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Aqyn agha? Abai Zholy as socialist realism and as literary history

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ABSTRACT

In Mukhtar Auezov's 1942 novel *Abai Zholy*, socialism is an end anticipated not just by history but more specifically by Kazakh literary history. In his earlier scholarly writings, Auezov had presented Abai as a transformational figure in the emergence of written Kazakh literature. In the novel, Abai becomes not only a literary innovator but also a political reformist: Auezov's Abai is horrified by the harsh and feudalistic behavior of his father Qunanbai, a wealthy local leader, and finds companionship and inspiration in his encounters with a series of famous 19th century Kazakh *aqyns* (bards). Auezov thus used *Abai Zholy* to argue that Kazakh folk literature had always been animated by a spirit of social critique which, in its laments and desires, had anticipated the Soviet world. This paper compares these *aqyns'* depiction in the novel first with Auezov's earlier scholarship on the 19th century and second with the content of the *aqyns'* own surviving works. These ideas reflected both contemporaneous shifts in Soviet nationalities policy and the influence of socialist realist literary models, which commonly staged both literary history and generational conflicts as allegories of political change.

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1. Introduction

Mukhtar Auezov's *Abai Zholy* is literary history written as revolutionary epic.¹ In the novel, Auezov fused his enduring preoccupation with Kazakh literary history with his specific interest in the 19th century Kazakh essayist and poet Abai Qunanbaiuly to create a text hailed as a classic of socialist realism. Auezov's interest in Abai dated to his earliest years: in a 1918 essay entitled "Abai, his works and craft,"

he made expansive claims for Abai's social and literary significance. For earlier poets, he wrote, verbal dexterity had been not an art but only a device to gain food and shelter, and so "the *aqyn* and the beggar had gone hand in hand;" Abai was the first to use poetry "to depict the human character, to tell its flaws, and show the path to humanism" (1918/2014, p. 42). In later works, Auezov continued to present Abai as transformational in his understanding of the link between verbal art and humanism, but he replaced the harsh evaluation of earlier *aqyns* with sophisticated explorations of the genres and themes of Kazakh oral literature. *Auezov's 1927/2014 Adebiet Tarikhy (History of Literature)*—a foundational attempt to organize Kazakh oral literature into a history of genres—contained detailed descriptions of earlier *aqyns* along with transcriptions and analyses of their works. In his novel, Auezov repeatedly shows the young Abai meeting with Kazakh *aqyns* who are fictionalized versions

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¹ Kazakh words are Romanized in accordance with the ALA-LC standard (but without the use of diacritics) except where other spellings have already become standard in English. All quotations of Kazakh texts are original translations by the author.

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of the real 19th century *aqyns* who had earlier figured in Auezov's scholarly works. Abai listens to their songs, reflects on their hidden messages, discusses these themes with the *aqyns* themselves, and is inspired to become an *aqyn* himself. Abai's revolutionary literary conscience is, in Auezov's telling, a weapon for social justice forged from the raw ore of Kazakh oral literature.

The historical Abai (1845–1904) was an odd choice as the hero of a socialist realist novel. He came from a wealthy and powerful family, was the son of the district's Agha Sultan, in his youth studied at a *medrese*, had multiple wives, and even served as an administrator for the Tsarist authorities.² Abai was plausible as a Soviet hero largely due to his ties with Russian revolutionary thought: in his late 20s he elected to travel to Semipalatinsk to study in a Russian school and there became close friends with Russian exiles and dissidents, whose ideas influenced Abai's most famous work, a collection of 45 short essays entitled the *Qara Sozder* (*Black Words*) in which he advocates for a Russian-inflected path to modernity.³ Auezov (1897–1961) was similarly a product of Russian education, first graduating from a college in Semipalatinsk and later studying Russian philology at Leningrad University in the mid-1920s. In the 1930s, Auezov not only established himself as a major scholar and writer, the author of an extensive list of plays, short stories, novels, and studies of Kazakh oral literature, but also survived attacks on these works as ideologically suspect. Auezov, briefly jailed in 1933, was criticized for neglecting socialist realism in favor of folk literature, and for writing historical fiction that romanticized rather than attacked 19th century Kazakh leaders.⁴ Yet when Auezov published the first volume of *Abai Zholy* in 1942, it was widely praised exactly as a triumph of socialist realism. Auezov had not only cast Abai as a Soviet hero, but had seemingly succeeded in using him to prove Kazakh literature was always already socialist.

Auezov's identification of a common ideological center in the disparate utterances of 19th century Kazakh *aqyns* and a *fin de siècle* Kazakh poet and essayist was a task troubled by the heteroglot complexities of the texts themselves. Neither oral nor written words, Mikhail Bakhtin writes, are ever free of entanglement with the already said, for close examination of any utterance necessarily reveals the "half-concealed or completely concealed words of others," which leave it "furrowed with distant and barely audible echoes of changes of speech subjects and dialogic overtones" (Bakhtin, 1986, p. 93). In *Abai Zholy*, these "words of others" were drawn from a 19th century world in which – as Auezov meticulously documented in his own scholarship – *aqyns* used the different registers of poetic speech to engage in oral duels with one another, to petition or mock their leaders, to memorialize at funerals and to flirt at weddings, and did all this with a head-spinning blend of

newly-coined verses and laudatory quotes from earlier poems. The novel thus had to hammer into ideological harmony a cacophonous polyphony of genres, performers, and performative contexts.⁵

The achievement of harmony was further complicated by rapid shifts in Soviet ideological pieties: as in the years to come the norms for acceptable descriptions of Russian–Kazakh relations in the pre-Soviet era shifted, as figures from Kazakh history were coded as progressive or banished as reactionary, and as the conventions and forms of socialist realism shifted, Auezov changed names, deleted portions of chapters, and added new sections to others.⁶ This paper uses specific details of the textual history of the first volume in order to examine the strategies Auezov followed as he attempted to craft a novel that would marry the conventions of socialist realism with a literary genealogy in which Abai was at once the heir of Kazakh oral literature and the forefather of Soviet Kazakh literature.

2. Socialist realism and nationalism

Stalin, so the story goes, coined both the famous description of authors as 'engineers of human souls,' the injunction that this meant they must depict 'reality in its revolutionary development,' and the conclusion that all this was done through a genre to be known as 'socialist realism.' These terms – enshrined as official policy at the first All-Union Congress of Soviet Writers in 1934 – problematically demanded modes of writing at once realistic and fantastic, for the 'reality' to be depicted was not the Soviet Union as it was but socialism as it would surely become (Clark, 2000, esp. p. 36–41).⁷

These ambitions meant that the socialist realist novel was a kind of Dr. Jekyll to the Mr. Hyde of Bakhtin's 'novel.' The epic differs from the novel, Bakhtin wrote, in that the former describes a complete and temporally distant world with no room for "open endedness, indecision, indeterminacy," while the latter – inhabited by heroes whose faces are but the first in a series of masks and animated by the anarchic energies of the carnivalesque – offers a "a living contact with unfinished, still evolving contemporary reality" (Bakhtin, 1984, p. 7). In the classic novels of socialist realism, exemplary Soviet citizens fought in the Revolution, struggled to re-open a factory or organize a *kolkhoz*, furiously confronted *kulaks* or careerists bureaucrats, and along the way gradually learned to harness their earlier-unbridled energy.

⁵ This focus on the tension between *Abai Zholy* and the oral literary texts incorporated builds on the discussion of intertextuality, authority, and the emergence of 'intertextual gaps' in Bauman and Briggs (2003), and Bauman (2004).

⁶ The revision of classics of socialist realism in order to ensure their conformity with changing ideological norms was a standard part of Soviet literary culture. The revisions to Auezov's *Abai Zholy* were comparatively limited in comparison with other works – there were at least four substantial revisions to Fedor Gladkov's *Cement* between its initial publication in 1925 and its final publication in 1958, the cumulative effect of which were to substantially simplify the novel's depiction of the NEP-era Soviet Union – see Laursen (2006).

⁷ For detailed descriptions of the adoption of the term socialist realism at the 1934 conference, see Brooks (1994) and Schild (2010). On socialist realism as a genre, see the studies of Clark (2000), Robin (1992), and Dobrenko (2007).

² For a detailed discussion of Abai's relations with Russian figures, see Campbell (2011, chapter four); for Abai's place within 19th century Kazakh intellectual life, see Uyama (2000).

³ *Black Words* is the title's literal translation, but the idiomatic meaning of 'qara soz' is prose. In the text, Abai employ a simple, almost conversational, style, in which he asks himself questions and debates possible answers.

⁴ The most detailed discussion of Auezov in the 1930s is in Kudaibergenova (2017); see also Yilmaz (2015).

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