

***I Aspire to Be a Good Person* (1965)**

Tologon Kasymbek (1931-2011)

OVERVIEW

Author

Tologon Kasymbek was born on January 15, 1931, in Ak-Jol village, Aksy District, Jalal-Abad Region, Kyrgyzstan, as Kudaiberdi, the son of his father Kasymbek's second marriage. His father, an educated man, introduced him to historical narratives and oral traditions, which later influenced Tologon's literary works. Kasymbek's death when Tologon was fifteen forced him into a life of hardship, shaping his resilience and commitment to learning.

He studied Kyrgyz Language and Literature at Kyrgyz State University and began publishing fiction while still a student. After graduating in 1957, he held key cultural positions, including chief editor of *Ala-Too* (1960–1973) and later of the State Committee for Publishing under the Council of Ministers of the Kyrgyz SSR.

Kasymbek's literary career began with *The Little Horseman* (1952). He gained national recognition with *Alymkan*, later adapted into a film. His autobiographical novella *I Aspire to Be a Good Person* (*Adam Bolgum Kelet*, 1965) reflects his own life experiences.

He is best known for historical novels. *Flourishing* (*Kelkel*) explores Kyrgyz life before and after Soviet rule, while *The Raid* (*Baskyn*) and *The Massacre* (*Kyrgyn*) depict historical events and figures such as Baytik, Shabdan Batyr, Kurmanjan Datka, Toktogul Akyn, and Jantay Khan. His most celebrated novel, *The Broken Sword* (*Syngan Kylych*, 1966), was translated into all major Soviet languages and into English in 1980.

Tologon Kasymbek is a deeply loved and celebrated author in Kyrgyzstan, renowned for his mastery of historical novels. Through his works, he vividly brings to life the history, culture, and traditions of the Kyrgyz people, portraying their struggles, resilience, and values across generations. His novels combine meticulous historical research with compelling storytelling, offering readers both education and inspiration. Kasymbek's writings not only preserve the memory of important historical events and figures but also explore universal themes of honor, courage, and human dignity, earning him a lasting place in Kyrgyz literature and the hearts of readers.

Novella

The writer's autobiographical novella, *Adam Bolgum Kelet*, was published in 1965 in Russian under the title *Хочу быть человеком* (*I want to be a Human*). It has not yet been translated into English.

In Kyrgyz, *adam bol* refers to becoming a good and honorable person who lives a meaningful and dignified life, a principle often imparted to young people entering adulthood. Accordingly, the English title for this novella can be rendered as *I Aspire to Be a Good Person*. The work was translated into Turkish as *İnsan Olmak İstiyorum* by Samet Azap and published in 2019.

Background

This autobiographical novella tells the story of T. Kasymbek, whose early hardships shaped his life. In 1946, an earthquake killed his father, leaving him and his widowed mother to suffer. During a famine, authorities caught his mother stealing two heads of barley and brought her before the village council. Seeing her cry, the young Kasymbek comforted her, saying, "Mother, why are you crying? We took only two heads of barley out of hunger. No one has died."

Kasymbek repeatedly tries to enroll at the university in Frunze from Osh but often fails. He sees wealthy children admitted easily and feels life is unfair. Briefly frustrated, he quickly returns to his dreams and focuses on continuing his studies. The novella shows the small defeats and challenges a young person faces while seeking his own path, and even after sixty years, its events remain relevant, reflecting the author's insight into human nature.

The main character, Asylbek, initially believes that becoming a "man" requires wealth, success, and social approval, following his father's advice. Through challenges, he learns that living honorably, helping others, and contributing to society are the true paths to a good life.

Asylbek's father, Changyl, holds an old-fashioned mindset. He believes that being a "good man" means wealth, high office, and praise, and he tries to secure opportunities for his son through flattery, food, and bribery. He shows little interest in Asylbek's ambitions and seeks to control his path. Even today, this image of a controlling father remains familiar and relevant.

MAIN CHARACTERS

Asylbek – main character, a young man aged 17–19

Changyl – Asylbek's father

Chotur – neighbor, tractor driver

Bazyl – disabled war veteran

Orko – team leader in the kolkhoz

SYNOPSIS

The action takes place in the 1960s in the Aksy region of Kyrgyzstan. Asylbek and Mykty, recent school graduates, travel to Frunze (now Bishkek), the capital of Soviet Kyrgyzstan, hoping to enter the law department. However, both Asylbek and Mykty, the son of the head of the local village council, are idle and unprepared for the exams. They fail and return to their village.

Asylbek's father, Changyl, is very unhappy with his son's failure. He scolds Asylbek, reminding him that he has sold his only calf to support his education and had hoped his son would become a good man. Changyl tries to find a job for Asylbek in various municipal administration positions. Changyl works at the *raipo*, administrative office responsible for industry, procurement, and planning, but he is dismissed when a young specialist arrives. Despite asking his boss to give the position to his son Asylbek, the boss refuses.

Changyl invites Berdike, the head of the local municipal village council, to a lavish dinner. Berdike, who is trying to remove his secretary Kokul, promises Changyl that he will give the position to Asylbek. Asylbek dreams of this job and continues to idle in the village with Mykty, who spends his time drinking alcohol. However, Kokul becomes head of the village council, Berdike is dismissed, and Asylbek's dreams are destroyed.

Changyl warns Asylbek not to associate with lowly or "dirty" workers like Chotur, the neighbor and tractor driver. He also dislikes Orko, the local kolkhoz team leader, who tries to involve Changyl and Asylbek in physical labor, such as building a chicken shed, preparing silage, and collecting the harvest. Changyl despises physical work and looks down on Orko. He behaves proudly and arrogantly toward the workers. The villagers discuss the idleness of Asylbek and Mykty while women and girls work; even at a village meeting, this topic comes up.

Changyl finds a new job at the forestry instead of working at the chicken shed or the fields. He tries to gain favor with Ivanov, the head of the local forestry office, inviting him to dinner. Ivanov offers to help rebuild Changyl's old, collapsing house for a thousand soms, but Changyl refuses, saying it is too expensive. One day, when their house and shed collapse, the "dirty" worker Chotur teaches them how to rebuild the wall.

Despite his father's protests, Asylbek tries to help with the harvest and plough the field with Chotur, which his father hates. Changyl finds him a job as an assistant to the school head, but Asylbek refuses. He then works as a collector of old leather and animal skins for reproduction. This job slightly satisfies his father because Asylbek can carry his old bag. Eventually, Asylbek decides to change his life. He leaves his job and wants to work at the hydroelectric station. He throws away the old bag and starts a new path for himself.

SCENES

Asylbek Failed Exams A young man named Asylbek left his village to enter the university in the city. It was summer, and the wheat was almost ripe when he departed, carrying his documents and his parents' hopes. When he returned; the fields were golden and the grain had already been cut. His parents were overjoyed to see him. After a while, Asylbek confessed that he had failed the entrance exams. His father, recently dismissed from his job, was angry because he had high expectations for his son. He lamented that the son of Toko, a villager, had graduated while Asylbek had not. His mother comforted him gently and set *ayran*, fermented milk drink and fresh bread before him.

Asylbek's First Night in the City Asylbek went to the city to apply to the law faculty. He admired the beauty of the city's buildings and walked with hope, eager to start his studies. Mykty, a confident young man, saw Asylbek reading a book and suggested, "Let's go out into the city and have a beer." That evening, the city looked incredible to Asylbek: cars, parks, fountains, beautiful girls, elegant young men. They went to a restaurant, had some beer, and got a little tipsy. By the time they left, it was already late.

A Long Night That night, Mykty explained that his father, the head of the village council, had written letters to his friends at the university to help them get enrolled. He added that his father had made sure Asylbek was included as well. After their long journey, they finally reached the dormitory and fell asleep. The next morning, they went to the university to attend enrollment preparation courses. Among them was a Russian language class to help them get ready for the entrance exams.

Wandering the City Asylbek and Mykty couldn't focus in class. "I'm hungry, let's go," Mykty said, and Asylbek eagerly followed. No one stopped them. They wandered the city streets, basking in sunlight, visiting stores, and letting the day drift by. At the bazaar, they shared a watermelon, they admired colorful clothes and shining Volga cars in the city. "My dream is to be a big boss, head of a ministry," Mykty said. Asylbek laughed, "That's hard." "Luck decides," Mykty shrugged. Later, imagining wealth, they joked of cars, gold watches, and bribes. The day ended in the old beer pub, *shashlyk* barbeque on the table, laughter and beer warming the evening.

The Exam Day The day of the exam arrived and the hall was crowded with anxious applicants. Asylbek and Mykty felt a heavy sadness. The Russian language test began, a spelling and writing exercise dictated by audio. They glanced around, hoping someone might help. Mykty tried to sit near a clever-looking student, but an old professor separated them and the exam began. The next day they searched the results. Asylbek hoped for at least a C, but his name appeared in the middle of the failed list. Mykty had failed too. Neither Asylbek nor Mykty was admitted to the further exams. Their father's friend could not help, for the teachers said Mykty was not a good student.

A Visit to the Rector The next day, Asylbek and Mykty went to the rector, the president of the university. They told him of their long journey from a distant village, of the hard work at the kolkhoz, and of their dream to study. The rector listened and gently explained that the competition was fierce, and failing the Russian language exam meant they could not continue, for all instruction was in Russian. Their hearts sank. Dreams of learning, bright as the summer sun, dimmed in an instant. Sadness clung to them like the evening mist, and hope felt distant, fragile, and thin.

Chotur Neighbor One day Chotur, a neighbor and tractor driver, came to talk with Asylbek. Once, he had followed his mother's strict teachings, abusing his wife, forcing humiliations, and filling the village with whispers of shame. His wife longed for love, but he demanded obedience, even making her kiss his dirty feet. Years passed, his mother died, his first wife left, and the villagers remembered his cruelty. Now Chotur had a new wife, Soiko. When asked if he remained harsh, she laughed, he had changed, learned respect, and worked humbly, leaving the past behind.

A Ride to the District One morning, Asylbek's father woke him and hung an old bag on the wall, saying he would need it once he got a job. "I will ride my horse to the district center," his father said. "You

follow me after." Asylbek climbed into the car with the driver, Kenebay. On the road, Kenebay honked as a joke, startling the horse. Furious, Asylbek barely kept the car from crashing. After Kenebay left, he saw his father ahead and rode alongside him to the *raipo* office, the Soviet district cooperative overseeing stores, bakeries, and community services.

A New Job At the *raipo* office, Asylbek's father stood proud yet wounded, asking that his old position be given to his son. He even swore he would sell his horse if trouble came. The boss shook his head; a new man already filled the chair. Outside, hope did not die. When news came that the village council secretary was leaving, the father's eyes brightened. "We will invite Berdike," he said softly. "*Tashty eritken ash*, food and respect can melt stone." He urged Asylbek to befriend Mykty, Berdike's son. But Asylbek's heart resisted, remembering wasted money and silent betrayals in the city.

Big Promises Asylbek bought sweets, and bottles at the village store, while his mother brewed bozo, the gentle drink that warms courage and loosens tongues. He felt uneasy. Soon Berdike arrived, round and important, with his thin accountant Burgo. Neighbor Orko drifted in as if invited by fate. Vodka flowed freely. Berdike boasted that his son Mykty would soon leave for military academy. Asylbek's father spoke carefully of work for his son. Orko suggested hauling grain and then spoke of fetching water instead. The father looked past him. Berdike mentioned the vacant secretary's post. As they were leaving through the gate, Asylbek's father gathered his courage and asked Berdike to appoint his son secretary. Berdike smiled, patted his coat, and said, "Time will show."

Proposals and Ambitions Asylbek spent days in the village library. One day Orko, the supervisor of a work team at the kolkhoz, rode up on horseback. He asked Changyl to help build a chicken shed. Changyl, proud and stubborn, refused. "I am meant to lead, not hammer boards," he said. Orko warned him he would answer to the kolkhoz chairman. That afternoon old Aiymgul arrived with news of a wedding in the village. She suggested Akbay's clever daughter for Asylbek. His mother beamed, and Asylbek nearly dropped his book. Changyl asked, "Did he choose, or did you?" Then added firmly, "First, let him find a job."

Asylbek Did not Attend a Meeting Asylbek felt happy imagining his future job as secretary of the kolkhoz. One day, a meeting was held, but he did not attend. His father was furious, insisting he be active like everyone else, not sit idly at home. He warned Asylbek not to befriend Chotur or other ordinary workers. Another day, Asylbek rode his horse while Chotur drove his tractor. Soiko climbed onto the trailer, calling out, "Work hard and don't keep company with lazy people like Asylbek." He felt a flush of irritation and discomfort, but said nothing, uneasy under her teasing gaze.

Uneasy Encounters One day Asylbek noticed a yurt and a tent and saw Shaiyr, who worked at the local library. She asked him to ride along, and he felt a quiet, special attention in her gaze. Her husband was away in military service. She explained that she was delivering books to workers in the fields and pastures. Shaiyr mentioned that Asylbek and Mykty had been idling in the village and that their behavior had been discussed at the Komsomol meeting. Unease settled over Asylbek, and he tried to quietly leave, embarrassed and restless. Back in the village, Chotur asked Asylbek to play cards. Asylbek refused. "Why?" Chotur said, scowling. "You are lazy and do not work." Asylbek grew angry. Chotur reminded him again that his idleness had been discussed at the meeting.

Under the Big Tree Asylbek stopped speaking to Chotur and began keeping company with Bazyl, a war veteran without legs. Bazyl sat under a tree, playing music and sharing stories, tending his garden of corn, melons, and tomatoes with his strong wife managing both farm and home. One day Mykty arrived, mocking Bazyl and teasing Asylbek. They drank vodka with onions, ate melons, and argued over jobs and drinks. Mykty mocked Asylbek as a woman, and anger flared, but Bazyl intervened. When Mykty pressed for more vodka and ridiculed him, Bazyl struck him with his *komuz* in frustration, breaking the instrument.

Plans Asylbek and Mykty returned home, greeted by Changyl, Asylbek's father, whose politeness toward Mykty was careful, for his father had promised a job for Asylbek. Changyl had a new post at the forestry. Mykty joked that Changyl could sell a big sack of nuts on the black market and grow rich, but

Changyl only smiled, feigning meek honesty. Later, Asylbek and Mykty went to the district, enjoying the bustling streets and the small pleasures of freedom. Changyl said softly, "You two should stick together, we are old, like your father, Berdike." Mykty smiled, adding that his father wanted Asylbek as his secretary, which made Changyl quietly pleased.

The Corn Dispute One day Orko came to Changyl's garden and said the corn should be cut for silage, to feed animals in the long winter. Changyl shook his head, firm and stubborn. "The leaves are for my only cow," he replied. Orko offered hay instead, but Changyl refused. Changyl was a man who did not love gardening. He grew only corn, a simple crop that demanded little work, enough to feed his cow and tend his small garden. Orko's visits irritated him, every suggestion and command a challenge to his pride. Changyl felt superior, calm in his stubbornness, guarding his patch of land and the life he had chosen.

Field Lessons One day Asylbek and Mykty went to the fields, where many villagers and the team leader, Orko, were working. Their arrival surprised everyone, for they had been discussed at the meeting. Asylbek felt shy and ashamed, while Mykty criticized freely. Villagers, young and old, girls and women, worked at silage preparation, mocking the two lazy men and urging them to join. Slowly, Asylbek began working, surprising Orko, and Mykty finally joined too. Sadyr, Bazyl's brother, struck Mykty for breaking Bazyl's komuz in a past fight. Fists and a pitchfork clashed, but the crowd intervened.

Chotur's Visit One day Asylbek was reading when Chotur passed by. "How are you?" he asked, his tone teasing, as if seeking a quarrel. Asylbek sensed the provocation but answered calmly. Chotur complained that Asylbek never visited him. "I am busy," said Asylbek. "Busy?" Chotur scoffed, "I have never seen you busy." Anger stirred within Asylbek, yet he held it. Chotur invited him home, a challenge hidden in hospitality. Asylbek hesitated, caught between pride and curiosity, while the quiet village watched their subtle tension like leaves in a restless wind.

The Master Builder Changyl's father welcomed a guest, Comrade Ivanov, head of forestry, a Russian proud of Kyrgyzstan's vast forests. Asylbek disliked his father's flattery and stepped outside. His father asked him to catch a cock for the guest, but Asylbek failed, and a hen replaced it. Ivanov spoke at length of his skill, saying the house of Changyl was poor and needed rebuilding to survive earthquakes.

Plan To Build a House Asylbek translated Ivanov's words: the master offered to build them a house and asked a thousand som for his work. Changyl smiled, proud and confident, claiming, "I am a master myself." Yet Ivanov persisted, sharing that in three years he had built a six-room house, grander than nearly any in the village. The village boasted only a handful of fine homes. Asylbek remembered when Ivanov arrived three years earlier. By summer's end, a fine house stood beneath a red roof, six bright rooms rising where dust once lay.

The Red Roof House Ivanov's family was never idle; their hands worked steadily, their garden neat and full. Some villagers asked to buy the house. Ivanov named ten thousand *soms*, local currency unit and they gasped at the price. Even Asylbek's father once offered his only cow, a comical bargain for such a home. Remembering this, Asylbek smiled. When Ivanov later departed, he left simple advice behind: work hard, and build your life brick by brick.

Cards and Confessions Asylbek went to Chotur's house, where Dilde, a distant cousin girl, worked steadily at her sewing machine. The needle clicked as the men played cards. Chotur mocked Asylbek for idling in the village; Dilde smiled, and Asylbek felt the sting of it. When Chotur accused him of staring at her, his discomfort deepened. Then Chotur spoke of his own fall, his wife leaving after his cruelty, gambling away even his coat, stealing a suitcase that held only books and underclothes. He fought, drank, barely survived. "There's a meeting tomorrow," Chotur added. Asylbek kept silent, shame heavy in his chest.

At the Village Office The next day Chotur and Asylbek went to the municipal village office for the meeting. Burgo the accountant sat buried in paperwork, barely looking up. Soon four women entered,

asking for government money promised for their children. One was a single mother, and Burgo mocked her cruelly for having a child out of wedlock. The women's faces flushed; they demanded their payments, accusing him of hiding the money stubs and withholding funds. Their voices grew firm and unafraid. Asylbek could not stay silent. He stepped forward and sharply criticized Burgo for his unlawful actions and heartless behavior.

Lights on the Naryn The meeting began with a young speaker from the district executive office, neat and confident. He spoke of a new hydroelectric station on the Naryn River, a grand project that would bring light and power to the region. Kokul, the current secretary of the village council, urged the youth to join the construction. Asylbek felt uneasy speaking near him, sensing that one day he might take Kokul's place. He asked for volunteers. Kenebay the driver eagerly stood, and two others followed. A film was to inspire them, but flickering reels and failures left the hall in restless darkness.

Among the Potatoes Asylbek walked past the fields where young people bent low, lifting potatoes from the dark earth. He searched for Dilde among the scarves and sunlit braids. The women noticed him first; they laughed lightly and teased him to take a sack and earn his bread. Their irony pricked his pride. Sadyr's gaze was colder. He accused Asylbek of idling with Mykty and warned him not to mock poor Bazyl, the disabled man who labored despite his pain. Shame burned in Asylbek's chest. Without another word, he stepped into the furrows and began gathering potatoes, hands sinking into honest soil. Asylbek carried Dilde in his thoughts the whole day, as one carries a quiet melody that refuses to fade.

After the Harvest After collecting potatoes in the field, Dilde brushed the soil from her skirt and walked toward Chotur's house, her steps slow with evening tiredness. She was three years younger than Asylbek, once the best singer at school, her voice bright and fearless. Now she had grown into a quiet young lady, her songs replaced by thoughtful silences. Asylbek saw her on the path and hurried to meet her, searching for simple words. Dilde answered shyly, sensing his affection. A faint warmth rose in her cheeks, but she lowered her eyes and hid it, pretending indifference.

An Anonymous Letter Autumn arrived, and the nomads returned from the summer pastures, their herds trailing dust along the valley road. One evening Asylbek's father came home from work strangely restrained; by morning his anger had ripened. He woke Asylbek at dawn and ordered him to write a petition to the Chairman of the Cabinet of Ministers of Kyrgyzstan. For three months they had waited while Kokul, once secretary, spread false accusations against Berdike and took the post for himself. Father raged about Kokul's cruelty, his adultery, even his grandfather's sins. Asylbek framed the complaint in careful legal words. He signed his father's name, only to be shouted down. "Anonymous!" his father demanded.

Learning the Weight of Work Asylbek began working on the tractor trailer with Chotur. When Orko, the team leader, came by and asked about Soiko, he was surprised to see Asylbek at work. He wondered aloud whether he could handle such heavy labor. Orko said Changyl had always held office posts and was now busy with forestry; otherwise, he would never have allowed his son to work on a tractor trailer. He urged Asylbek to learn to drive the tractor himself. Asylbek soon enjoyed the work, sleeping well and feeling new strength. But his father, still restless and dissatisfied, came one day, mocked the job, and asked him to go somewhere with him.

Between the Plain and the River His father said that the school head's assistant had been dismissed and that the headmaster had requested Asylbek be brought. Standing in the middle of the ploughed field, Asylbek quietly asked what he would be expected to do. His father replied he would serve as the school head's assistant. Asylbek refused. His father shouted, anger echoing across the plain. Without another word, Asylbek sprang onto the tractor, and Chotur drove off with him, leaving his father standing alone among the furrows, muttering to the wind. All day unease followed him. By evening, he walked to the river and heard Dilde singing as she carried water. Hidden, he smiled, heart lifted. Later, passing her house, her mother noticed him, and he hurried by, pretending not to see.

Evening at Dilde's Window Night had fallen, and Asylbek lingered near the window of Dilde's house. Inside, she read a book, the lamplight soft on her face. Her mother urged her to sleep, teasing, "Changyl's son, Asylbek, is always wandering near this house." Dilde smiled. "Mom, you suspect everyone." Her mother chuckled, remembering the last time Asylbek's mother had asked if they might marry. Dilde shook her head firmly. "No, Mom. I consider Asylbek only as my cousin brother, Chotur." Asylbek watched quietly, heart stirring with a mix of embarrassment and longing.

Tears in the Field Asylbek returned home to his father's fury, sensing anger not just at him but at his mother too. His father demanded to know if Orko had drawn him to tractor work. Asylbek stayed silent. Then his father ordered him to write an anonymous petition to the Prime Minister, accusing Orko of wrongdoing. Memories of hundreds of anonymous letters flooded him, and he felt embarrassed, as if everyone knew his secret. "No need to write about Orko," he whispered. His father shouted, insisting Orko had abused a woman to force her labor. Asylbek refused. Furious, his father stormed off. Alone, Asylbek ran outside and wept under the open sky.

The Skin Collector One day, Asylbek began working, collecting old leather and animal skins to be processed into leather. He spent the autumn with Chotur on the trailer, then moved to gathering dried animal dung to sell as fuel, earning his own wages. Happiness settled over him; his father, softened after the anonymous letter drama, spoke kindly and encouraged him. Asylbek grew more confident and responsible, embracing his work. Later, his father mentioned a vacancy in the animal raw materials department. For two months he collected the skins of sheep, goats, and cattle. Villagers teased him, calling him the "skin collector," but Asylbek walked proudly, learning patience, pride, and the quiet dignity of labor.

At Shepherd Mambet's One day, Asylbek went to Shepherd Mambet's house. Mambet's son was busy working with wood, shaping pieces with care. They spoke of school, where children learned to drive tractors and even make bricks. Asylbek shared his own work, collecting old leather and animal skins. Mambet nodded and asked him to bring four pieces of sheep skin. Asylbek carefully sorted them, separating the first-grade skins from the second. The sun fell warm across the yard as he worked, hands steady and precise, learning the quiet discipline of labor, the rhythm of village life, and the small pride in doing work well.

Bazyl's Komuz Asylbek saw Bazyl, the disabled man who had been beaten by Mykty. Bazyl called him over and invited him to stay for dinner; meat was being prepared, filling the kitchen with warmth. He asked about the skins and leather, explaining he hoped to become a shoemaker, and requested any extra pieces. Suddenly, Sadyr, Bazyl's brother, arrived with a new komuz, joking that its price was a young cow. "Just a gift," he laughed, though he asked his wife to offer a calf. Sadyr strummed the komuz, filling the room with sad, lyrical notes, old songs, and the haunting instrumental tune of "Kukuk," echoing through the evening.

Dreams of Dilde Asylbek dreamed of Dilde that night. In the quiet glow of his mind, her voice called to him: "You are my joy." A rush of happiness filled him, warm and unshakable. In the dream, he fought enemies, fierce and fearless, defending her with every ounce of strength. The sun rose, and Asylbek woke, heart still racing, his face flushed with remembered courage. His mother noticed his unease and gently comforted him, smoothing his hair, whispering words of calm.

The Visit of Ivanov One day, Asylbek went to collect the skin of a cow slaughtered for the villagers' share. On the path, he saw Ivanov, head of forestry, riding his horse. They spoke briefly. Asylbek asked about Kolya, Ivanov's son, and learned that Kolya was working at the hydroelectric station while attending evening courses in metalwork and concrete. When they reached Asylbek's house, his father fretted over a large hole in the back wall. Ivanov, seeing the damage, reminded them he had warned that the house was weak. He came to place an order for Asylbek's father but turned back, unsettled by the ruin.

Rebuilding the Home Asylbek's father grieved over the ruined house and shed. The cow, chickens, and horses were left outside; the horse shivered in the cold. Asylbek resolved to repair the

damage, but his father dismissed the effort. "Only Ikram can do it," he said. Undeterred, Asylbek molded clay bricks and began building a sturdy wall. His father eventually joined, watching and assisting. By morning, the wall had collapsed. "I was right," his father said, shaking his head. "Only masters can do this work." Yet Asylbek's hands ached with pride, and in the rhythm of building, he learned patience, strength, and quiet determination.

Chotur and the Wall Neighbor Chotur arrived and laughed at the collapsed wall, mocking the clay bricks for lacking the mud-and-straw mixture. "Bring some reed," he said, and skillfully built a sturdy wall, stepping back proudly at his work. Asylbek's father tried to belittle Chotur's effort, but could not deny the result. Later, his mother invited Chotur to dinner, praising his skill. Asylbek felt uneasy, watching his parents show respect to another. Though the wall now stood firm, he quietly struggled with the sense that his own efforts were overlooked, even as others received praise.

A Walk Through the Village One day, Asylbek searched for two pieces of old shoe leather, feeling weak, unlucky, and incapable. He thought of his father, proud, always longing for a white-collar life, yet shunning hard work and feared he might follow the same path. His mother tried to comfort him, noting that his father had already given the leather to the shoemaker, though she worried about the cost. His father shrugged, saying he could manage without it. Asylbek rose, slung his bag over his shoulder, and went out. Collecting leather and animal skins for the district, he listened to barking dogs, lowing cattle, and bleating sheep, admiring Ivanov's neat house and the simple homes scattered across the village.

The Old Bag Asylbek came to the office and announced he was leaving. His boss reminded him that he had promised promotion to Asylbek's father, yet Asylbek remained firm. The boss could not stop him. He wrote a leave petition, noting he had not taken his salary for three months and that the two pieces of leather his father gave the shoemaker could be compensated. He planned to join the hydroelectric station's construction, determined to live an honest life as a worker rather than follow the false pride of white-collar office work like his father. On the way home, he looked inside his father's old bag and found a notebook listing relatives in office jobs. Irritated, he threw the bag into the river, determined to be a different man and leave the past behind.

CHARACTER ANALYSIS

Asylbek

Asylbek is the main character, a young man of 17–19 who strives to become educated, morally upright, and independent. Initially, he believes that success, wealth, and social approval define a "man," following his father's advice. At first, he is naive, idle, and unprepared, relying heavily on his father's guidance. Over time, through challenges and personal experience, he learns the value of hard work, helping others, and contributing to society. He gradually asserts his own path and moral judgment, becoming responsible, resilient, curious, and self-reliant.

Naive At the beginning of the story, Asylbek believes that a man's worth is determined by wealth, social status, and the approval of others. Following his father's advice, he dreams of becoming the secretary of the village council, seeing it as a stepping stone to higher positions in the Communist Party. He avoids physical labor in the fields, idles with friends, and disregards the villagers' disapproval, believing that a white-collar position is the key to his future success. This naïveté makes him idealistic but unprepared for real-life challenges, causing him to fail in his early attempts at education and work. Over time, his experiences teach him that true honor and manhood come from personal integrity, moral choices, and contributions to the well-being of others, rather than external validation.

Idle Asylbek spends his time idling with Mykty and neglects his studies. He does not prepare for his university exams in Frunze, believing that his social connections and family guidance will secure his success. As a result, he fails and returns to the village, facing the reality of his inaction. This period of

laziness and lack of preparation highlights his initial immaturity and dependence on others, setting the stage for his eventual growth and development as he begins to take responsibility for his own future.

Moral Over time, Asylbek learns the importance of helping others and contributing to society. He begins to spend time with Chotur, a neighbor and tractor driver, who becomes a mentor in the value of honest work and a dignified life. Chotur himself once followed a bad path, indulging in gambling, theft, and alcohol, and even lost his wife due to his abusive behavior. Through his own transformation, he now works diligently, respects his family, and lives responsibly. By observing and learning from Chotur, Asylbek comes to understand that even simple tasks, such as ploughing the fields or helping with the harvest, have real value and contribute meaningfully to society, shaping him into a conscientious and morally aware young man.

Resilient Asylbek demonstrates resilience and determination as he overcomes hardships and setbacks. He rejects his father's reliance on flattery and influence to secure positions, seeking instead to build his own path. When the villagers criticize him and Mykty for idleness, he feels ashamed but uses it as motivation to take responsibility for his life. Ultimately, he decides to work at the hydroelectric station, embracing physical labor and practical experience as a way to establish his independence, prove his worth, and create a meaningful future.

Changyl

Changyl, Asylbek's father, holds a traditional, old-fashioned mindset. He believes that being a "good man" means wealth, high office, and social recognition. To secure his son's future, he tries to influence powerful people through flattery, lavish dinners, and even bribery, while showing little interest in Asylbek's own ideas or ambitions. He despises physical labor and looks down on workers like Chotur and Orko, considering manual work beneath him. Changyl attempts to control Asylbek's path, steering him toward prestigious positions, yet his overbearing nature often causes friction and forces Asylbek to seek independence. His pride, arrogance, and desire for status reflect the generational and social tensions central to the story, highlighting the conflict between traditional authority and personal growth.

Arrogant Changyl consistently believes he is superior to others. His position at the *raipo* office gives him a sense of privilege and authority, allowing him to look down on his neighbors. Despite living in an old, collapsing house, he never makes efforts to improve it, and in his garden, he grows only corn to minimize work, avoiding labor-intensive crops like melons, watermelons, potatoes, or tomatoes. He treats Orko, the kolkhoz team leader, with disdain, dismissing Orko's requests to help build the chicken shed and claiming he would rather work in Orko's position than engage in physical labor. Changyl's arrogance reflects his pride, laziness, and resistance to practical work, highlighting the tension between his elite mindset and the values of honest labor represented by characters like Chotur.

Flattery Changyl often uses flattery to gain favor with powerful people in order to secure opportunities for himself and his son. He invites officials, such as Berdike and Ivanov, to lavish dinners, compliments them excessively, and offers gifts or bribes to influence their decisions. This reliance on flattery shows his belief that social connections and praise from others are more important than hard work or personal merit. While he seeks advancement for Asylbek through these means, he ignores the boy's own ambitions and independence, highlighting his manipulative and status-driven nature.

Rigid Changyl exhibits a rigid mindset, clinging to his beliefs about social status, wealth, and authority. He refuses to adapt to new ideas or ways of life, insisting that a "good man" must follow his model of success—holding office, gaining praise, and avoiding physical labor. His rigidity prevents him from valuing honest work, practical skills, or his son's personal ambitions. Even when faced with opportunities to improve his own life, such as repairing his collapsing house or engaging in farm labor, he resists change, preferring comfort and prestige over effort. This inflexibility contributes to tension with Asylbek, who gradually seeks independence and moral growth, highlighting the generational and ideological divide between father and son.

Chotur

Chotur, a neighbor and tractor driver, embodies the values of humility, hard work, and practical skill. Unlike Changyl, he does not seek prestige or social approval, and his life reflects honesty, responsibility, and respect for others. He once followed a troubled path, gambling, drinking, and behaving abusively, which caused him to lose his wife, but he transformed his life through discipline and moral reflection. In the novella, Chotur becomes a mentor figure for Asylbek, teaching him the dignity of labor and the importance of contributing to society.

Hard-working Chotur exemplifies the value of hard work in every aspect of his life. From driving the tractor to helping with the fields and participating in construction, he approaches each task with diligence and care. His commitment to labor is not motivated by prestige or social recognition but by a sense of responsibility, practical necessity, and moral duty. Even after a troubled youth spent in gambling, drinking, and abusive behavior, Chotur transformed his life through effort and discipline, proving that persistent work can reshape one's character and circumstances.

Regretful In his youth, he made serious mistakes. First, he treated his wife harshly, following his mother's advice to be strict, forcing her to kiss his dirty feet and physically support him on steep mountain paths, which caused her great suffering and led to the breakdown of their marriage. Later, he fell into gambling and even stole a young woman's suitcase while attempting to help her, only to find books and underwear inside. Even when discussing Asylbek's idleness, he notes that any effort, even theft, is preferable to doing nothing, emphasizing that action and responsibility matter more than waiting for privilege or status.

Forgiving Chotur demonstrates a forgiving nature, showing patience and understanding even when others, like Asylbek, make mistakes or quarrel with him. Despite Asylbek's youthful idleness, misjudgments, or moments of disagreement, Chotur does not hold grudges or react with anger. Instead, he treats these situations as opportunities to teach, guide, and support growth. His forgiving attitude allows him to maintain strong, constructive relationships and exemplifies emotional maturity and moral wisdom.

Bazyl

Bazyl is a disabled war veteran who lost his legs in service. Despite his physical limitations, he demonstrates resilience, courage, and determination. To support himself, he tries to repair shoes, showing resourcefulness and a strong work ethic. Music provides him comfort, and he plays the *komuz*, musical instrument his only form of entertainment and a link to his inner life and culture. However, his *komuz* is broken by Mykty, who is drunk and demanding more alcohol, highlighting the challenges and disrespect he faces from some villagers. Bazyl's perseverance, moral strength, and ability to endure hardship contrast with the younger, less disciplined characters like Asylbek, making him a model of endurance, dignity, and quiet heroism.

Resilient Bazyl demonstrates remarkable resilience by overcoming the physical and emotional consequences of losing his legs in the war. Rather than surrendering to despair or dependence, he strives to live independently and maintain his dignity. He adapts to his limitations, finding practical ways to support himself, such as repairing shoes. Despite hardship, poverty, and occasional disrespect from others, Bazyl continues to endure with quiet strength, proving that true resilience lies not only in physical survival but in preserving self-respect, purpose, and moral integrity.

Talented Bazyl possesses notable artistic talent and cultural knowledge. He knows old legends, poems, and traditional *kuu* instrumental music, preserving the oral and musical heritage of his people. His ability to play the *komuz* and recall epic stories reflects both memory and creative skill. Through music and storytelling, Bazyl expresses emotion, wisdom, and cultural identity, showing that his strength is not only physical endurance but also spiritual and artistic richness.

Optimistic Despite his disability, Bazyl deeply appreciates everyday life. He often sits beneath a tree, enjoying the garden where his wife grows tomatoes, watermelons, and melons, taking pleasure in the sunshine and the gentle breeze. These simple moments reflect his inner peace and gratitude. He warmly welcomes guests from the heart and shows sincere affection toward his children, valuing family and companionship. His love of life is expressed not through grand achievements but through contentment, warmth, and an enduring ability to find joy in ordinary, beautiful moments.

THEMES

Society

Social Context: *Village Life*

The novella vividly portrays rural life in the 1960s Aksy region of Kyrgyzstan, showing both its challenges and communal values. Villagers rely on honest labor, practical skills, and mutual support to survive and thrive. Characters like Chotur and Orko embody diligence, resilience, and moral integrity, proving that even simple work such as ploughing fields, driving tractors, or building farm structures brings personal satisfaction and benefits the community.

At the same time, the story exposes systemic corruption and social inequities under the Soviet system, which controlled almost every aspect of life. The accountant Burgo withholds government funds from women who are entitled to them. Berdike, the head of the village council, prefers flattery and personal gain over honest work, resenting those who demonstrate diligence such as his secretary Kokul. He rewards loyalty and superficial compliance rather than merit, manipulating positions and opportunities to serve his own interests.

The novella also depicts cultural norms in love and courtship. Asylbek cannot openly confess his feelings for Dilde but demonstrates his affection through respectful behavior, reflecting socially accepted ways of expressing love. His mother suggests other girls for him, as arranged marriages remain a normal cultural practice.

These personal and social dynamics unfold against the backdrop of Kyrgyzstan's ambitious national projects such as the Toktogul and Kurp-Say hydroelectric stations, highlighting the contrast between moral integrity in everyday village life and the inequalities and compromises within official structures.

Illustrative moment: Chotur and Asylbek went to the municipal village office for a meeting. Burgo, the accountant, sat buried in paperwork, barely looking up. Soon four women entered, demanding the government money promised for their children. One was a single mother, and Burgo mocked her cruelly for having a child out of wedlock. The women's faces flushed, but they stood firm, accusing him of hiding the money stubs and withholding funds. Asylbek could not remain silent. He stepped forward and sharply criticized Burgo for his unlawful actions and heartless behavior. Afterward, the meeting continued with a young speaker from the district executive office, neat and confident, announcing a new hydroelectric station on the Naryn River, a grand project that would bring light and power to the region. Kokul, the current secretary of the village council, urged the youth to join the construction. Asylbek felt uneasy speaking near him, sensing that one day he might take Kokul's place. Volunteers, including the eager driver Kenebay, stepped forward. A film was shown to inspire the group, but flickering reels left the hall restless and unsettled.

Ethics

Moral Growth: *Self-Realization*

The novella centers on Asylbek's gradual moral growth and search for self-realization. At the beginning, he is naive, impressionable, and driven by dreams of social status. Influenced by his father, he believes that becoming a village council secretary and rising within the Communist Party will define his

success and manhood. He avoids physical labor, neglects serious preparation for his education, and measures worth by prestige rather than character.

However, repeated failures, public criticism from the villagers, and his growing discomfort with his father's flattery force him to confront his own weaknesses. Through interactions with figures like Chotur and Bazyl, Asylbek begins to understand that dignity lies not in titles but in honest effort and moral responsibility. Working at the hydroelectric station becomes a turning point, as he chooses action over idleness and independence over dependence on influence.

By the end of the novella, Asylbek realizes that true self-worth is grounded in integrity, perseverance, and meaningful contribution to society. His transformation from a status-seeking youth into a self-aware and responsible individual reflects the broader message that personal growth requires humility, reflection, and the courage to redefine one's values.

Illustrative moment: Asylbek begins working on the tractor trailer with Chotur, gradually discovering the satisfaction and strength that comes from honest labor. When Orko, the kolkhoz team leader, sees him at work, he is surprised and notes that Changyl, who has always held smaller office positions and now works in forestry, would never have allowed his son to perform such tasks. Encouraged to learn the tractor himself, Asylbek grows to enjoy the rhythm and effort of the work, sleeping soundly and feeling a new vitality. Yet his father remains critical. He comes to the field, mocks Asylbek's labor, and urges him to take the dismissed school head's assistant position. Asylbek quietly refuses, jumping onto the tractor and leaving with Chotur, while his father stands alone among the furrows, muttering.

Social Status vs. Inner Worth

Through Changyl, the author critiques the Soviet system, exposing its flaws and latent corruption. Changyl pursues social prestige and office positions for himself and his son, relying on flattery—what he calls "*tashty eritken ash*" ("food melts stone")—favors, and even bribes to secure opportunities. Job openings, university admissions, and promotions are often determined not by merit but by connections, highlighting systemic unfairness. Those who refuse to comply or deny favors risk retaliation, sometimes through anonymous letters denouncing them. Changyl surrounds himself only with people of status, seeking influence, even though he is not highly educated and neglects practical responsibilities, such as repairing his own house. His obsession with prestige contrasts sharply with the moral strength of humble villagers, showing that true worth lies in character, work, and contribution to society rather than rank or position.

Illustrative moment: At his former office, Asylbek's father, Changyl, stood proud yet anxious, trying to regain a sense of influence. He approached his former boss and earnestly requested that his old position be given to his son, pledging that he would even sell his horse if necessary to ensure the opportunity. The boss shook his head; a new man had already assumed the chair, leaving Changyl momentarily defeated. Yet he refused to let hope die. When news arrived that the village council secretary was planning to leave, his eyes brightened with anticipation. "We will invite Berdike," he murmured, recalling the old saying, "*tashty eritken ash*"—food and respect can melt stone. He encouraged Asylbek to befriend Mykty, Berdike's son, seeing connections as the key to advancement. But Asylbek's heart resisted, remembering wasted money, idle dreams, and the silent betrayals he had witnessed in the city, uncertain whether flattery and favors could truly shape his future.

Generational Conflict

The tension between Asylbek and his father Changyl illustrates a deeper clash between two worldviews. Changyl embodies traditional, status-driven thinking: he believes that respect, wealth, and office positions define a "good man," and he seeks to control his son's path to ensure social prestige. He surrounds himself with influential people, flatters superiors, and even considers bribes and favors necessary for advancement. In contrast, Asylbek gradually develops a sense of personal responsibility and ethical living. Through his experiences with humble, hardworking villagers like Chotur and Bazyl, he learns that true worth comes from diligence, moral integrity, and contributing to society, rather than social rank or external approval.

This generational struggle is not unique to Kasymbek's novella. Similar conflicts appear in other coming-of-age or autobiographical works. In James Joyce's *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, Stephen Dedalus resists his father's and society's expectations to assert his own identity. Maxim Gorky's *My Childhood* recounts his own hardships, family pressures, and encounters with social injustice, emphasizing resilience and personal growth. Fyodor Dostoevsky's *Poor Folk* explores social status, moral dignity, and the struggles of ordinary people, while Chekhov's *Ward No. 6* examines tensions between authority and personal ethics. These works, like Kasymbek's, show that the conflict between inherited social hierarchies and individual moral development is a timeless and universal theme.

Illustrative moment: Asylbek returned home to his father's fury, sensing anger not just at him but at his mother too. His father demanded to know if Orko had drawn him to tractor work. Asylbek stayed silent. Then his father ordered him to write an anonymous petition to the Prime Minister, accusing Orko of wrongdoing. Memories of hundreds of anonymous letters flooded Asylbek, and he felt embarrassed, as if everyone knew his secret. "No need to write about Orko," he whispered. His father shouted, insisting Orko had abused a woman to force her labor. Asylbek refused. Furious, his father stormed off. Alone, Asylbek ran outside and wept under the open sky.