts for each unexpressed or unfulfilled communal need, as well as for the inter-relational conflict of needs in the process of adaptation to change.

One maxim of travel is that journeys originate from and return to a designated spot. Nomadism—destination-less—although not a viable way of life, nevertheless remains an ideal. Characters, historically nomads, identify with the wandering animals and even the grasses, propelled across the Steppe; they are encountering its dangers, yes, but they are also thriving on its rich diversity. This notion of unity and sufficiency with one's environment is a religious and cultural precept described in the Qur'an as *tawhid*. The Kazakh poet Abai elaborates:

The time motif is a where, a place, a space; this is the nomad's perspective. And it points to a broader phenomenology of the Steppe wherein existence is experienced as a visceral unitary whole in which a sacred or secular, inner and outer, are one, a single horizon that always rises ahead of you, beckoning you... a vision of tawhid (Abai in Schwartz).

Aitmatov dwells on the disruption of this unity between culture and environment (*ghafлах*) and the misery the rupture causes through his extensive use of animal imagery, borrowing from the Sufist belief that animals are mystical beings and prescient counterparts to humans. (As a young man, Aitmatov trained as a veterinarian before turning to the public life of writing.) Animals, such as the hungry vixen at the beginning of the story that hovers near the tracks foraging among the oil-soaked remnants for food, are depicted as miserable, specifically because of their semi-domesticated state; clearly, even to Yedigei, the idea of ranging is more attractive than its actuality, since animals need food, shelter, and, like humans, companionship. The novel's Steppe is no longer the garden of heaven promised in the Qur'an, but rather a ruined garden (Schwartz 5) that the author laments through the plight of the animals driven from their usual source of nurture.

Rootedness, though desired, likewise does not and cannot occur as an absolute condition. The town of Buranly-Burannyi hosts a diaspora of displaced persons, whose own children have subsequently dispersed to other towns for education and employment. At issue in the novel is whether the grown children and extended family will gather for the burial ceremonies and if those who do return retain sufficient cultural memory and ancestral respect to conduct the traditional burial. Kazangap's son Sabitzhan, educated in a boarding school and now a minor government official, embodies the practical atheism promulgated by the Soviet state. Sabitzhan argues against the lengthy burial trip on grounds that he is needed at work; his wife does not honor her father-in-law by attending the ceremony; he readily capitulates when authorities bar the caravan's entrance into the ancient cemetery; and even borrows a tractor for the cortege to speed the time-consuming task of digging a Moslem grave with its customary side entrance.

Kazangap's burial journey includes a recounting of how World War II and its aftermath disrupted notions of return to a family life defined by place and occupation in rural Kazakhstan. Kazangap, still stinging from his father's denunciation as *a kulak* (a detail that echoes Aitmatov's own father's denunciation and death), refuses a return to his native village after the war. Yedigei in a shell-shocked state after his discharge was not fit to resume his accustomed fishing work, relying on his wife's labor until Kazangap recruited both of them to the outpost that grew to become a station concourse. Further, the continuing harassment of the schoolteacher Abutalip Kutybaev, who settles his family at Boranyi-Burannyi after a series of firings, illustrates the unjust suspicion and factually- unsupported political fickleness that deprived many veteran prisoners-of-war of stability long after the end of the war.

### **Bodies That Matter**

How then can we dissect this clearly impossible longing to live in a nomadic "natural state" on the unspoiled Steppe? We might begin by looking at circumstances in which the physical body matters beyond its potential for work and the capacity of the mind to travel imaginatively beyond the limitations of the body -- and most particularly beyond the claims of the Socialist State imposed upon the bodies of inhabitants of the region of Kazakhstan appropriated by the Stalinist regime.

In *Bodies that Matter*: On the discursive limits of 'sex,' Judith Butler "troubles" assumptions girding the two poles of gender identity: biological/anatomical realities (essentialism) and social categories that attach themselves (at birth) to these physical realities (*social constructivism*). Rather than accept either of these binary categories as "real," Butler

describes the interplay of effects from the two that allow for a multitude of individual choices regarding how to “perform” gender; noting that only through repetition do gender acts come to feel “natural.” One of the violations of the Cultural Revolution was the gender leveling of male and female citizens, who even within male and female designations had differing physical capacities and desires, which the body *will* insist upon. Several have written insightfully about the construction of the Soviet male in the Cultural Revolution that fetishizes his physical strength.

The interplanetary space travel motif in the novel has been interpreted as disobedience to the Soviet State and is arguably an attack on its repressive structures, such as the Iron Curtain or the Berlin Wall (Clark v). However, the narrative of the rebellious space workers at the Cosmodrome can also be read as an answer to a perceived call to a purer existence, one in which technology, intelligence, and a more open-hearted government obviate a harsh history. This conversation of cosmonauts with planetary aliens raises the possibility of a better world in which bodies are not exploited in the name of the state for work or warfare. Moreover, it occurs within the context of international collaboration between Western and Eastern nations and a planet populated similarly to Earth. In a letter to the two governments, the space team explains its decision to leave the post:

We have sent you a signal from outer space...from the previously unknown galaxy of Derzhatel, the Upholder. The light-blue-haired people of Lesnaya Grud' are the creators of the highest form of modern civilization. A meeting with them might make a profound change in our lives, the lives of all Mankind. We could gain immensely from their experience, we could change our way of life, learning how to obtain energy from the material of the world around us, and how to live without weapons, without force and without wars (Aitmatov 106).

Despite the time gap, the cosmonauts in the novel exemplify the spirit of an ancient nomadic urge: the transportation of their bodies collectively to some spot beyond the next ridge or hollow in order to explore the vast resources the seemingly inexhaustible Steppe historically has provided. The urge to travel to an inexactly located source of well-being on, in, or beyond the all-providing Steppe is at the heart of the utopian imaginary of the Steppe, rather than the object of the Steppe itself.

Bodies, the novel illustrates, prevail because they insist upon the satisfaction of private physical desires; in parallel narratives, we learn of the lustful extramarital desire Yedigei conceives for Zariya, Abutalip's widow. He has chosen not to castrate his camel Karanar, but he beats the camel in which he has such pride in a fit of frustration when social convention does not permit him the same range of intense sexual freedoms as the camel. This episode raises questions of the subject's “bodily obligation” to the State (Kagonovsky 7) and just how far workers can be pushed to deplete their bodies for work, renouncing personal pleasures, such as sexual attachments, procreation, creative occupations such as writing, family recreation and the marking of holidays. The depiction of labor in the novel often involves shoveling snow under blizzard conditions so engines can pass, which the older generation of workers accept as their mission in life. The younger workers refuse to work as “beasts” and walk off the job in protest, even when aided by modern snow-clearing equipment.

Another area of bodily dispute is care for the dying and insistence on proper Islamic funeral rites. Such rites enact a historic claim upon the Steppe, join the physical to the symbolic, and directly confront the bureaucratic claim to both land and bodies. While spiritual beliefs may exist in the symbolic realm, they are deeply rooted in the individual and national psyche and are not easily denied or erased. The need for respectful burial furnishes a cautiously handled occasion for the author to initiate inquiry into the long-term effects of suppressed Islamic affiliation. Yedegei, an ethnic rather than practicing Muslim, identifies with Islam but cannot recall the exact prayers and songs of his Sunni heritage, typifying the vagueness of religious practice in Kazakhstan after 30 years of Soviet atheism. *Kazakhstan, Islam, and Politics*: Since Islam in Kazakhstan developed in isolation from the rest of the Muslim world, most Kazakhs do have a strict interpretation of the Quran. The logistics of building stationary mosques to convert a migratory society meant that Islam was not able to fully penetrate Kazakh society. Kazakhs adopted a moderate version of Islam mixed with their own indigenous belief system (*Kazakhstan, Islam, and Politics* 127).

Yedegei, nevertheless, voicing dissatisfaction with impersonal secular disposal of the remains of his friend and mentor, conducts an improvisational ceremony based on recall:

Here we are, standing on the Malakumdychap precipice, by the grave of Kazangap, in an uninhabited and wild place, because we were unable to bury him at the cemetery where he asked to have his grave... You, oh great one, if You exist, forgive us and in your mercy accept the burial of your Kazangap and, if he deserved it grant his soul everlasting peace. All that we have had to do, we have done. Now the rest is up to You (Aitmatov 341)!

Interestingly, Yedegei's arduous effort to bury the elder Kazangap in the ancient cemetery only serves to *un-bury* his escaped spirit; throughout the journey bearing Kazangap's shrouded corpse, he consistently is depicted as *extra*-physical. In death he takes successive forms associated with the Steppe: a wild vixen hovering near civilization, the irascible Bactrian camel, the rust-colored dog Zholbars, and the sentient white-tailed eagle who witnesses the denial of burial rights by the Soviet authorities -- and the shooting rocket itself. Kazangap's mode of conveyance to the grave, both tractor and camel on the very day of the space blast-off, and the makeshift burial *outside* the sacred cemetery in a spot claimed as common property demonstrate how eclectically and incongruously features of the imagined Steppe combine spiritual dimension with physical features of the landscape.

All of the Steppe, it would seem, both can be -- and/or never can be -- freely accessed imaginatively by all Kazakhs at any spot in time travel. The extreme limit of the revolutionary aesthetic of Soviet Socialism was that ultimately it ushered in the defeat of the revolutionary consciousness it sought to foster. "Revolutionary culture destroys everything around it -- even [eventually] itself (Dobrenko 17)." By prizing functionality, it denied the intellectual yearning of the individual worker and consequently the opportunity for the development and expression of the dialectic of beliefs, a conversation in which ideological beliefs could evolve. The extreme prizing of functionality is depicted in the plight of the *mankurts*, prisoners whose minds and sense of identity were systematically extinguished by their captors through a cruel and painful process, rendering them perfectly obedient slaves.

A monstrous fate awaited those whom the Zhuan'zhuan kept as slaves for themselves. They destroyed their slaves' memory by a terrible torture – the putting of the *shiri* [the nursing mother camel's udder] on to the head of the victim...mercilessly contracting [it] under the burning rays of the sun...as if an iron ring was being tightened...The result was the mankurt slave, forcibly deprived of his memory and therefore very valuable, being worth ten healthy, untreated prisoners (Aitmatov 124—126).

The question of whether the author intended the mankurts to represent the labor of the Kazakhs under Soviet rule has been raised, including the suggestion that workers in the outposts of Kazakhstan were asked to participate in the destruction of their own culture (Clark x). The myth of Naiman Ana, the sorrowing mother who seeks out her brain-damaged son, is preserved in the Kirghiz epic *The Manas*, which was revived in a 1990 movie filmed and distributed in Syria and Turkey. The result is that the term *mankurt* has become widely used as a pejorative in the political arena for the “forcible forgetting” and “enforced amnesia” (Schwartz 4) of Soviet brainwashing. The revival of the story demonstrates the continuing subversive quest for remnants that it is believed the Steppe preserves, insisting on a counter-myth of recovery. In the myth and novel, the bird Donenbai encodes the surname of the victim's father in song as he appears selectively on the Steppe, providing an elusive trace of identity and kinship for those with an ear for the past (Samakin).

### **New Aesthetic for a New Nation**

Just what is the role of a master narrative in nation building? The process of cultural projection termed the imaginary is an unanticipated reaction to the Soviet project of Socialist Realism in the arts, which systematically diverted attention from individual effort and achievement. However, since Ur-narratives rest on the same substrate as identity—nostalgia, pride, a sense of personal privation, and a longing for recompense and reward—they are rarely erased but continually modified.

What the social imaginary reveals is exactly how citizens, in a repressive state in which travel and outside communication is limited, make use of the details of their one irrefutable possession—their own geographies and legends—to push against an arbitrary subtraction of artistic creativity and beauty. This process of reconfiguring a master narrative and crafting a new aesthetic is necessary to overcome the “alienating forces that [have] constricted the boundaries of [individual and cultural] freedom” (Dobrenko 17).

The European Union has outlined its educational policy in the Bologna Agreement, suggesting the inclusion of nationalist or “heritage” literature as a means to “air” the multi-vocal histories of ethnically distinct populations that will live and work together. As Kazakhstan emerges from the long shadow of ideological constraint, one articulation of independence is a school curriculum designed to accent its own literature. The portrayal of a range of personal experiences under Soviet rule may be a key factor in youth's identification with its own highly mixed Kazakh culture.(Baktin of its youth. Scholars agree that, given the young nation's complex history as a place of exile, the way Kazakhstan chooses to negotiate notions of home and belonging has implications for the social cohesion, stability, and development in this country (De Young *et al* in Asonova).

Further, literary texts travel in time along with a population that reads or hears about the reading; through the trace literary texts leave. As texts become icons of a culture, they sustain an ongoing critique long after publication and the first generation of readers, continuing to unfold issues for national conversation that have been suppressed for so long as to be virtually *unspeakable* (Derrida). The cognitive process of any reader as he or she voluntarily engages in *the dialogic*, inquires into the various meanings and subtexts that Mikhail Bakhtin believes necessary [for cultural understanding]. Thus Aitmatov's novels four decades after publication bring forth perplexing issues around Islamic duty and worship that can be fruitfully interrogated by personal response to and close analysis of his texts. As a site for diaspora, not only individuals but entire communities in Kazakhstan are presently sifting through a perplexing heritage of religious traditions, complicated by a long period of atheism that may be to an extent internalized. These important conversations are complicated by pressures of Islamic conservatism from nearby countries, which conflict directly with decades of secularism still evident in state policy. (At the point of writing, in Kazakhstan there are no release time provisions and few public spaces for weekly and daily religious ritual and worship.)

The reader's task, then, if not the very *act* of reading, is to assimilate multiple features of the text under discussion: apparent features such as text type, protagonists, plot lines, and outcomes; and subtle aspects such as register of language, minor incidents, ironies and unintended incongruities, and slips in point of view. Room for questioning, alternative versions, objections, references to other texts and one's own cultural experiences actively shape the meaning-making processes that situate national literary works within the scope of an expanded field, connecting them to other texts and events (Carey 2010)

*The Day Last More than a Hundred Years* ends with Yedigei's quest after his return from the burial journey to find Zaripa and clear the name of her wronged husband. He represents a new type of citizen who exercises personal agency. He travels to the capitol to seek answers and redress, anticipating, even before the disbanding and re-development of the Soviet states, an advocate role for the common worker in nation building and a more perfectible nation. The ethos of *perestroika*, to a degree, shifted sanctions away from the "village prose" of past writers; as an émigré himself, Aitmatov could position himself in international dialogue, although he was careful to implicate the Chinese, rather than the Soviets, in the mankurt cruelties. Aitmatov was named a Hero of Socialist Labor in 1978 and founded the Issy-kul Forum, which encouraged other (mildly) dissident writers. By including the folkloric and without being overly pious, he was one of the first to reinsert the religious dimension of cultural Islam into the country's narrative.

Would we consider the novel a nationalist literary text, and do nationalist texts play a role in nation-building? Although Aitmatov's novel is one of the few contemporary works of fiction from the CIS that is widely translated; it has the advantage of a fully developed protagonist on a quest that is both secular and religious in nature, which links present concerns – and even concerns for the future -- to past experience. Aitmatov could not have predicted the collapse of the Soviet Union, but issues of regional autonomy are treated, including the leasing of Kazakhstan's space stations at Russia. Understandably, however, the style of the novel was not receptive to the modernist experiment of the West that aims to capture the rich "stream of consciousness," and another limitation is that it contains markers of Socialist Realism that might be considered didactic to today's readers. As Stalin proclaimed, : "Soviet literature is tendentious – and we are proud of it." (Luker 19)

In the ending of the story, we confront the enigma of the historical imaginary: a space capsule launched to retrieve the errant cosmonauts, signifying to readers that efforts of the state to contain and direct the collective imaginary will only create further defiance and cause it to range further afield, ever able to evade official inspection. The foundational myth within the narrative in the novel serves an epic function and is effective because it unites the familiar (the Steppe, the railroad) and the barely imaginable (nomadic life on the Steppe, the space mission). Such closure illustrates on multiple levels how the reading public [at the time of publication] was collectively ready to envision and grasp its own distinct historical cultural significance.

### About the Author

Dr. Catherine Carey investigates the role of national literature in the national policy of developing nations in Asia and the Bologna Agreement. She researches Socialist Realist writers and their continuing influence on teaching literature in former Soviet states. In her graduate classes for teachers at Kimep University, Kazakhstan, she stresses the search for culturally appropriate contemporary literary selections.

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