ISSN:2828-6235
Impact factor:13.77

International Journal of Literature and Language Studies(IJLLS)

Cosmic Scale, Historical Memory, and the Tragedy of Erasure: An Artistic Interpretation of Chingiz Aitmatov's Novel The Day Lasts More Than a Hundred Years

HUMMATOVA (PANIYEVA) GUNEL SALEH
Azerbaijan State Pedagogical University,
PhD in Philology, Senior Lecturer
gunelpeniyeva@mail.ru
+994559176817
Orcid ID:0000-0002-8916-3484
doi:https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.24523058

Abstract: This article presents a comprehensive artistic and theoretical interpretation of Kyrgyz writer Chingiz Aitmatov's landmark novel The Day Lasts More Than a Hundred Years (Gün var əsrə bərabər), examined through the Azerbaijani edition compiled by Asif Hajiyev with an introductory essay by Bakhtiyar Vahabzadeh (Aitmatov, 2009). Drawing upon modern Western and international literary methodologies—specifically close reading (Close Reading), narratology, chronotopic analysis, and mythopoetic interpretation—this study investigates the multi-layered semantic architecture of the novel. Rather than viewing the work merely as a chronicle of life at a remote railway junction in the Sary-Ozek steppes, the analysis approaches it as an intricate philosophical and aesthetic system that binds local historical trauma, ancient Turkic folklore, Stalinist repression, and planetary cosmic consciousness into a unified narrative whole.The interpretive framework is organized around five core analytical questions drawn from international fiction theory: who speaks and from what temporal-ideological vantage point; how plot conflicts and turning points are structured; how the chronotope of the steppe, railway, and outer space generates meaning; how recurring symbols—most notably the legend of the mankurt, the Ana-Beyit cemetery, the train schedules, and the camel Karanar—operate across narrative levels; and how silence, memory, and subtext challenge totalitarian conformity. Through close textual engagement and direct quotations rendered in English alongsidein-text citations, the study contrasts the moral integrity of the unlettered railway worker Yedigey Zhangeldin with the hollow, bureaucratic conformity of Kazangap's son Sabitjan, whom Vahabzadeh characterizes as a lifeless automaton devoid of genuine selfhood.Furthermore, the article explores the structural parallelism between the earthly struggle to bury Kazangap at the ancestral Ana-Beyit cemetery—now enclosed by barbed wire and a spaceport perimeter—and the joint Soviet-American space expedition that discovers the peaceful extraterrestrial civilization of Lesnaya Grud. Ultimately, Aitmatov demonstrates that the erasure of historical and ancestral memory (mankurtization) constitutes the gravest threat to human civilization, whereas genuine humanism survives through ordinary individuals who bear the moral weight of memory, conscience, and solidarity.

Keywords: artistic interpretation, Chingiz Aitmatov, The Day Lasts More Than a Hundred Years, close reading, narratology, chronotope, mankurt, historical memory, mythopoetics

Introduction

In twentieth-century world literature, few works achieve the structural synthesis of intimate human psychology, ancient mythic memory, and global philosophical inquiry found in Chingiz Aitmatov's 1980 novel The Day Lasts More Than a Hundred Years (published in Azerbaijani translation as Gün var əsrə bərabər in his Selected Works; Aitmatov, 2009). As Azerbaijani poet and scholar Bakhtiyar Vahabzadeh observes in his foreword to the Baku edition, Aitmatov is a master capable of elevating the most ordinary episodes of everyday life to a planetary plane, viewing human

existence from the highest summit of philosophical reflection so that a local incident reflects universal truth like the sun mirrored in a single drop of water (Vahabzadeh, 2009, p. 5). Although Aitmatov wrote primarily in Russian, his characters, landscapes, and moral consciousness remain deeply rooted in Kyrgyz national experience and Central Asian oral epic traditions, particularly the Manas epic (Vahabzadeh, 2009, pp. 5–6).

The artistic interpretation of such a multi-layered novel demands moving beyond a linear summary of its plot. In contemporary literary scholarship, interpretation is understood as an active uncovering of a text's internal semantic codes, narrative voice, temporal architecture, symbolic patterns, and ideological subtext (Barthes, 1975; Genette, 1980). Within international literary studies and short-fiction or novelistic poetics—exemplified by the New Critical Close Reading tradition and structuralist narratology—analysts systematically interrogate how form generates meaning (Brooks & Warren, 1979; Rimmon-Kenan, 2002).

The purpose of this article is to apply the core interpretive methodologies and analytical questions of international literary theory to Aitmatov's The Day Lasts More Than a Hundred Years as presented in the 2009 Baku edition (Aitmatov, 2009). By combining close textual analysis with direct quotations and scholarly references formatted according to the Publication Manual of the American Psychological Association (7th ed.), this study examines how Aitmatov interweaves three distinct temporal and spatial dimensions—the single day of Kazangap's funeral procession, the mythic past of the Nayman Mother and the mankurt, and the futuristic cosmic encounter with the planet Lesnaya Grud—into a cohesive warning against historical amnesia and spiritual dehumanization.

In Western and international literary scholarship, interpreting a complex narrative work requires examining its autonomous aesthetic design alongside the cultural and ethical questions it poses to the reader (Booth, 1983; Brooks & Warren, 1979). The close reading method focuses on lexical precision, recurring motifs, tonal shifts, and structural ironies, whereas narratology investigates the mechanics of storytelling: who speaks, who perceives, how narrative time is compressed or expanded, and how embedded stories interact with the framing plot (Genette, 1980; Rimmon-Kenan, 2002).

Drawing upon standard international frameworks for literary interpretation—such as those articulated in Literature: An Introduction to Fiction, Poetry, Drama, and Writing and An Introduction to Literary Studies (Kennedy & Gioia, 2016; Klarer, 2004)—this analysis organizes its inquiry around five foundational interpretive questions:

1. The Narrator and Focalization Question: Who narrates the story, through whose consciousness are events filtered, and how do shifts in perspective create irony or moral authority? (Genette, 1980; Booth, 1983).

2. The plot, conflict, and structural parallelism question: How are the primary narrative threads constructed, what internal and external conflicts drive the action, and how do seemingly disparate subplots reinforce one another? (Brooks & Warren, 1979).

3. The Chronotope (Space and Time) Question: How do specific spatial settings and temporal rhythms—such as the compression of a century into a single day—shape the philosophical meaning of the text? (Bakhtin, 1981; Klarer, 2004).

4. The Symbols, Mythic Archetypes, and Motifs Question: Which objects, legends, natural forces, and recurring images carry symbolic weight across different historical eras? (Kennedy & Gioia, 2016).

5. The Language, Silence, and Ideological Subtext Question: What is communicated through plain folk wisdom versus bureaucratic jargon, and what truths emerge from silences, memory, and suppressed history? (Rimmon-Kenan, 2002).

When these five questions are brought to bear upon The Day Lasts More Than a Hundred Years, every seemingly minor detail in the opening pages reveals itself as an intentional structural node that resonates across the entire novel (Vahabzadeh, 2009, p. 6).

Narratologically, Aitmatov employs a third-person omniscient narrator whose perspective is predominantly focalized through the consciousness of Boranly Yedigey, a World War II veteran and ordinary railway switchman living at the isolated Boranly-Burannyi junction in the Sary-Ozek steppes (Aitmatov, 2009). Through figural narration—a technique in which the narrator enters the protagonist's inner thoughts while maintaining third-person grammar—the reader experiences the world through Yedigey's sensory perceptions, ethical instincts, and associative memory (Genette, 1980; Rimmon-Kenan, 2002).

Aitmatov constructs the novel's central moral conflict by placing Yedigey in sharp ideological and psychological opposition to Sabitjan, the educated son of Yedigey's deceased friend Kazangap. As Vahabzadeh emphasizes in his critical commentary on the text, Aitmatov deliberately contrasts an unlettered laborer who continuously questions life's meaning with a credentialed bureaucrat who possesses ready-made, prefabricated answers for every situation (Vahabzadeh, 2009, p. 6). Those who have ready-made answers to all questions are depicted as individuals stripped of independent thought, living inside standardized molds and acting as servile executors of dry official commands (Vahabzadeh, 2009, p. 6).

While Yedigey lacks formal secondary education, his speech is infused with the ancestral wisdom of the Manas epic and lived moral integrity, making him extraordinary in his very ordinariness (Vahabzadeh, 2009, p. 6). Sabitjan, conversely, has studied at higher institutes and stuffed his mind with modern information, yet beneath that weight of data he has lost his individuality and self-awareness, becoming a spineless functionary who tries to posture as an "important person" (Vahabzadeh, 2009, p. 7). This moral chasm reaches its dramatic peak when Yedigey learns that the sacred ancestral cemetery of Ana-Beyit—where Nayman Ana is buried—is slated for destruction to make way for housing projects tied to the nearby spaceport, and he implores Sabitjan to use his regional administrative post to intervene. Sabitjan flatly refuses:

"What business of mine are such matters... I have my family, my children, and my position. I cannot go against the wind. With a single phone call, they would strike me from behind and throw me out into the street" (Aitmatov, 2009, as cited in Vahabzadeh, 2009, p. 7).

Yedigey's devastatingly concise reply exposes the existential hollowness of Sabitjan's worldview:

"It seems you only watch your back, and you live by your back" (Aitmatov, 2009, as cited in Vahabzadeh, 2009, p. 7).

In this exchange, the unlettered railway worker ascends to the summit of human dignity through independent moral agency, whereas the educated official descends into spiritual bankruptcy by sacrificing national history, ancestral memory, and filial duty for personal comfort (Vahabzadeh, 2009, p. 7).

A defining structural innovation of The Day Lasts More Than a Hundred Years is its multi-tiered plot architecture, which alternates between the terrestrial funeral journey across the Sary-Ozek steppe and a parallel science-fiction subplot set in outer space (Aitmatov, 2009). At first glance, the funeral of Kazangap, the tragic persecution of the schoolteacher Abutalip Kuttybayev and his wife Zaripa during the Stalinist purges, the ancient legend of the mankurt, and a joint Soviet-American space mission aboard the non-military aircraft carrier Convention appear to be disconnected narrative strands (Vahabzadeh, 2009, pp. 7–8). However, close structural reading reveals that these threads operate as mirrors reflecting the same fundamental crisis of human civilization (Brooks & Warren, 1979; Vahabzadeh, 2009, p. 8).

In the cosmic narrative line, Soviet and American cosmonauts—representing rival ideological superpowers during the Cold War—are united in space by a shared mission to investigate energy

resources on Planet X and subsequently make contact with an advanced civilization on the planet Lesnaya Grud ("Forest Bosom") (Vahabzadeh, 2009, p. 8). Looking back at Earth from the vantage point of extraterrestrial harmony, the cosmonauts perceive terrestrial wars, national hostilities, and ideological hatred as absurd and grotesque. In their message transmitted back to Earth, they write:

"Looking at Earth from here, it seems to us that all people living on Earth are our sisters and brothers, and we are nothing without them. Yet we also know that, in reality, people on Earth do not think this way" (Aitmatov, 2009, as cited in Vahabzadeh, 2009, p. 8).

As the cosmonauts encounter the inhabitants of Lesnaya Grud, they are astonished by a society that has transcended political violence entirely. Reporting back to Earth's command centers, the cosmonauts explain:

"Their way of life is so contrary to our Earth-bound stereotypical mode of thinking that our minds are scarcely capable of grasping it. Because they do not know what a state, a weapon, or war is. They do not even have a conception of state violence or war as a means of struggle" (Aitmatov, 2009, as cited in Vahabzadeh, 2009, p. 9).

Although diverse ethnic groups inhabit Lesnaya Grud, they refuse to become "uninvited guests" on Earth until humanity resolves its internal hostilities, prompting the cosmonauts to plead with Earth's authorities:

"Knowing the strife on Earth and the enmity of peoples and states toward one another, do we have the right to invite them to our planet on behalf of all humanity? We implore you, cast aside enmity and rivalry, resolve this matter at the United Nations... so that we may learn from their experience and create a turning point in our own way of life" (Aitmatov, 2009, as cited in Vahabzadeh, 2009, p. 9).

The tragic irony of the novel's plot lies in the juxtaposition of these two levels: while Earth's superpowers collaborate in space and debate planetary ethics, their military-security apparatus on Earth erects a barbed-wire perimeter around the Ana-Beyit cemetery, barring Yedigey from burying Kazangap in ancestral soil and launching rockets into the sky that physically seal Earth off from peaceful extraterrestrial contact (Aitmatov, 2009; Vahabzadeh, 2009, pp. 8–9).

In Mikhail Bakhtin's theory of the literary chronotope, spatial and temporal indicators are fused into one carefully thought-out, concrete whole, where time thickens and becomes artistically visible while space becomes charged with the movements of history (Bakhtin, 1981, p. 84). Aitmatov's very title—The Day Lasts More Than a Hundred Years—foregrounds this chronotopic compression. The present-time action of the novel unfolds over roughly twenty-four hours, from the evening Kazangap dies to the following afternoon when Yedigey conducts a makeshift burial on a lonely steppe ridge after being turned away from Ana-Beyit (Aitmatov, 2009).

Yet within this single day, Yedigey's consciousness traverses an entire century of Central Asian history: the pre-revolutionary nomadic past, the collectivization era, the devastation of World War II, the post-war Stalinist terror that destroyed Abutalip Kuttybayev simply for recording folk legends for his children, and the technological-bureaucratic alienation of the late Soviet period (Aitmatov, 2009; Vahabzadeh, 2009, pp. 7–9).

Spatially, the novel is anchored in the vast, windswept Sary-Ozek ("Yellow Steppes") and the solitary railway line where trains rush incessantly from east to west and west to east (Aitmatov, 2009). The railway serves as a potent chronotopic axis: it connects the remote outpost to the outside world of state power and historical upheaval, while simultaneously underscoring the isolation of those who maintain the tracks. Conversely, the Ana-Beyit cemetery represents sacred historical time—the vertical axis linking living generations to their ancestors—whereas the fenced-off cosmodrome represents technocratic state power detached from moral roots (Aitmatov, 2009; Vahabzadeh, 2009, pp. 7–8).

A central pillar of close reading and mythopoetic interpretation is tracing how an embedded folk legend illuminates the psychological and political reality of the modern narrative (Kennedy &

Gioia, 2016; Klarer, 2004). In The Day Lasts More Than a Hundred Years, the ancient legend of the Ruan'yuan (Juan-Juan) invaders and the creation of the mankurt functions as the novel's philosophical nucleus (Aitmatov, 2009; Vahabzadeh, 2009, pp. 7, 9).

According to the legend recounted by Yedigey, the nomadic Ruan'yuan torturers shaved the heads of young captives and stretched fresh, wet camel-neck skin (shiri) tightly over their skulls. Under the scorching desert sun, the shrinking rawhide constricted like an iron band, causing unimaginable agony and forcing the victim's growing hair to curl inward into the scalp. Those who survived lost all memory of their name, their parents, their tribe, and their human identity, becoming completely obedient slaves—mankurts—who would even murder their own mothers upon a master's command, just as the mankurt son shoots an arrow into the heart of Nayman Ana when she tries to awaken his memory (Aitmatov, 2009; Vahabzadeh, 2009, p. 7).

Through this mythic archetype, Aitmatov transforms a regional folkloric motif into a universal metaphor for ideological brainwashing and historical amnesia. In the modern layers of the novel, the mankurt is no longer produced by physical camel rawhide, but by bureaucratic careerism, fear, and totalitarian conformity (Vahabzadeh, 2009, pp. 6–9). Sabitjan, who despises his father's traditions and refuses to defend Ana-Beyit, and Tansykbaev, the ruthless investigator who interrogates and destroys the innocent intellectual Abutalip Kuttybayev, are modern mankurts who have surrendered their conscience and cultural memory to state authority (Vahabzadeh, 2009, p. 9).

Alongside the mankurt symbol, Aitmatov weaves natural and animal imagery—most notably Yedigey's powerful Bactrian camel Karanar, descended from Nayman Ana's legendary white she-camel AkMaya—to signify untamed vitality, loyalty, and resistance to artificial constraints (Aitmatov, 2009). Even the recurring image of the vixen hunting along the railway tracks at the novel's opening and closing frames human civilization within the enduring rhythms of nature (Aitmatov, 2009; Vahabzadeh, 2009, p. 6).

In narratological and ideological interpretation, what a text leaves unsaid—or communicates through subtext, prayer, and silent endurance—often carries greater moral weight than explicit political rhetoric (Rimmon-Kenan, 2002; Booth, 1983). Writing under Soviet censorship in 1980, Aitmatov embedded a profound critique of Stalinist repression and bureaucratic authoritarianism within the tragic story of Abutalip Kuttybayev, a former prisoner of war who survived Nazi captivity only to be arrested by Soviet security organs for writing down his war memories and folk tales for his young sons (Aitmatov, 2009; Vahabzadeh, 2009, p. 7).

Against the cruelty of state informers and unfeeling officials like Tansykbaev and Sabitjan, Aitmatov posits a quiet, resilient community of conscience represented by Kazangap, Yedigey, Yedigey's loyal wife Ukubala, Abutalip, and Zaripa (Vahabzadeh, 2009, p. 9). As Vahabzadeh notes, the world endures and grows more humane precisely because alongside land-grabbing Ruan'yuans and spiritually hollowed mankurts, there exist compassionate individuals who bear another person's sorrow as their own and see into the deep moral layers of life (Vahabzadeh, 2009, pp. 9–10).

When the armed guard at the spaceport checkpoint refuses to let the funeral procession enter Ana-Beyit, Yedigey does not succumb to Sabitjan's cynical resignation. Instead, he buries Kazangap on the Malakumdychar ridge overlooking the forbidden ancestral ground, recites a Muslim funeral prayer for the first time in decades despite having forgotten many words, and resolves to return to confront the authorities about the fate of Ana-Beyit (Aitmatov, 2009; Vahabzadeh, 2009, pp. 7–8). In that final act of remembrance and prayer, silence and memory triumph over institutional erasure.

Conclusion

Applying the analytical tools of close reading, narratology, chronotopic analysis, and mythopoetics to Chingiz Aitmatov's The Day Lasts More Than a Hundred Years demonstrates why the novel stands as one of the supreme achievements of modern world literature (Aitmatov, 2009; Brooks & Warren, 1979; Rimmon-Kenan, 2002). By compressing a century of historical trauma into

the twenty-four-hour funeral journey of a humble railway worker, Aitmatov unites local Kyrgyz folk memory with planetary ethical questions (Bakhtin, 1981; Vahabzadeh, 2009, pp. 5–9).

Through the stark moral contrast between Yedigey Zhangeldin and Sabitjan, the novel exposes the danger of educated conformity detached from conscience and historical roots. Through the structural parallel between the fenced-off Ana-Beyit cemetery on Earth and the peaceful civilization of Lesnaya Grud in space, Aitmatov warns that humanity cannot reach higher cosmic or moral horizons while destroying its own ancestral memory and clinging to ideological hostility. Ultimately, the enduring power of The Day Lasts More Than a Hundred Years lies in its affirmation that human dignity resides in memory, empathy, and the courage to ask fundamental moral questions in an age of ready-made answers (Vahabzadeh, 2009, pp. 6–10).

References

1. Aitmatov, C. (2009). Seçilmiş əsərləri [Selected works] (A. Hajiyev, Comp.; B. Vahabzadeh, Foreword). Şərq-Qərb. https://gdu.edu.az/wp-content/uploads/2022/04/Chingiz-Aytmatov.pdf (Original work The Day Lasts More Than a Hundred Years published 1980)
2. Bakhtin, M. M. (1981). Forms of time and of the chronotope in the novel. In M. Holquist (Ed.), The dialogic imagination: Four essays (C. Emerson & M. Holquist, Trans., pp. 84–258). University of Texas Press.
3. Barthes, R. (1975). An introduction to the structural analysis of narrative. New Literary History, 6(2), 237–272. https://doi.org/10.2307/468419
4. Booth, W. C. (1983). The rhetoric of fiction (2nd ed.). University of Chicago Press.
5. Brooks, C., & Warren, R. P. (1979). Understanding fiction (3rd ed.). Prentice-Hall.
6. Genette, G. (1980). Narrative discourse: An essay in method (J. E. Lewin, Trans.). Cornell University Press.
7. Kennedy, X. J., & Gioia, D. (2016). Literature: An introduction to fiction, poetry, drama, and writing (13th ed.). Pearson.
8. Klarer, M. (2004). An introduction to literary studies (2nd ed.). Routledge.
9. Rimmon-Kenan, S. (2002). Narrative fiction: Contemporary poetics (2nd ed.). Routledge.
10. Vahabzadeh, B. (2009). Ön söz [Foreword]. In C. Aitmatov, Seçilmiş əsərləri [Selected works] (pp. 5–10). Şərq-Qərb. https://gdu.edu.az/wp-content/uploads/2022/04/Chingiz-Aytmatov.pdf