

Humanism of Chingiz Aitmatov Gained Through Suffering of the Epoch

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ABSTRACT

The article analyzes humanistic ideas in the works by Chingiz Aitmatov (1928-2008) within the framework of Kyrgyz national and European and Russian intellectual environment. It is reiterated that Ch. Aitmatov thought in a metaphysical and humanistic manner, in spite of the prevailing materialistic ideology. The idea that Ch. Aitmatov's specific humanism results from an individual's direct experience and understanding of the consequences of the Great Patriotic War is substantiated. Within this context, the historical fate of the Kyrgyz nation in the 20th century is analyzed with reference to the works by Ch. Aitmatov.

Keywords: Humanism, Man, Kyrgyz culture, Ch. Aitmatov, The western and the eastern, Russian culture, Philosophy, Literature.

1. INTRODUCTION: EASTERN ORIGIN IN THE WORKS BY CHINGIZ AITMATOV

What we have defined as the Eastern origin in Aitmatov's works is justified by the fact that the homeland and culture in which the writer grew up predominantly belong to the Eastern type. However, from another point of view, a thorough study of the culture of the Kyrgyz nation makes it clear (at least to the author) that this culture *expressly* does not belong to the Eastern or Turkic cultural type. Typically, in the broad sense of the word, the notion of the East refers to such countries and cultures as China, India, Japan, as well as the entire Muslim and Buddhist cultural milieu. However, living in the Kyrgyz culture and studying it, we sometimes find more differences than resemblances to these Eastern cultures. In this study, we shall merely point out this idea without descending in particulars.

In this article, the works by Aitmatov are examined in two dimensions: in a broader sense, the study is focused upon identifying the cultural

layers that contributed to the emergence of Ch. Aitmatov's specific humanism, as well as a philosophical consideration of the processes experienced by the Kyrgyz nation in the twentieth century. In a narrower sense, we would like to focus on the "inclusion" of the Kyrgyz nation in the axis of world history; in other words, we analyze the "meeting" of the Kyrgyz nation with Western culture in the light of the works by the outstanding representative of this nation, Chingiz Torekulovich Aitmatov (1928-2008).

Ch. Aitmatov was born in Sheker Village (currently, Talas Region, Kyrgyz Republic). The writer is a laureate of the Lenin Prize and three State Prizes, a Hero of Socialist Labor of the USSR, a Hero of the Kyrgyz Republic, and an Academician of the Academy of Sciences of the Kirghiz SSR.

We consider that the works by Ch. Aitmatov can be divided into two stages for the purposes of discussion. The first stage of his creative work is mostly associated with the Kyrgyz national culture, whereas the second one is related to the so-called "cosmopolitan" period, i.e. touching upon global

issues of humanism, morality, philosophy, politics, ecology, etc. In connection therewith, discussing contemporary art, W. Heisenberg, the German physicist and philosopher, mentions, “art can no longer be determined by the tradition of any specific cultural circle, it tends to convey the view of life of a person who relates his life to the life of the entire Earth, as if he were contemplating the Earth from some star” [1]. Thus, Chingiz Aitmatov was striving to grasp the issues of a common human nature, expanding his search to a greater extent as his literary talent improved. He asks a question, “What happens if you are safely secluded within yourself? It will result in a culture which is pseudo-national in its essence, because it would reflect only one aspect of the national character at most”. [2] To embrace all the beauty and completeness of national life, it was expedient for the author to study other cultures; in this case, Russian and European cultures have to be mentioned first and foremost. Other cultures act as mirrors reflecting our own culture; by getting to know the others, we discover ourselves.

“I need to endure the epoch in which I live in order to speak about it,” Aitmatov once said, answering the journalists’ questions. In fact, World War II had a deep impact on his work and became a motive for creating literary works based on what he had seen and experienced. Hegel emphasized that “philosophy is its own time comprehended in thoughts,” and Aitmatov directly experienced (though he stayed on the home front) and pondered over all the sorrows of the Great Patriotic War. These experiences generated Aitmatov’s deep faith in man and admiration for his virtue, on the one hand; on the other hand, he noticed all his faults.

The Kyrgyz people, who stayed in different living conditions and in other spatial and temporal representations for ages, suddenly encountered a kind of materialistic teaching in the 20th century: K. Marx’s ideas, concepts of socialism and communism, and attempts at their practical implementation turned out to be unexpected and, in a certain sense, “shocked” common people. Harsh methods of dispossession, collectivization, class destruction of “petty bourgeois elements”, etc., caused a lot of misinterpretations. The consequences of the “early Kyrgyz communist” fanaticism related to Lenin’s teachings are reflected in the works by Chingiz Aitmatov. Thus, in his novelette *Farewell, Gulsary!*, the protagonist, an “ex-communist” named Tanabai, in his youth, profoundly enthusiastic about the ideas of communism (in this case, the concept of the

struggle of classes), sends his brother to exile in Siberia, where he loses his life: “Why should I doubt? If he’s on the list, it means he’s an exploiter! For the sake of Soviet power, I won’t spare my own brother! I’ll dispossess him with my own hands if you don’t!” [3]. Afterwards, Tanabai, realizing all the utopianism of the idea of “good and happiness for everyone”, justice, classlessness, actual replacement of the state by the party which acts as an overly bureaucratized administrative apparatus, and common sense replaced by ideology (of course, he does not study those issues theoretically, he just sees their practical implementation while working as a herder), feels disappointed and regrets what he did in his youth when he sent his brother into exile. “It’s all just pointless talk, mere promises,” Tanabai exclaims. What was the point of his actions? What did he sacrifice his brother for? Why did he spend all his life working “for the good” of society if an ordinary man is just a tool, a means to achieve a presumed “higher goal”? [4].

In order to avoid judging the events of those times from the point of view of the present-day perception, when the USSR already collapsed and Marxism and Leninism virtually disappeared from the political sphere, it would be advisable to consider the context of these events.

2. MARXISM AND AITMATOV

Immersing into Russian philosophy and the intellectual life of imperial Russia reveals that, before the October Revolution, the intellectual life of Russia included a pluralism of opinions, and different points of view on social, political, spiritual, and cultural life of the country were widely represented. However, before and after the October Revolution, in the “national outskirts”, as they were referred to, people only had to choose from the two alternatives: they could either support all the innovations and modifications taking place in society or oppose them. There was no other obvious option

Expanding and totally implementing Marxist and Leninist ideas into the life of the Kyrgyz nation considerably narrowed the intellectual space, presenting other views as marginal. As Ch. Aitmatov mentions later, fanatical adherence to dogmatism in the intellectual environment, dictate of the party, certain fears of the central authorities, an inherent inferiority complex, and a constant craving for recognition from the central authorities left no space for free creativity. Due to ostracism and extremely narrow views of the local party

representatives and literary experts, Aitmatov preferred publishing his works in Moscow magazines, where, according to him, there was more space for free creativity. Savetbek Abdrasulov, a contemporary Kyrgyz philosopher, writes that “the newly emerging Soviet Kyrgyz elite could be described as an imitation elite” [5]. The philosopher quotes *The Place of the Skull*, a novel by Ch. Aitmatov, where Kochkorbaev, the community leader, says, “I don’t have to think... I’m always with the party” [6].

Considering the concept of “the useful”, the German philosopher M. Heidegger writes that, when something is at hand, within a usual algorithm of activities, we tend not to notice this thing; we are likely to notice it when it is absent from our everyday use. In the same manner, an ordinary Kyrgyz will notice nothing extraordinary in the works by Aitmatov, since what he describes is his ordinary life. One could even wonder, “What could be surprising in such issues?”

To Aitmatov, who was a humanist and a person deeply believing in love, the official doctrine of dialectical materialism asserting that matter is the basis, and culture is merely its superstructure, was foreign. He most likely shared the opposite views similar to those of Aristotle stating that it is culture that shapes matter and brings it into existence. All his creative works are actually an attempt to “spiritualize” a communist, and, after that, a post-Soviet liberal. Undoubtedly, both a communist and a liberal are products of the Age of Enlightenment, and Aitmatov supported romanticism in many ways, sharing an interest in folklore, myths, fairytales, common man, and return to the origins and nature.

In the beginning, Aitmatov accepted the image of a communist not as a mere idea, but as givenness; however, he tried to make it more humane, spiritual, and profound. To him, the genre of prose is what helps shifting from descriptiveness to a deeper understanding of man and personality. Aitmatov regards literature, on the one hand, as a type of art which embraces life in the most large-scale and versatile manner: it is capable of rendering folk art in a different form without losing its essential features. On the other hand, according to the writer, the advantage of literature over classical philosophy is in the fact that it does not only appeal to reason, strictness of thinking, or logic, but also embraces sensibility, the “lifeworld”, if we apply the terminology of phenomenology. Whereas philosophy tends to discriminate reason

and sensibility, literature strives to synthesize them by generating images and describing man in his fullness and contradictory nature.

While Russian people tended to go beyond the materialistic doctrine that limited them, immanently turning towards God and Orthodoxy, and other Central Asian nations turned towards Islam, the Kirghiz tried to “spiritualize” by being introduced to folklore, mythology, and folk traditions. The reason was that, deeply within their archetype, the Kyrgyz people are not canonically religious. If we use a symbolic language, the Kyrgyz are the nation of music and creativity transmitted by word of mouth. In this regard, Aitmatov writes, “narratives, epics, wandering theaters, poetic ‘mushairas’, i.e. bards’ and poets’ improvisational contests – all of these taken together represents the nature and essence of folk art. While it is profoundly national in its content, it implies universal spiritual human values, which, unfortunately, were declared a product of feudal patriarchal consciousness by our official class ideology until recently, and therefore regarded as hostile to the new socialist culture and subject to ostracism, annihilation, etc.” [7]. In this context, we should mention the spiritual influence of the outstanding narrator of the epic Kyrgyz poem *Manas*¹ Sayakbay Karalaev² on Aitmatov. As an epic poem, *Manas* is “the greatest work of art among all Kyrgyz epic works... in terms of volume, it surpasses all the known epic poems in the world. There are eleven versions of *Manas*, some of which consist of over seven hundred thousand rhymed lines.” [8]. It resembles the following fact: after the so-called turn in philosophizing, Heidegger was amazed by Hölderlin’s poetry; according to his contemporaries, he “would speak loudly when he was alone – he composed his poetry aloud. It seemed to those who overheard him from the neighboring room that, at such moments, he was ‘obsessed’ with poetry, as if something otherworldly was speaking through him and independently of his will” [9]. The Russian philosopher A.V. Pertsev affirms that, according to Heidegger, this “otherworldly” issue is Existence. As to the poetry by F. Hölderlin, it was transformed

1. The most prominent Kyrgyz epic poem and the name of its protagonist, the mighty hero who united the Kyrgyz nation. *Manas* is included in the UNESCO Intangible Cultural Heritage Lists, as well as in the Guinness Book of World Records as the most voluminous epic poem in the world.

2. The great Kyrgyz manaschi, poet, and storyteller Sayakbay Karalaev (1984-1971) had an excellent memory and a profound knowledge of Kyrgyz national folklore. The manaschi performed the traditional epic plots from the *Manas* epic trilogy that he developed himself, improvising perfectly.

by Heidegger into the language as the “home of Existence.”

Unfortunately, despite the fact that S. Karalaev and Heidegger were contemporaries, the latter could not have been acquainted with the former. Heidegger is known for his profound interest in Chinese and Japanese culture; perhaps he would have been impressed by a person who “remembered about a million lines of poetry by heart” [10]. He could perform *Manas* for hours and days without getting tired of it, demonstrating the greatest artistry. S. Karalaev’s rhythm and impeccable performing style completely overcame the language barrier: “during the civil war, when he fought among the red partisans in Siberia...” [11], he performed excerpts from *Manas*. “He recalls that people who did not understand a single word in the Kyrgyz language would listen to *Manas* for hours.” [Ibid.] In his later works, M. Heidegger brilliantly describes and conceptualizes poetry, as well as such outstanding poets as Hölderlin, Rilke, and Trakl [12]. Unfortunately, none of the Kyrgyz philosophers have provided a profound interpretation of *Manas* as an epic poem and “manaschi” as a phenomenon, “deducing” them from the sphere of folklore studies only and expressing them in the philosophical language the way M. Heidegger did.

Aitmatov writes, “I was exceptionally lucky that, in my early childhood, I met people who did not accept the doctrine of totalitarianism internally. They shared their courage with me and taught me to be and always remain humane in spite of anything – to value my human dignity above all the other issues.” [13]. To Aitmatov, Yedigei Burannyi from his novel *The Day Lasts More Than a Hundred Years* and Boston from *The Place of the Skull* are exactly such persons, the true bearers of the supreme ideas of humanism. Besides, Aitmatov writes, “If I were asked about the great people of my nation I know, Sayakbay Karalaev [the narrator] would probably be the first to mention.” [14].

3. EUROPEAN ASPECTS IN THE WORKS BY CH. AITMATOV

The Western world based on Greek philosophy, Roman law, and the Christian religion developed a completely unique type of culture. Aitmatov’s primary task was studying this culture, because one could not become a full-fledged writer without this cultural wealth. In Ch. Aitmatov’s conversation with Daisaku Ikeda, the Japanese philosopher

emphasizes that studying Western philosophy had a positive effect on his knowledge of the domestic culture, “Modern Japanese writers, who have profoundly studied the spirit of Western European culture, have long and painfully pondered over avant-garde, too, in order to clearly understand the cultural tradition of their native country” [15]. In a similar way, Aitmatov tried to comprehend the spirit of Western European culture from the inside in his later works. Since he did not speak any European languages, he was introduced to the European tradition via the Russian language.

As we know, there were controversies about which way Russia should follow in the history of Russian philosophical and political thought. Whereas the Westernizers suggested connecting Russia’s further development only with familiarizing with Western culture, the Slavophiles affirmed that Russia had its own peculiar path of development. Judging from this perspective, Aitmatov could be considered a Westernizer, though there was no such striking stratification in the Kyrgyz society as in Russia. However, it should be noted that the Slavophiles in Russia did not shy away from Western culture and knew it brilliantly; therefore, from the point of view of the content of his works, Aitmatov is closer to them.

Unlike Japanese and Kyrgyz culture, Russian culture was closer to the West both historically and religiously. Due to the monolithic nature of the cultural life of the Kyrgyz nation until the 20th century, no clearly expressed split could emerge in that society. In this regard, Aitmatov undoubtedly welcomed the development of national identity and the cultural development of his nation; at the same time, he obviously opposed the nihilistic attitude towards other nations and cultures. His viewpoint is clear: to be on equal footing with other peoples, one needs to understand them from within.

Thus, the image of Avdii Kalistratov from *The Place of the Skull* is an attempt to understand the Christian (Orthodox) attitude while belonging to an entirely different culture. Aitmatov regards the Christian religion as the backbone of the Western European spirit; therefore, it is no coincidence that he uses a storyline with the Pope as a moral authority in his novel *Cassandra’s Brand*. Not accepting the unequivocal dominance of the cold reason of the Enlightenment and materialistic ideology or pragmatism, Aitmatov highly appreciated faith, sensitive, romantic, dramatic, and tragic aspects which cannot be embraced by reason. Aitmatov does not see the tragic as a totally

negative issue, since it causes a feeling of the fullness of existence and possesses its own internal logic. Formally adhering to generally atheistic views, Aitmatov nevertheless admits that the best moral system ever developed by mankind is contained in the religious teachings.

Undoubtedly, Aitmatov studied European culture via Russian literature; it should also be kept in mind that Russian culture is a part of European culture. Russian philosophy is centered on literary works and is religious in a number of aspects. What was Aitmatov supposed to do if he did not adhere to any religion? What could he rely upon? Apparently, it was the great literary tradition of the Russian nation that provided the “form” he could use in order to express his views. In his conversation with the Japanese philosopher D. Ikeda, Aitmatov admits that he did not have any special philosophical education. For objective reasons, it was impossible to get a neutral, profound, and versatile philosophical education at that time, anyway. Perhaps that was why he regards philosophy as one of the constituent parts of literature. In fact, starting with Parmenides, classical philosophy admits the identity of thinking and existence, therefore, everything that is not related to thinking is rejected by “pure philosophy”. Hegel’s panlogism which asserts the identity of thought and existence and Marxist social determinism which leaves no space for personality, as well as Husserl’s reduction and attempts to reduce philosophy to a strict science and Wittgenstein’s affirmation stating, “Whereof one cannot speak, thereof one must be silent” are unacceptable for Aitmatov’s romantic and metaphysical approach. Since philosophy sometimes shifts too far from man in its “quest for objectivity”, and man becomes just an instrument of “objective” law (at least according to Hegelian and Marxist concepts known to Aitmatov), he does not seek to proceed from a certain philosophical system, refusing to accept it as a universal and all-encompassing method of cognition for explaining society and man.

It should be mentioned that, in his social and political essays and dialogues (for instance, the dialogue with the Japanese philosopher D. Ikeda titled *Ode to the Grand Spirit*) [16], Aitmatov refers to non-classical thinkers, such as F. Nietzsche, S. Kierkegaard, F. Dostoevsky, and L. Shestov. Aitmatov’s works could be characterized as existentiality affirming the love for life, not the individualism of atheistic existentialism. A certain proximity of non-classical philosophy to literature

and other forms of expression denotes a certain crisis within the limits of rationalist philosophy itself, since positivism, scientism, and a strictly scientific approach to philosophy and life result in degradation of the very essence of philosophy, because, as the Russian philosopher S. A. Nizhnikov mentions, “human existence is characterized by its progression into nothingness, ‘protruding beyond the limits of existence as a whole’, and transcending is inherent in it” [17]. A.V. Pertsev notes that, “by rejecting all theoretical considerations and, in general, all sorts of ‘meanings’ as extra-scientific inventions, positivists attempt to reduce all human knowledge to observation of facts and statistical processing of experience. Within the framework of this approach, any reasoning about the Existence which is otherworldly (for experience), or about the transcendental, the ultramundane are represented as sheer madness.” [18].

Apparently for this reason, Aitmatov, not without the influence of Nietzsche, describes the current state of society and man, “we are reaping the fruits sown when the hereditary intelligentsia was destroyed, the hereditary peasantry was exterminated, monuments were destroyed, God was abolished, and law was breached” [19]. A purely materialistic ideology could not firmly establish itself in the Kyrgyz mythological and poetic worldview. Kyrgyz culture had to deal with a degenerate form of European culture which sometimes acted aggressively. Aitmatov writes, “When all the angels fell, and their gods perished, humans did not notice that they had become ‘different’. Such ‘new’ humans had to overthrow God, because otherwise, they were simply scared to destroy all living things, water, for instance, by intoxicating it with poisonous waste. In the East, such actions as considered deadly sins to this day” [20].

The criticism of traditional metaphysics (philosophy) suggested by M. Heidegger, on the one hand, correlates with Aitmatov’s views of philosophy, yet on the other hand, it differs from it profoundly. First, as we have mentioned before, mythopoetic themes touched upon in Heidegger’s later work are due to the crisis of philosophy itself. An attempt at creating a “non-conceptual” comprehension of existence and the search for other forms of expressing his views lead Heidegger away from applying traditional metaphysical concepts. In this aspect, Aitmatov, paying no particular attention to philosophical concepts and categories, turns specifically to prose, novels, and simple words,

since he believes that “the world can be embraced only by thought, only by the word that expresses it” [21]. Heidegger, who radically strives to discover another origin in philosophy and thought, regards humanism as a project of a metaphysical tradition which must be overcome. Unlike Heidegger, Aitmatov remains faithful to his *humanism* based on human love and a romantically sublime attitude towards man. Thus, gradually joining Russian philosophy centered upon literature, Chingiz Aitmatov continues his own way.

4. CONCLUSION

Relativization and regarding truth as relativity in the philosophy of postmodernism yield the idea that there is no truth as such left in all the spheres of the present-day life. In the context of the 20th century, as M. Foucault demonstrated, truth started to be actively associated with power. The capitalist and socialist blocs had their own “truths” and “realities”. In this regard, Aitmatov as a metaphysician and a representative of romanticism has always affirmed that absolute truth does exist.

The truth lies in the spiritual unity of all nations, the western ones and the eastern ones. Aitmatov writes, “in view of this, I see the dialectical unity of the West and the East as a visionary harmony of the universal subject, when the West acts as a force mostly involved in the quest for God outside, which has determined its achievements in cognizing the external world, whereas the East is always absorbed in searching for God within its soul, which has determined its unique achievements in cognizing the cosmic essence of the human substance. I see these principles as the supreme dialogue of the world culture”. [22]

Therefore, the following points can be highlighted as a conclusion: firstly, in the works by Ch. Aitmatov, two cultures, the eastern one (Kyrgyz) and the European one (Russian), overlap, which significantly influences the genesis of this unique Eurasian writer.

Secondly, Aitmatov strives to “spiritualize” the communist, and, subsequently, the post-Soviet liberal. Omitting a number of nuances, we can affirm that both communism and liberalism are based on the same premises, such as the essential ideas of the Enlightenment.

Thirdly, it is Aitmatov’s addressing the Eastern tradition that, in a certain sense, spiritualizes his initially materialistic views.

Fourthly, despite the influence of materialist ideology, Aitmatov stays true to his understanding of humanism based on human love and a romantically sublime attitude towards man. Ch. Aitmatov’s humanism was gained through suffering of his life in which the epoch was refracted.

AUTHORS’ CONTRIBUTIONS

A. I. Kadyrov was directly responsible for writing the text of the article. And also analyzed all collected primary sources and literature. T. Zhumagulov was responsible for collecting primary sources, necessary literature and compiling the structure of the scientific article. B. M. Maratov was responsible for text design and editing of the final version of the article.

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