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## **THE SOVIET COLONIALISM: CONSCIOUS AND UNCONSCIOUS CODING OF MEANINGS IN THE *THE WELL* NOVEL BY ABISH KEKILBAYEV**

**ABSTRACT:** Abish Kekilbayev's story *The Well* was first published in 1978 in the Kazakh language book *Belaya Aruana*. The story is one of the most striking works of Kazakh literature of the Soviet period and it has been translated into many languages of the world. It has been the subject of research by literary and cultural critics in Kazakhstan, Russia, Germany, the United States, Bulgaria and other countries, and it is still of interest for analysis and interpretation. In 2018, a feature film based on the novel was produced in Kazakhstan. This article examines the work as an example of coding during the ideological censorship of the Soviets and, from a psychoanalytical perspective, as a derivative of birth trauma. During the Soviet colonial period, ethnic myths acquired particular significance for Central Asian writers; they became a natural extension of the traditional folk epic and a way out of the situation: by engaging the mythical consciousness, they could encode meanings, presenting them in the form of socialist realism.

**KEYWORDS:** Soviet colonialism, sublimation, birth trauma, Tengrism, nomadism, mythology

### **Introduction**

Soviet colonialism was reflected in art in the form of an ideological dogma called socialist realism. The Soviets adopted this method in order to better control creative people and effectively promote their policies. In the 1930s, prominent modernist writers and members of the Central Asian elite, who posed a threat to the implementation of Soviet ideology, fell under the wave of political repression. For example, the famous Kazakh modernist writer M. Zhumabaev (1893-1938) and an Uzbek writer A. Kydiri (1894-1938) were arrested and shot as "enemies of the people". The principles of socialist realism: a popular character, an ideology and concreteness implied the praise of workers and peasants and their achievements in labor in the name of communism. This paradigm created a new "elite" of writers with idealized and often victimized characters and illogical plots. Creative works were subjected to severe censorship. Indeed, many works were written about ordinary people, their everyday and working life. One such work is a novel *The Well* by Abish Kekilbayev.

Colonial discourse in the prose of Central Asian writers has found an outlet in historical novels, philosophical parables from ancient Turkic myths, Tengrism symbolism, images of totem animals, etc. For instance, a Kyrgyz writer Aitmatov (1928-2008) in his novel *The White Ship* expressed his attitude towards the Soviet state through the image of a fallow deer – the foremother of the Kyrgyz clan (Aitmatov 2010). In the story, a representative of the Soviet authorities forces an old Kyrgyz man to kill the totem animal. In the story *White Aruana*, a Kazakh writer S. Sanbaev (1939-2013) described the repression and persecution of the Kazakh elite through the story of an animal sacred to the Kazakhs – the noble camel Aruana (Sanbaev 1969). According to the story, fellow villagers cut the veins out of Aruana's eyes and forcibly mated her with a black-browed camel. The scene of Aruana's forcible blinding signifies here a metaphor for the blinding of the Soviet people by propaganda. Thus, sublimation into creativity helped writers to express themselves in the face of total control and pressure.

Sublimation, according to the theory of S. Freud, is an unconscious psychological defense that reduces anxiety and discomfort caused by unacceptable drives and incentives. According to Freud, everything that we call “civilization” arose, possibly, due to the mechanism of sublimation. The founder of psychoanalysis cites the biography of Leonardo Da Vinci as an example, and concludes that the great painter and inventor became outstanding due to sublimation of libidinal energy into creativity. This process encourages people to engage in “positive” activities, including self-expression in creativity.

According to Freud, a mature personality is able to sublimate deep trauma in “positive” activities, heal without special psychotherapeutic procedures (Freud 2020, 32). “Our therapy works because it transforms the unconscious into conscious, as it is able to carry out this transformation” – notes the first psychoanalyst (ibidem, 433).

Freud himself admitted that he justifies his high performance by the result of conscious sublimation, since he shared the Jewish morality that sex is “decent” only for the purpose of childbearing (Romanin 2006, 174).

Kekilbayev wrote his most famous works in the adulthood: *Steppe Ballads*, *End of the Legend*, *Abylai Khan*, including his novel *The Well*. According to the plot of the story, the protagonist, Ensep, managed to establish a family, has become a professional, and survived a period of testing fame and wealth, and, only being alone, he felt an inexplicable desire for the bosom of the earth, for underground waters, realized in the profession of a well digger. The author takes the reader to this idea gradually, using the technique of retardation – deliberate condensation and slowing down of time. The whole story is, in essence, a description of one day. The events of the novel begin in the late afternoon, when the heat subsided. Kekilbayev does not write anything about the sunset, but readers feel the approach of the night/death in the atmosphere of the text: “an immense blue space, shrouded in a smoky haze” (Kekilbayev 2001, 123).

## **1. The nomadic picture of the world and self-acceptance**

The novel presents a special existential picture of the world, where human life is a given reality, a short period for a human being to accept herself | himself. Self-acceptance goes through the story not as a conscious search for the meaning of life, but as a destiny. A. Freud, (2018, 11) who continued the study of the phenomenon of sublimation, noted that sublimation, i.e. replacing an instinctive goal in accordance with higher social values means accepting or at least knowing the values. Knowledge of values for Kekilbayev's protagonist, Ensep, means reconciliation with himself, with the desire to penetrate deeply into the earth – to dig wells. Reconciliation with his internal need makes the work so attractive and deeply human as Ensep refused to live a full-on life in society in order to realize his unconscious call.

Although the novel was written at the height of the socialist ideology, it does not contain any pathos of collectivism and feat for the sake of the ideals of communism. This is an ode to a lonely man, a nomad who survives in the illimitable steppe in the endless cycle of life. The literary and everyday mythology of the story reflects a nomadic picture of the world, which is very close to the Kazakhs, as the nomadic lifestyle existed in Kazakhstan until the beginning of the 20th century. The philosophy of the nomad can be expressed in the words of E. Fromm that the disharmony of human existence gives rise to needs that go far beyond the needs associated with the animal origin of man. "They lead to a persistent desire to restore unity and balance between man and the rest of nature" (Fromm 2020, 11).

In the worldview of the steppe nomad, the Tengrian cosmogonic model consists of three worlds: upper, middle and lower. The ancient Turkic belief in a Tengri-Blue sky harmoniously fits into the life of Ensep. Tengri reigns in the sky, on the earth where the people live, Ensep is in a constant interaction with ZherSu (earth | water), the patroness of water and earth and one of the goddesses of the middle world. However, the boundaries of water and earth come into contact with the underworld, where everything is subordinated to Erklig – the god of the underground world. The peculiarity of the underworld in Tengrism is its mirror inversion. Therefore, no wonder that the view of the sky from a deep well, at the very beginning of the novel, rhymes with the sea: "The sky, as huge as the sea, has now turned into a small round bowl overturned over his head" (Kekilbaev 2002, 123). Everything inside the earth, underground, in the water under the earth belongs to Erklig, where Ensep strove for repeatedly, and each time this craving became more and more irresistible. The attraction of the protagonist is ambivalent: Ensep becomes seized by the fear of death, since he consciously enters into the possession of Erklig, but he cannot stop led by his unconsciousness. The reader, of course, associates striving into the bosom of the earth as a harbinger of death, a sign that appeared already at the beginning of the novel: the imminent onset of the night.

## 2. The genesis of the birth trauma

O. Rank in his work *The birth trauma and its significance for psychoanalysis* notes that in successful cases, in the final phase, the process of healing the unconscious is quite naturally embodied in the typical symbolism of birth. This is the well-known fantasy of rebirth, in which the patient's will to recover leads his cure (Rank 2009, 3). The protagonist of the story, Ensep, makes many attempts at rebirth by finding water in the vast steppe, painful digging and building wells, by constant penetrating deeply into the earth and getting freed from there.

Ensep's striving for the wells, deeply into the earth in Kekilbayev's story is similar to the irresistible craving of the protagonist of V. Makanin's novel *Manhole*, Klyucharev, to various kinds of manholes and caves. Klyucharov thus produces an infinite number of acts of rebirth, expressed in a penetration into various entrances-openings, and releasing from them afterward, the most desirable of which is the underground hole: the embodiment of the womb of mother earth (Makanin 2009, 172-341). All his efforts are directed at the process of rebirth, painful crawling out, which will give him initiation. However, due to frequent repetitions and constant reflection, the hero displaces his desire even more deeply and gets stuck in the process itself (Arukenova 2018, 185). The concentration on the process is also characteristic of the Kekilbayev's protagonist.

The repetition of Ensep's actions is cyclical and similar to the change of seasons, to the cycle of nature, to which the nomads were adapted well. In their work devoted to schizoanalysis, J. Deleuze and F. Guattari (2007, 2) believe that the unconscious functions by analogy with production, where production possesses investments – desire machines, and for the desire machine, the process is more important. Likewise, Ensep's unconsciousness endlessly reproduces the process of birth, while it loses its meaning. Deleuze generally considers nomadism as a process in itself, as an endless act of becoming a person like a desire machine and a body without organs (Deleuze 2007, 7).

As written by Rank, returning in fantasies to the mother's womb, "a person is in a relaxed position in a semi-dark space, in a half-oblivion, in a state of fantasy (hallucination) almost free from the requirements of reality" (Rank 2009, 3). Indeed, after a painful penetration into the depths of the earth, Ensep finds temporary peace down there: "Legs unmistakably found steps: still, try to climb back and forth from day to day for a whole year ... What a bitter cold! Feeling like it snapped in the temples. [...] Well, finally the bottom!" (Kekilbayev 2002, 124). Each time, stepping on the bottom of the well, he seems to be preparing to return to the safe womb of his mother: "Ensep tightly closed his eyes, stood motionless, let his heart and nerves calm down". However, miracle does not happen, he opens his eyes and sees that he is left "all alone – behind seven layers, in an eerie, icy dungeon" (Kekilbayev 2002, 124).

The birth trauma is the deepest trauma held in the unconscious of every person born naturally (as opposed to a cesarean section). The sublimation of birth trauma possesses a universal message and causes reaction in every human being. As noted by Rank: “The guiding line in this case should be the Freudian proposition that any affect of fear is basically reduced to the physiological fear of birth (suffocation)” (Rank 2009, 25). Rank also argues in this regard: “all kinds of fear are based on fear of birth, and all kinds of pleasure ultimately tend to restore primary intrauterine pleasure” (ibidem). Despite the fear and danger, Ensep continues to hammer the ground, as if to reach “primary intrauterine pleasure” he is ready to step over any obstacle.

- (1) Ensep stood paralyzed with fear, afraid to move a finger. Still he made up his mind, bent down, felt the cold, damp walls and the stone as flat as a board. No, there was no one in this grave except him. “Boom-boom-boom” alarm was ringing in his ears (Kekilbayev 2002, 157).

The socially acceptable motivation that Ensep will remain in people’s memory as the person who built the deepest well falls apart at the end of the story, because in fact the well will be called: “The one where Ensep died” (ibidem, 162). This final point of the story corresponds to Ensep’s real aspiration to return to the mother’s womb after numerous acts of rebirth, in an attempt to overcome the birth trauma. Here is also an allusion to the anthropogenic myth about the Turkic clan Ashina, whose progenitor is considered a she-wolf. The she-wolf fed and raised the only survived descendant of the tribe in the cave and gave him offspring. According to the scientist-philosopher, researcher of Kazakh mythology S. Kondybai, the cave is “the primordial space, protocosmos, the place where life is born, and the bosom of the Great Mother” (Kondybai 2002, 157). The meaning of the cave as a depth in the earth, on the border of the middle and lower worlds, is essentially the same as that of the well, with the only difference that the function of the well is extraction of water. Elements of paranoia can be traced in the actions of the protagonist: Ensep’s unconsciousness makes him constantly search for water and penetrate deep into the earth for this purpose.

### **3. The archetype of water and Kazakh mythology**

The archetype of water is presented in a variety of myths as one of the cosmic primary elements, as the original substance from which all living things have emerged. Ensep’s ambivalent striving for the force of earth-water is similar to the desire to return to the primary element. The archetypal meanings of water are reflected in the image of a well – a source of water. For centuries, the healing power was attributed to water from underground sources. In fairy tales and myths, the waters of springs and wells at all times have been attributed to the properties

of cleansing, curing diseases, and satisfying thirst and hunger. The mystery of the well combines mystery of earth and water. The expression “water spring” is translated literally from the Kazakh language as “an eye of water”, which denotes a connection with the past, with the world of the dead and therefore has magical properties, in addition, as life, as a way of communication between the three elements: air, water and earth. Ensep’s goal in the novel is to get to the source of water at the bottom of the well.

The symbolic content of the image of a well is the realization of the original meanings of the archetype of water and associative components, including salvation, life, knowledge, the truth, purity, including death through the depth – from the depth of memory to the depth of the grave in the earth. For instance, in Islam, the well of Barkhut is the grave of the prophet Huda, where *Huda* means *God* in Persian (Benvenista 1995). Hence, the well of Barkhut is the Tomb of God. In the Kazakh folk epic about the lovers Kozy-Korpesh and Bayan Sulu, the well becomes the place of Kodar’s death, whom Bayan Sulu does not want to marry. The girl promises to marry Kodar if he digs for her a well with spring water. Kodar, in turn, sets a condition that, going more deeply into the well, he will hold on to the girl’s braids. At some point, Bayan Sulu cuts the braids and the well becomes Kodar’s grave. Then the girl stabs herself with a dagger. According to K. Jung’s theory, water is a symbol of the unconscious; it is not for nothing that Ensep’s thoughts are controversial and ambivalent until he has reached the water source at the bottom of the well.

Along with eschatological associations, water is also a prototype of time and the passage of time. Water is at the same time a symbol of rebirth as life-giving water in folklore (Averintsev 1982, 27). Ensep tries to dig the deeper and deeper wells, as if trying to get to the center of the earth. “The master hammers and hollows the ground in dampness and darkness. This monotonous, tedious work plagues and wears out even the strongest, enduring and fearless, like the devil” (Kekilbaev 2002, 147). Each time approaching the source on the bottom of the well, fearing to die under the onslaught of the water gushing from the ground, Ensep vows not to return to the well: “And he gives a vow in his soul: Lord, if only I get lucky this time, if I get out of here safely, if I do not perish, I will never, never, never again dig the wells” (ibidem). Nevertheless, after a few months “he would build his leaky shack in another place and would take up a shovel and a crowbar” (ibidem, 148).

#### **4. Mythology and fiction of Central Asia in the former Soviet Union**

Folklore and literary-everyday mythology forms not only the basis of the plot in Kekilbayev’s novel, but also contributes to the dynamics of its construction. The story reveals a picture of the world of a nomad, in which a person spends most

of his life in motion, while being alone. However, a human being, as Fromm wrote, is simultaneously lonely and connected with others: "He is alone in the sense that he is a unique being, not identical to anyone else, and is aware of himself as a separate person. He must be alone when he must make judgments or make decisions only by the power of his mind" (Fromm 2020, 61).

In the story, almost no attention is paid to Ensep's family, his wife and his children. The description of the bride seeking and the protagonist's marriage constitute only one short sentence in the novel: "Soon Ensep married the daughter of the shoemaker Ikhlās" (Kekilbayev 2002, 162). In the Kazakh folk epic and the epic of Central Asia, the focus is given to the act of initiation: a young man performs feats for the sake of his people and overcomes obstacles to marry his beloved in order to continue the family line. The culmination and finale of such epic works is the wedding. Kekilbayev continues the tradition of the folk epic and focuses on the second part of life completion of his earthly stay and on the philosophical question of the meaning of life. This is another indication of the importance of the act of sublimation, the main therapeutic, healing goal of the author, who seems to merge into the narrative with the image of the protagonist.

In the nomadic view, the world is described not only as figurative levels and as tiers, but it is also experienced emotionally in action, movement, change, in constant dynamics. The continuity of life, its constant renewal is the main function of the Tengrian world, and a human is part of it. Ensep, who has fulfilled his social mission as a successor of the family and a digger of wells for people, completely surrenders to his latent desire: he rushes into the element of Erklig, where an underground river flows, a representation of the mother's placenta, connecting him with the sea-cosmos. According to a Tengrian/nomadic belief, there is no death, but there is a consistent cycle of life, similar to the change of weather and seasons; therefore, physical death means for Ensep the natural continuation of life.

Driven by an ethnic worldview, a work of fiction is likened to a myth with a non-linear narrative. In the narrative, like in the myth, the line between personality and space, between matter and spirit, and, what is interesting, between reality and artistic text are erased. The main character of Kekilbayev is on the border of two worlds: a middle one and an upper one, earthy and other worlds. This borderline is similar to the process of going from the conscious to the unconscious, which, according to V. Rudnev (1999, 156), is the goal of psychoanalysis.

The mythological consciousness inherent in the foundation of creativity is characteristic of many writers of Central Asia during the Soviet period. Aitmatov mediated folklore myths in almost all of his works. For example, in his novel *The White Ship*, he uses the myth of God's suicide. Sanbaev also uses this myth in his novel *White Aruana*. At first glance, this is a tradition of the modernist writer's direction of the early twentieth century: the Homer's myth determined the structure of J. Joyce's *Ulysses*, F. Kafka's *Castle* is based on the myth of Sisyphus,



and T. Mann's *Magic Mountain* is based on an intertext myth of Tannhauser, etc. For the writers of Kazakhstan and Central Asia, myths played also a role of a so-called buffer in the era of ideological censorship. For Kekilbayev, this challenge turned out to be solvable, since for the Soviet censorship myths were a relic, and the writer's creative sublimation used to be read as a story about the hard life of a poor man digging wells and his tragic fate in the conditions of a backward nomadic life. Elements of mythology and ethnic motives a priori belonged to primitive beliefs. The censorship of the metropolis consisted of people with a Eurocentric education, in which nomadic culture has never been mentioned.

In any case, the national cultural element was allowed only in accordance with the formula "national in form and socialist in content", and the ultimate goal was to erase all ethno cultural differences and create a homogeneous Soviet identity, where Russian culture and language, however, have dominated by default. (Tlostanova 2020, 112).

Fiction created in Soviet times by writers representing the Turkic culture on the border of nomadic and sedentary lifestyles still needs to be properly interpreted in terms of colonial discourse and the strategy of coding meanings in the era of ideological censorship. The domination of Russian culture and, accordingly, the Orthodox faith made it possible to interpret literary texts in their own way, which turned out to be convenient for many writers who revealed the tragedy of repressed ethnic groups. Representatives of the galaxy of unique bilingual writers transmitted the ethnic code of the Kazakhs also in Russian, preserving the flavor and originality of the steppe mentality. However, not all works with ethnic motives found a positive response from the censorship. For example, the works of a Korean writer A. Kim were severely criticized by the Soviet censorship: "For the Soviet reader with a European mentality, the artistic world of Kim, relying on Buddhism and shamanism, was strange and often caused misunderstanding and even rejection" (Safronova 2020, 280). The nomadic type of economic activity (nomadism) was considered by the Soviet government as a relic and a backward way of life in comparison with the settled way of life; moreover, the ideologists of the metropolis were not familiar with Tengrism, an ancient religion of the Turkic nomads. The Eurocentric, superficial look at the work of the former nomads did not allow for a complete understanding of the meanings encoded in the writers' texts. For example, a literary critic from the former GDR (German Democratic Republic) V. Choppe, interpreted the works of Kazakh writers as follows:

The imperial power also suppressed other peoples and nationalities. However, at the same time, Kazakhstan experienced obvious historical progress and development. Nomads largely settled down and took up agriculture. The abolition of patriarchal slavery was also of great importance (cited for: Satpaeva 1978, 189).



Writing about historical progress, the author of the article is completely ignorant of nomadism, and he is not aware of the consequences of the forcible destruction of the nomadic lifestyle of the Kazakh people by expropriating livestock and the famine, which took away almost half of the population of Kazakh nation. The words about patriarchal slavery also confirm the fact that the author is completely unfamiliar with nomadic culture.

## Conclusions

As I. Kukulin noted in his article titled *Russian literature in the head of the "younger brothers"*, the term *Soviet colonialism* has long been established, although a contradictory picture emerges since the national policy in the USSR had the character of *positive discrimination*, that is, it supported national minorities. Nevertheless, the elements of cultural policy resembled classical colonialism, especially since the second half of the 1930s, when the most "authentic" representatives of the majority of the *peoples of the USSR* in the public space were folklore artists – singer-storytellers, dancers, etc. An archaization of the public image of the national minorities' cultures took place, which intensified the contrast between "the modern culture of the older brother" versus "the folklore of the younger brothers" (Kukulin 2020).

Consciously and/or unconsciously, Kazakh writers coded dramatic themes, ethnic symbols, and mythological plots in their fiction, understandable only to native speakers of the language and culture. The tragic events of the first half of the twentieth century: the repressions and destruction of the elite of the Kazakh people, the destruction of the nomadic culture and, as a result, the Asharshylyk (Famine) that led to the death of almost half of the population of Kazakhstan is still not reflected at the national level. Nevertheless, they have become a topic of many works of Kazakh writers both in the Soviet period and nowadays.

Tengrism as a religion and belief in the eternal sky has preserved its place in the collective unconscious of the Kazakhs in the form of images and archetypes, which is particularly evident in the works of writers, artists, and musicians as a result of creative sublimation (Jung 1991, 77). Through conscious and unconscious coding of meanings, Abish Kekilbayev managed to transmit the code of the nomadic culture and the ancient faith of his ancestors in his work.

The title of the novel itself is the key to the psychological problem solving by the author. From the point of view of psychoanalytic literary criticism, Kekilbayev's story "The Well" is an example of a work that reproduces the phenomenon of the birth trauma.

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