

HUMANITIES INSTITUTE
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THE LONG JOURNEY / UZAK JOL (1935)

Mukay Elebayev (1906–1944)

Reference: Elebayev, M. (2020). *Uzak jol*. Sham Publishing House.

OVERVIEW

Author

Mukay Elebayev, one of the prominent figures of Kyrgyz literature, was born on January 15, 1906, in Chong-Tash village in the Tup District of the Issyk-Kul Region. He lost his parents at an early age and grew up an orphan.

In 1916, during the Urkun, Elebayev fled to China with other Kyrgyz. He returned to the Issyk-Kul valley on foot in 1917 after hearing that a new government had been established there. He later drew on these experiences in his autobiographical novel *Uzak Jol* (*The Long Journey*), which portrays the lives and hardships of ordinary Kyrgyz people during a period of major political and social change.

Elebayev's first published poem, *Zarygam* ("I Long"), appeared in the newspaper *Erkin-Too* in 1924. Written in the tradition of Kyrgyz lament poetry, it expresses the young poet's longing for education. While studying at an agricultural vocational school, he also wrote *Alga Bas* ("Move Forward"), *Chamda* ("Make an Effort"), and *Arsar Jigit* ("The Indecisive Young Man"). His first collection of poetry was published in 1931.

Much of Elebayev's work is autobiographical. Alongside *Uzak Jol*, his literary legacy includes *Kyiyn Kezeng* ("Difficult Times"), *Zarlyk* ("Despair"), and *Boroonduu Kunu* ("On a Stormy Day"). He was also an accomplished literary translator, translating into Kyrgyz such classics of Russian literature as Nikolai Gogol's *The Overcoat* and *Dead Souls*, Leo Tolstoy's *Hadji Murat*, and Alexander Pushkin's *The Tale of the Dead Princess and the Seven Knights*.

Elebayev went to the front in 1943 and served in the 267th Rifle Division. He died in combat in the Pskov Region in May 1944. His wartime poems reflect his experiences at the front, his longing for his homeland and family, his hope of seeing them again, and his faith in victory. They include *Alysta Kalgan Jarga* ("To My Wife Left Far Away"), *Sogushtan Kat* ("A Letter from the War"), *Korushorbuz Bir Kunu* ("We Will Meet Again One Day"), *Ala-Toodon Kat* ("A Letter from Ala-Too"), and *Tilek* ("A Wish").

Elebayev's poetry, prose, and translations occupy an important place in the development of modern Kyrgyz literature. Several schools in the Issyk-Kul and Jalal-Abad regions bear his name.

Novel

Mukay Elebayev began writing the novel in January 1934 and completed it in October 1935. It was published in 1936. Elebayev described the work as "the first book of the novel," suggesting that he intended to continue the story. Indeed, the continuation later appeared in the form of several short stories and novellas, including *Sasyk Negar* (1937), *Kyiyn Kezeng* (1938), *Boroonduu Kunu* (1939), and *Zarlyk* (1941).

Background

The novel is based on Mukay Elebayev's childhood and, through the experiences of his 11-year-old self, portrays the historical tragedy of the Kyrgyz people. It realistically depicts the hardships of life at the time, the difficulties of fleeing to China, and the personal tragedies people faced.

Several real people, including Burmake, Urmanbet, Mamirmazin, Chonkol, and Bala Kurman, appear in the novel under their real names.

The novel depicts the events of Urkun, the 1916 Kyrgyz uprising and the mass flight of Kyrgyz people to China that followed. It presents these events from a socialist-realist perspective and reflects the influence of Bolshevik ideology.

The novel highlights the oppression and violence of the Russian Empire, including the loss of land, heavy taxation, forced labor, and the suffering caused by the 1916 uprising. It also shows the dangers faced by Kyrgyz people during their flight to China, where many suffered from hunger, cold, disease, death, and separation from their families.

At the same time, the novel shows some of the negative actions and behavior of the Kyrgyz and other ethnic groups. The Bolsheviks, in contrast, are presented as fighters for freedom and defenders of the oppressed. Their role in creating a new social order is also emphasized.

MAIN CHARACTERS

Mukay — The 11-year-old main character.

Bekkul — Mukay's brother.

Elebes — Mukay's paternal uncle.

Burmake — Elebes's wife.

Beishembi — Elebes's son.

Urmanbet — Mukay's relative.

Baybolot — Mukay's neighbor.

Mamirmazin — A Uyghur imam in China.

Iymankul — Mukay's friend in China.

Vasiliy — A wealthy Russian settler. Mukay does his work.

Chonkol — A Tsarist official.

SYNOPSIS

Mukay is an eleven-year-old boy living in the Issyk-Kul region at the end of the nineteenth century, when Kyrgyz lands and people are already under the Russian Tsarist Empire. He is one of ten children, with nine siblings. Three sisters are already married, while Mukay and the other young children remain at home. After their mother dies, the children are left orphaned. Their paternal uncle Elebes and his wife Burmake take responsibility for them. The family struggles through hunger, illness, poverty, and growing oppression.

During the famine, Mukay is taken by his wealthy maternal grandmother and sent to herd lambs. She treats him harshly and calls him unlucky because he is poor. Later, he returns to Elebes and the family in Kyzyl-Kiya. After his father dies, Mukay works for a Russian settler named Vasiliy, but he is beaten and never receives his wages. Poor people are increasingly abused by Russian officials and wealthy local elites. Poor men are also chosen for the Tsar's Labor Army while the rich protect their own sons.

Anger over land, taxes, injustice, and conscription leads to the 1916 uprising, Urkun. Mukay and his family flee toward China with thousands of Kyrgyz refugees. The journey brings hunger, violence, death, and separation. In China, Mukay begs for food, herds cattle, collects rhubarb, and works in opium fields. His youngest brother dies. Two sisters remain in China, while Eshpay and Ashymkan are also left there. Burmake, Elebes, and Beishembi die, and the family falls apart. Bechel, Mukay's elder brother, disappears.

Mukay eventually escapes Mamirmazin and finds other Kyrgyz people. He later returns to Aksuu and finds Bekkul. Together they join a caravan traveling toward Issyk-Kul. After years of exile, Mukay and Bekkul finally reach their homeland and are welcomed by relatives. They are free at last, but their family remains scattered, with loved ones dead, missing, or still in China.

SCENES

Childhood

A Family Left to Fate Mukay's family is large: ten children, six daughters and four sons. Three daughters have already married, leaving Almakán, Mukay, Bekkul, Eshbay, Ashymkan, and Bekdayir at home. When their mother dies one day, the six children are left orphaned. Their aunt Burmake, a woman of about sixty and the wife of their father's elder brother, comes to care for them while their father leaves in search of food. Soon, the children are struck by *kelte*, a typhoid-like illness. There is no food, only water. Burmake tends to each child, giving them what little she can and refusing to leave them alone.

A Child in the Years of Hunger That year, hunger had settled over the land. There was no grain, no wheat, and little food to keep families alive. One day, Mukay's maternal grandmother came riding to their home. His mother had come from a wealthy family, and his grandmother, whose household was rich in livestock, took Mukay to live with her. But she was not a kind woman. She sent him to the pastures to tend the lambs, where he spent his days with other young shepherds. One boy mocked him, calling him a slave. They fought, and the boy tore Mukay's coat. His grandmother scolded him harshly, calling him *yrysy jok*—"unlucky." To her, poverty itself was a sign of misfortune.

Seven Tyiyn for a Prayer One day, Sarybay's wife invited Mukay to their home. Sarybay was the richest man in the region, but he had fallen seriously ill. His family believed that giving charity to a poor child might bring God's mercy and help him recover. They had searched for the poorest boy in the area, and Mukay was brought before them. They gave him seven *tyiyn* as alms and asked him to pray for Sarybay's health. Mukay returned to his grandmother's house, carrying the small coins and the weight of a world he could hardly understand. Three months later, Elebes, his father's elder brother, came and took him home. Before he left, his grandmother gave him an old coat and said, "Do not gossip about us."

The Journey to Kyzyl-Kiya Elebes took Mukay to a place called Kyzyl-Kiya. After Mukay's father fell ill, Elebes and his wife, Burmake, had brought the family there. At the time, seven people lived in Kyzyl-Kiya, working on the highway. The Kyrgyz lands were already under the Russian Empire, and Russian settlers had begun to settle in the area. Some made a living by keeping bees, while others found different ways to earn money. One of them, Basharin, became wealthy by making whitewash, a material used to whiten walls. He owned seventy cows, and Elebes's daughter-in-law worked milking them. Elebes's son Beishembi had three children of his own. Together with Mukay and his siblings, nine children lived in the household. A few miles away, another Russian settler worked as a post officer.

After Their Father's Death One day, their father died. In the middle of the night, Burmake woke the children. According to tradition, the boys had to mourn their father aloud, crying, "My father!" A few days later, Urmanbet came. He was Mukay's father's nephew, but he had raised Urmanbet as his own son. Beishembi asked Urmanbet to stay, get married, and help care for the children. Urmanbet refused. He left for Karakol, leaving the children behind once again.

With Vasiliy Elebes sent Mukay to work for a Russian settler named Vasiliy, looking after his cows. In Vasiliy's house, Mukay saw paintings and Orthodox icons for the first time. He worked from early morning until late at night and slept in the hallway. He was promised two soms (currency) a month. When his clothes became worn and torn, he asked Vasiliy and his wife for some old clothes. They told him that they could buy him new clothes with the money he had earned. Mukay felt this was unfair. One day, they beat him after a wild bird attacked the geese. He stayed there for only two months and never received his wages. One evening, when the river became shallow, he crossed it and went home. Elebes scolded him a little and told him he should be patient, while Burmake welcomed him back.

Urmanbet Is Chosen for the Labor Army One day, news spread through the village that the Russian Tsar was demanding men for the labor army. Each *volost*, a local district of about 300 households, had to send men. As usual, the local elites chose someone from among the poor, and Urmanbet was selected. The men sent to the labor army were promised 400 soms. Urmanbet demanded a horse from the *volost* leader for his journey, and the leader had to give him one. He then took 250 soms of Urmanbet's 400-som allowance from the Russian authorities as payment for the horse. The villagers were surprised by Urmanbet's courage. Before leaving, he returned to the village dressed in his soldier's clothes. Burmake warned him to be careful around the local elites, because ordinary people were afraid to speak against the rich and powerful. Urmanbet was not afraid. He said that those who oppressed the people deserved no respect.

The Night of the Postman Winter had come, bringing long, dark nights and fierce winds. One night, while the family slept in their yurt, they heard the sound of bells outside. Elebes immediately got up. He was one of the road workers whose duty was to accompany the Russian postman through the mountain pass at night. The postman's horses were strong, but the road was often difficult, especially in winter. When Beishembi's horse stopped and refused to move, the postman called Elebes. Instead of thanking him for his help, he struck him hard and knocked him into the snow.

The Cattle They Lost One day, a man from the Japak clan was killed by the drunken son of a wealthy man. According to custom, the Boor clan had to pay *kun*, compensation for the death, by giving cattle to the Japak clan. Many cattles were taken, including Beishembi's cow and his neighbor Baybolot's cow. For Mukay and his five siblings, and for Elebes, Burmake, Beishembi, his wife, and their three children, that cow was everything. It was their only means of survival. Losing it left the whole family devastated. Beishembi went to Karakol to bring the cow back. Instead, he was beaten and ordered to pay fifteen soms. The next day, he began working for Vasiliy to earn the money.

Chonkol and His Men One day, Chonkol, the *starshina*, a local municipal official appointed by the Russian authorities, arrived with his men. He was actually Russian, but the locals called him Chonkol, meaning "big hands," because of his cruelty. Everyone was frightened when he appeared. Elebes and his family were afraid too. Chonkol moved through the crowd, shouting insults and beating people. No one dared to protest. He ordered the people to gather stones and clear the road. Mukay and his friend were among those forced to work. They carried stones and cleaned the road with their bare hands. When they reached a stony hill, Mukay could hardly walk any further. The stones were hot, and his bare feet could not bear the heat. Unable to endure it any longer, the two boys suddenly ran away.

Bala Kurman's Abuse and the Soldiers in Karkyra Instead of protecting the people, Bala Kurman robbed the poor. One day, he took the horse of a poor man. Meanwhile, Mukay's family had to move to Karkyra to host the soldiers. All the security guards spent the night at Karyp's house, and Burmake Aunt sent Mukay there to eat some meat. While the meat was being prepared, a man arrived and said that the security guards had taken his horse. When he asked Bala Kurman to return it, he was severely beaten. Mukay was given a few small pieces of lamb, but he was still hungry. Seeing this, another man gave him some meat from his bone.

Days of Hunger Mukay and his family were still suffering from hunger. Elebes would drink tea with a cup of roasted wheat talkan only once a day. The children would stare at the talkan, their favorite food. Elebes and his wife would give each child a spoonful of it. One day, Janymjan, Beishembi's wife, was preparing to grind the wheat in a hand mill. When one of the boys asked for some, Beishembi asked her to give him a little. Janymjan became angry, took the wheat, and walked away. Beishembi followed her and hit her. In the struggle, all the wheat was scattered on the ground, and the children began picking it up and eating it like chickens. The boys would sometimes gather wild berries from the mountains and exchange them for bread with Basharin and an old Russian man. The old man would sometimes give them bread without asking for anything in return when they came to him. Basharin's family, however, was not as generous.

The Growing Oppression Meanwhile, oppression in the region was growing worse. Mukay's neighbor, Baybolot, had a divorced daughter. Wealthy men decided to arrange her marriage without the consent of either the young woman or her father. Even Karabay, one of the local elites, took fifty sheep and other livestock as the bride price from the Kazakh man who wanted to marry her. But on the day of the wedding, the young woman eloped. Karabay then severely beat Baybolot and even threatened Beishembi. He threatened to send both of them to the labor army. As a result, Baybolot and his wife left the village. Around the same time, the family received a letter from Urmanbet. Mukay read the letter aloud, as he had learned to read and write a little from the local mullah. Urmanbet wrote that he had been in places such as Ukraine and Ashgabat, but that he did not yet know where he would settle. He ended his letter with a poem.

The Conscription Crisis News spread that the Russian Tsar would recruit Kyrgyz and Kazakh men into the army. Soon, rumors said they would instead be sent to the front as laborers to dig trenches. The people strongly opposed both possibilities and were prepared to resist the local elite as well. The local leaders themselves feared both the Tsarist authorities and the people. Wealthy families planned to send poor men in their place. Tribal leaders Kydyr Baatyrkan, Yrskeldi, and Soodanbek met to discuss the matter. Some supported conscription, while others opposed it. Poor young men threatened to attack the leaders if forced to serve. Rumors also spread that some local elites had been arrested.

In the Opium Fields One day, their relative Solto came and took Mukay and his brother Bekkul to harvest opium. They also brought Kydyrman, the son of their neighbor Ibray, and set off for Solto's village, Sary-

Tologoy. There, they began harvesting opium from fields covering five or six hectares, planted by Solto and Abdylida, a man who lived in Karakol. The Dungan workers sang mournful songs as they worked. Opium cultivation had increased in Kyrgyz lands over the previous few years as Dungans, a Muslim community of Chinese origin, settled in the region. In the past, opium was mainly grown in places such as Urumqi, Kashgar, and Turpan, but its cultivation had gradually spread into Kyrgyz lands, and some Kyrgyz had begun making money from it as well. Bekkul eventually collapsed from the effects of the opium. Later, Mukay and Bekkul were taken by another man to grind wheat by hand.

Baybolot's Imprisonment One day, Mukay returned from the opium fields and saw Baybolot being taken to the house of the *pristav*, a local Tsarist police and administrative official, by a Kensa Guard. Mukay followed them and hid behind the door. Baybolot was accused of taking a conscription list from an official and beating him. He admitted it but protested that the poor were being forced into military service while the rich protected their sons. He also told the *pristav* that the Russians had taken their land, water, and grazing areas and burdened them with taxes. When the *pristav* threatened him, Baybolot refused to back down. He continued to demand justice and was eventually imprisoned.

Baybolot's Letter from Prison Baybolot sent a letter from prison, which Mukay read to the family. He wrote about how difficult life was in prison. No one listened to his complaints, and Kyrgyz people were treated with contempt. The police kept them away from the officials, making it almost impossible to reach anyone who could help. Baybolot also complained about the local Kyrgyz officials. They cared more about their positions, their relatives, and collecting bribes than about the people. They placed heavy taxes on the poor while protecting the wealthy from paying their fair share. Those who protested were beaten, threatened, or dragged through the courts. According to Baybolot, corruption had become so common that nothing could be done without a bribe. He also mentioned Satarkul, who had recently gone to Karakol with his family to file a petition but seemed to have found no one willing to help.

Uprising

News of Urkun After a while, Uncle Elebes came to take Mukay and Bekkul, bringing their time in the opium fields to an end. Meanwhile, people were talking intensely about the conscription issue. Rumors were spreading that if the Kyrgyz refused to send men to the Tsarist Russian army, the Tsar would wage war against them and slaughter the people. On their way to Kyzyl-Kiya village, the travelers stopped to stay with a family Elebes knew. Soon, a man came riding toward them at full speed, shouting as he rode. A crowd had gathered, and people were running away in panic. Uncle Elebes called out, asking what was happening. Someone in the crowd turned and shouted anxiously, "The Tsar and the Kyrgyz are at war!" This is how the story first introduces the outbreak of the 1916 uprising, known as Urkun.

The Rising Spreads One day, fighting broke out between Russian soldiers and Kazakh people in Karkyra, in the Issyk-Kul region. This time, ordinary and poor people had risen up, while the wealthy did not know what to do. In the end, they had little choice but to join the rebellion. Local people were moving from place to place every day, trying to escape the violence. Many took cattle left behind by Russian settlers, but Beishembi refused to take anything. His mother, Burmake, warned him not to take what did not belong to him. The uprising spread beyond Karakol and Issyk-Kul. There were also reports of fighting in Pishpek, with the Sayak, Sarybagysh, and other tribes joining the rebellion.

Migration

Fleeing Toward China The people were thrown into chaos, and many suddenly began fleeing toward China. They drove their cattle with them, leaving behind wheat and corn fields that were trampled and ruined as people and animals passed through. In some places, people burned the houses, beehives, cornfields, and hay belonging to Russian settlers. Families moved through Karkyra, Tuz, Tekes, and Narynkol, eventually reaching the Chinese border. But they were still not safe. They heard that Tsarist soldiers were close behind them. A few days earlier, rumors had spread that the governor of Turkestan had ordered his soldiers to kill all Kyrgyz, including babies, and had sent 500 soldiers to carry out the order.

Trapped at the Border When the people reached the Chinese border, they suddenly heard gunfire of Russian soldier behind them. The Chinese border guards fired back, leaving the crowd caught between two sides: the Tsarist Russian soldiers behind them and the Chinese guards ahead. Despite the heavy gunfire, the people kept moving toward the Chinese border. They began crossing the Muzart River, and complete chaos broke out. Men, women, children, and horses struggled through the water amid the cries of people and the noise of frightened cattle. One woman was swept away while trying to cross with a cradle carrying her babies. After reaching the other side, the exhausted crowd found a field and began eating whatever they could find. Then the shooting started again, and many people were killed.

Forced into Exile: The Kyrgyz Refugees in Chinese Turkestan Mukay, his siblings, Uncle Elebes, and Burmake reached Chinese lands with thousands of Kyrgyz refugees. They had been forced to flee their homeland because of oppression, heavy taxes, discrimination, and the Labor Army, which compelled men from poor families to leave their homes. In China, hunger, homelessness, bitter cold, and despair awaited them. Driven by desperation, some families sold women and children for a plate of food. Parents lost children, and families scattered across Chinese Turkestan. One day, the refugees wrote to the Russian Empire's consulate in Kulja, pleading for help. They were starving, homeless, and sick, yet the Russian consulate remained silent and indifferent.

The Unending Hardship in China The burden of life did not ease in China. After some time, the family moved to another village, where Mukay and his siblings began asking local Uyghurs, fellow Turkic people, for food. Mukay and his two brothers went from door to door begging for bread, and by evening they would return with whatever little they had managed to collect. One night, they lost their cow—their last precious possession. Eventually, the family reached a small Dungan village. There, another tragedy awaited them: Mukay's youngest brother died. The family was overwhelmed by grief. Their sorrow was so deep that none of them had the strength even to cry.

Separation in Aksuu Mukay's two sisters remained in China. The family was so desperate for food that one of the sisters was forced to be sold in exchange for cow. Later, they heard that the other sister had married after their flight. The family eventually reached Aksuu city, where they met Mamirmazin, a Uyghur imam in his fifties. A cunning man, Mamirmazin told them that Kyrgyz people who returned home were being killed by the Russians, discouraging them from going back. The family stayed with him for a while. The three brothers—Mukay, and his brothers Bekkul, and Eshpay—were divided between Mamirmazin and his sons, Sherpende and Bakirdin. The young men herded cattle, while Mukay was sent to work in an opium field at Oston, outside the city.

The Family Falls Apart While Mukay was working at Oston, news came that Burmake had fallen ill. When he returned, he found that Burmake had died. She had become sick and passed away within a week. Mukay returned to the fields, but two months later, Uncle Elebes also died. When the harvest ended, Mukay was released and returned to Mamirmazin's house, only to discover that the family had moved elsewhere. Beyshembi was also seriously ill and died soon afterward. Despite everything, Beyshembi had been the one who held the family together. She had opposed Uncle Elebes whenever he suggested selling the orphans and had managed to keep the family together. After her death, the family began to scatter. Aunt Janymjan left with her only son to search for relatives. Eshpay remained working for Sherpende. Bekkul, Ashymkan, and Mukay stayed with Mamirmazin.

The Journey to Toguz Bulak One day, Mamirmazin's wife sent Mukay to Toguz Bulak, a rich pasture where the sheep would spend the winter. The land was well suited for livestock, with plenty of grass. But since the following day was Eid al-Adha, they did not send him away immediately. Mamirmazin and the other Uyghur imams went from house to house reciting the Qur'an, and Mukay accompanied him. At every home, people offered the imam bread and food. When the saddlebag became full, Mamirmazin sent Mukay home to empty it. As he walked, Mukay remembered his own days of begging, when people had rarely been so generous. By evening, he had carried the saddlebag home four times.

Life on the Pasture The next morning, Mukay set out with his fellow shepherd, Jamat, for Toguz Bulak. It was a vast pasture where wealthy families brought their animals to spend the winter. The grass was abundant, stretching across the endless steppe. Mukay became a shepherd there, spending his days tending

the animals beneath the open sky. Yet the quiet beauty of the pasture could not hide his loneliness. As he wandered across the endless grasslands, he often dreamed of escaping this life and finding a different future.

Misfortune and Growing Suspicion The following year, Mamirmazin decided to keep his goats at home for the winter. He was a wealthy goat owner, but that year an epidemic spread through the herd, killing many animals. Mukay blamed himself for the losses, and Mamirmazin also began to see him as a source of bad luck. One day, Mamirmazin's favorite male goat became ill, and his wife blamed Mukay—the name they used for Mukay. His brothers Eshpay was called Eshan, Bekkul was Beki, and Ashymkan was Ashi. When they heard the animals making noise outside, Mukay went to check and found that the sick goat had died. In spring Mukay was given the heavy work around the house. Ashymkan was unhappy and constantly scolded by the woman of the household, which deeply troubled Mukay.

Rumors of the Bolsheviks' Arrival Rumors about the Bolsheviks began spreading among the people for the first time. According to what they heard, the Bolsheviks were moving toward their region and would soon reach Yarkent. Mamirmazin and those around him spoke of the Bolsheviks with fear and suspicion, and their arrival became a growing source of anxiety. One evening, during dinner, Mamirmazin said, "The Bolsheviks are getting closer. There are many of them. They say they will enter Yarkent soon. If they reach Yarkent, we will be in danger too. They could spend one night there and arrive here the next day. People are already moving deeper into China. Before long, the wealthy families of the area gathered their belongings and left for Kulja. Mamirmazin, however, stayed behind.

Escaping Mamirmazin One day, Mukay and his friend Iymankul decided they could no longer stay with Mamirmazin. They waited until night and quietly escaped. They walked for hours without stopping and finally reached Kyrgyz Say, a town about fifty kilometers from Aksuu city. There was not any Kyrgyz living there, it still carried the name Kyrgyz Say. Mukay and Iymankul were afraid to ask the Russians for help because they remembered the fighting between Kyrgyz and Russian forces in 1916. They went from house to house looking for work and asking for bread. When no one helped them, they had no choice but to beg.

Surviving on the Road Eventually, someone told them that they could earn food by collecting rhubarb roots in the mountains. The local people would buy the roots and give them bread in return. Mukay and Iymankul climbed the hills, collected the roots, and brought them back to town. People began buying them, and the two young men were finally able to get something to eat. A few days later, they found work with a family from Kashgar. Once again, they were sent to work in the poppy fields. Their lives were still difficult, but at least they had food and a place to stay.

Finding the Kyrgyz Again After some time, Mukay met a Kyrgyz shepherd named Shadykan. Shadykan and three other Kyrgyz men lived in Kyrgyz Say. They had also traveled as far as Kulja during the Kyrgyz Uprising. Mukay was deeply moved to see another Kyrgyz person after everything he had been through. He had spent so long among strangers that even the word "Kyrgyz" had almost faded from his memory. He stayed with them and worked as a cattle herder. By then, he and Iymankul had gone their separate ways. Soon afterward, Mukay heard that Iymankul had died. Mukay continued struggling to survive. He brought more bread home than the others and also gathered blackberries in the mountains, a fruit he had never seen before. He took them to local households and exchanged them for bread.

Bolsheviks

Rumors and the Emptying Town Rumors that the Bolsheviks were coming spread throughout the region. The wealthy and influential people were deeply alarmed. They began spreading frightening stories, claiming that the Bolsheviks were ruthless killers who would slaughter even children with swords and spears. Kyrgyz Say was no longer the town it had once been. The wealthy stopped holding their usual celebrations and began preparing to leave. Soon, families were leaving in large groups. Even the church had grown quiet. Within a short time, almost everyone had gone, leaving behind only servants, shepherds, and the poor.

The Soldiers Arrive A day or two later, a large group of cavalry and infantry soldiers arrived in Kyrgyz Say. At first, Mukay and the others were terrified and hid from them. The soldiers asked the remaining people

who had left the town. Several young Tatars who had arrived with the soldiers acted as interpreters. The soldiers tried to reassure the frightened people: "Do not be afraid anymore. No one can harm you now." That evening, men, women, children, and the poor all gathered in the town square. One of the soldiers approached the crowd and began questioning people. He treated them roughly, forcing some to lie on the ground and beating several with a whip. He even dragged a young woman into a wooded area and sexually assaulted her.

Justice in the Square The following day, someone from the town told the commander what the soldier had done. The commander found him and had him executed by firing squad in front of everyone. Meanwhile, the soldiers brought down many of the locals who had fled into the mountains. Most were barely recognizable after what they had endured. They were the wealthy men who had once ruled Kyrgyz Say, yet now the poor no longer feared them. Some of the captured men were executed, while others were released. The soldiers gave Mukay some bread and an old shirt. He was overjoyed. It was the first time in his life that he had ever received such a gift. People began speaking about the soldiers' kindness and mercy.

A New Promise The Bolshevik soldiers gathered the poor people of Kyrgyz Say and addressed them. They told them that their enemies had spread lies, claiming that the Bolsheviks murdered innocent people without mercy. They said the Bolsheviks did not kill everyone they encountered and that their enemies were clearly defined. They promised to stand with poor and working people, to fight oppression and the wealthy, and to help people overcome their hardships. "Do not be afraid," they told them. "You have the right to use the freedoms and rights the Bolsheviks have won for you. Improve your lives without fear." The crowd welcomed the speech with enthusiasm and celebrated the Bolsheviks. The next day, red flags appeared throughout the town, and Kyrgyz Say seemed filled with a new sense of hope.

Mukay Goes Back for His Brothers Mukay could not forget the brothers he had left behind. He returned to Aksuu to bring them home, only to learn that Mamirmazin had been killed by the Bolsheviks. Mamirmazin's wife and daughter, however, refused to let Mukay take his brothers away. Mukay did not give up. He went to the pasture where Bekkul was working as a shepherd and found him there. He told Bekkul that the Bolsheviks had reached Karakol and that poor people, orphans, and those who had lost their parents would now have protection. He urged Bekkul to return with him to their homeland, to Issyk-Kul. Bekkul agreed, and Mukay managed to take his brother away from his former owners.

Home again

The Journey Home Mukay was determined to return home, no matter the danger. Around this time, he learned that a Russian merchant was taking three hundred sheep to Issyk-Kul. Mukay persuaded the merchant to let him join the journey. Mukay took Bekkul and joined the caravan. Issyk-Kul was a week away. For Mukay, the journey meant freedom after years of captivity. The road was long and difficult, but he traveled with hope in his heart. At night, when the caravan stopped to rest, he looked back on everything they had lost. Once, fourteen of them had shared a single tent. Now only two brothers were making their way home.

What They Left Behind Their elder sister had been left behind in Kulja in exchange for a cow. Only Bekdayir's grave remained. Uncle Elebes, his son Beyshembi, and his wife Burmake had all died. Aunt Janymjan had taken her only son and gone in search of relatives. Mukay's elder brother, Bechel, had disappeared, while Eshpay and Ashymkan remained in the hands of cruel people. As Mukay traveled home, he thought about the tragedy that had torn his family and so many other Kyrgyz families apart. He blamed the Tsar and the injustice of his rule for the suffering they had endured. At last, after years of suffering, Mukay and Bekkul reached their homeland, Issyk-Kul. Their relatives welcomed them with tears of joy. The brothers then continued toward Chong-Tash, the place where the author was born. At last, Mukay and Bekkul were free.

CHARACTER ANALYSIS

Mukay

Mukay is the main character of the novel. He is an eleven-year-old Kyrgyz boy who lives in the Issyk-Kul region under the Russian Tsarist Empire. After his parents die, Mukay becomes an orphan and is forced to face life without his parents. He experiences hunger, poverty, hard labor, violence, and the loss of family members. His life becomes even more difficult when he and his family are forced to flee to China during the 1916 uprising. Throughout the story, Mukay remains a child, but his difficult experiences force him to become strong and responsible. His journey shows the suffering, survival, and hopes of an ordinary Kyrgyz child.

Resilient Mukay is extremely resilient because he survives experiences that would overwhelm most children. After becoming an orphan, he faces hunger and poverty with his brothers and sisters. He is sent away to work and is treated badly by Vasiliy. Instead of giving up, Mukay leaves and returns to his family. Later, he survives the dangerous journey to China. There, he faces hunger, homelessness, hard labor, and the deaths of several family members. He continues working and searching for food even when life becomes unbearable. His resilience is especially clear when he escapes Mamirmazin and begins looking for a better life. He keeps going despite everything he loses.

Hardworking Mukay is hardworking because poverty forces him to work from a very young age. He does not have the chance to experience a normal childhood. He works for Vasiliy and takes care of his cattle. Later, in China, he works in opium fields and tends animals on the pasture. He also collects rhubarb roots and blackberries to exchange for bread. These jobs are difficult, but Mukay continues working because he needs to survive. He never expects an easy life. His willingness to work shows his determination. At the same time, his hard work also shows the injustice of his situation because a child is forced to work like an adult.

Caring Mukay is caring, especially toward his brothers and sisters. Even after his family becomes separated in China, he continues thinking about them. He does not simply leave his brothers behind when he finds a way to escape. Instead, he returns to Aksuu because he wants to find them. He searches for Bekkul and eventually finds him working as a shepherd. Mukay convinces him to return home. His actions show that family remains important to him despite everything he has experienced. He also remembers the people he has lost. His caring nature makes his suffering more emotional because he understands how much his family has been destroyed.

Brave Mukay is brave because he repeatedly faces danger despite being only eleven years old. He leaves Vasiliy after being abused and refuses to remain in a place where he is treated unfairly. In China, he and Iymankul secretly escape from Mamirmazin. They do not know what will happen to them, but Mukay chooses freedom over continued suffering. Later, he returns to Aksuu to find Bekkul. He risks going back because he does not want his brother to remain behind. His courage is not the absence of fear. Mukay is often frightened and uncertain. His bravery comes from continuing forward even when he is afraid.

Hopeful Mukay remains hopeful even after experiencing enormous suffering. He loses his parents, relatives, home, and several family members. In China, he faces hunger and loneliness and sometimes has to beg for bread. However, he continues searching for opportunities to survive. When he hears about the Bolsheviks and their promises to protect poor people, he begins to believe that life may change. He then decides to return to his homeland. He finds Bekkul and joins a caravan traveling toward Issyk-Kul. His journey home represents more than a physical return. It represents Mukay's hope for freedom, safety, and a life beyond the suffering he has known.

Beishembi

Beishembi is Elebes and Burmake's son and one of the most important adults in Mukay's family. He lives with his parents, his wife Janymjan, and their three children. After Mukay and his siblings become orphans, they live together as one large family. Beishembi tries to help support everyone, even though the

family has very little food. He works and struggles to keep the household alive during years of hunger. He also refuses to take cattle belonging to Russian settlers during the 1916 uprising, following the values taught by his mother. Beishembi faces poverty, injustice, and family conflict throughout the story. Despite these hardships, he remains deeply connected to his family.

Responsible Beishembi carries a great deal of responsibility for his family. He is not only responsible for his wife and three children but also lives with Mukay and his siblings. During the years of hunger, there is barely enough food to feed everyone. He tries to make sure that the children receive at least something to eat. When Janymjan is preparing wheat, one of the children asks for some. Beishembi tells her to give the child a little. His reaction shows that he cannot ignore the children's hunger. He understands that they are all depending on the small amount of food available. His responsibility comes from both his position in the family and his concern for the children.

Family-Oriented Beishembi is strongly attached to his family. He lives together with his parents, his wife, his own children, and Mukay's siblings. Even though such a large household is difficult to support, he continues living with them. He tries to make sure the younger children receive food when there is almost nothing left. He also remains connected to Mukay and the other children during their years of hardship. His family becomes one of the few sources of stability in Mukay's childhood. Beishembi's importance becomes even clearer after his death. Without him, the family begins to fall apart more quickly. His presence had helped keep the household together.

Compassionate Beishembi shows compassion toward the younger children, especially when they are hungry. One of the clearest examples happens when Janymjan is preparing wheat. The children are desperately hungry, and one of them asks for some. Beishembi tells Janymjan to give the child a little. He understands that the children cannot simply wait for better times because they may have nothing to eat. His compassion also appears in the way he treats Mukay and his siblings as members of the household. Although poverty creates tension inside the family, Beishembi does not forget that the children are innocent and dependent on the adults around them.

Honest and Principled Beishembi has a strong sense of right and wrong. During the 1916 uprising, many people begin taking cattle and other possessions that Russian settlers have left behind. Beishembi refuses to take anything that does not belong to him. His mother, Burmake, has taught him not to take what belongs to someone else, and he follows that principle even during a time of chaos. This decision is important because the family is desperately poor and desperately needs food. Taking a cow or other animals could have helped them survive. Yet Beishembi chooses to remain honest. His actions show that poverty has not destroyed his moral values.

Resilient Beishembi continues fighting to support his family despite constant hardship. Hunger becomes a daily part of life, and the family loses their only cow after it is taken as compensation. Beishembi goes to Karakol to try to recover it, but instead he is beaten and ordered to pay money. Rather than giving up, he begins working for Vasily to earn the money. His life is full of difficult choices, but he keeps trying to provide for his family. Even when he faces injustice and humiliation, he continues working. His resilience shows how ordinary people struggled to survive under poverty and oppression while still trying to protect their families.

Chonkol

Chonkol is a local *starshina*, an official working under the Russian Tsarist administration. Although he is Russian, local people call him "Chonkol," meaning "big hands," because of his cruelty. His arrival immediately frightens everyone. He moves through the crowd, shouting insults and beating people without hesitation. He uses his position to force poor villagers to work for him. Mukay and his friend are also forced to carry stones and clear the road. Chonkol does not show concern for their age, hunger, or exhaustion. Through Chonkol, the story shows how local officials could use their authority to intimidate, exploit, and control ordinary people.

Cruel Chonkol is extremely cruel toward ordinary people. When he arrives with his men, everyone becomes frightened because they already know what he is capable of. He insults people and beats them openly. He does not need a serious reason to use violence. His cruelty is part of how he exercises authority. The villagers understand that resisting him could bring even more punishment. Mukay witnesses this atmosphere of fear and experiences Chonkol's treatment himself. Instead of treating the villagers with basic respect, Chonkol treats them as people who can be ordered around and punished. His cruelty makes him one of the clearest examples of oppression in the story.

Abusive Chonkol abuses the power given to him as a local official. He is supposed to represent authority, but he uses that authority against the people. He orders villagers to gather stones and clear the road. They are forced to work under difficult conditions, without being given a meaningful choice. Mukay and his friend are also made to carry stones. When the work becomes unbearable, they run away. Chonkol's behavior shows that he sees his position as a way to control people rather than serve them. His actions demonstrate how government authority can become abusive when officials have power over poor people who have little ability to defend themselves.

Intimidating Chonkol creates fear wherever he goes. The villagers become frightened as soon as they see him and his men approaching. Nobody dares to protest against him, even when he insults and beats people. This fear is important because it shows the imbalance of power between officials and ordinary villagers. Chonkol does not need to explain or justify his actions because people are already afraid of the consequences of resisting him. Mukay also experiences this fear when he is forced to work on the road. Chonkol's reputation is so powerful that his presence alone is enough to silence people. He maintains control through fear rather than respect.

Exploitative Chonkol exploits the poor villagers by using their labor for his purposes. He forces them to gather stones and clear the road, making them perform exhausting physical work. Mukay and his friend are among those forced to participate. They work with their bare hands and eventually reach a stony hill where the stones are so hot that Mukay can barely continue walking. Instead of considering their suffering, Chonkol expects them to keep working. His behavior shows how poor people were treated as a source of free or forced labor. He benefits from their weakness while giving them no protection or consideration in return.

THEMES

Childhood: Child Labor, and Slavery

Mukay never really gets to have a normal childhood. He is only eleven, but after losing his parents, he has to think about work and food instead of school or games. He is sent to herd lambs and later works for other people. What makes his situation worse is that he is poor, so nobody really cares about what he wants.

His time with Vasiliy is especially painful. Mukay works from early morning until late at night and sleeps in the hallway. When his clothes become old, he asks for something to wear. Vasiliy tells him to use the money he has earned, but Mukay never gets his wages. He is treated like someone who has no rights. When he is beaten, he finally decides to leave.

Even after reaching China, things do not change much. Mukay keeps working wherever he can. He herds animals, works in the fields, and collects food in the mountains. He does these things because he has to, not because he has a choice.

Mukay's childhood is slowly taken away from him. He has to become responsible for himself much too early. The novel does not describe slavery only as being owned by someone. It also shows what happens when a poor child has no freedom, no money, and no power to refuse work. Mukay's life shows how easily children can be exploited when they have nobody to protect them.

Illustrative Moment: One moment that really shows this is when Mukay leaves Vasiliy. He has worked there for two months without receiving his pay. One evening, he waits until the river becomes shallow enough to cross and goes home on his own. He does not leave because he wants an adventure. He leaves because he has had enough. He has worked all day, slept in a hallway, been beaten, and still

received nothing in return. For a child, having to run away from work just to escape that treatment says a lot about how little freedom he had.

Oppression: Injustice

Oppression and injustice are major themes in the novel. Mukay and the people around him live in a society where poor people have very little power. Wealthy men, local officials, and Russian authorities can make decisions that affect their lives, while ordinary people have few ways to protect themselves. The scenes show that injustice is not limited to one event. It appears in marriage, taxation, military service, work, and the loss of land.

Baybolot's conflict with Karabay shows how social power works. Karabay is wealthy and influential, while Baybolot is poor. When the young woman refuses the marriage arranged for her, Karabay does not accept her decision. Instead, Baybolot becomes a target. He is beaten and threatened. His family cannot easily challenge Karabay because they do not have the same social position.

The scenes about taxation also show the pressure placed on poor families. People who already struggle to feed themselves are still expected to give money and goods to those in power. For a family like Mukay's, losing even one animal can create a serious problem. The poor have to work harder while their resources continue to disappear.

The novel also shows injustice through land. Baybolot speaks about Russian settlers taking important places from the Kyrgyz people. Land, water, and grazing areas are not simply pieces of property. They are necessary for families to keep animals, grow food, and survive. Losing them makes poverty even worse.

Military service creates another form of inequality. Poor families are expected to give their sons, while wealthy families have more opportunities to protect themselves. Urmanbet's situation shows how little choice ordinary people have when an official order is made.

Through these different scenes, the novel presents oppression as a system rather than one person's cruelty. Wealth and political authority give some people control over others. Poor families are left with fewer choices, fewer resources, and less protection. Their suffering comes not only from hunger or poverty, but also from a society that repeatedly takes away their rights.

Illustrative Moment: A different example appears when Baybolot speaks to the *pristav* about what is happening to his people. He does not speak only about his own problems. He explains that the wealthy protect their sons while poor families are forced to give theirs. He also talks about the loss of land and grazing areas. The important part of the scene is that Baybolot finally speaks directly to an official. He tells him that the people are suffering and that the system is unfair. However, even after speaking openly, Baybolot remains powerless.

Survival: Hunger

Hunger is one of the most important parts of Mukay's life. It is not shown as a single difficult moment, but as something that follows him from his childhood through his years in China. After Mukay's mother dies, he and his siblings are left without enough food. Their father leaves to search for food, while Burmake stays with the children. When they become sick with *kelte*, there is almost nothing to eat. Burmake gives them whatever little food she has and takes care of them.

Later, Mukay is taken to his maternal grandmother. Her family is wealthy and has many animals, but Mukay does not live comfortably there. He is sent to the pasture to look after lambs. His grandmother treats his poverty as something shameful and calls him *yrtsy jok*, meaning unlucky. This shows that hunger is not only a physical problem. It also affects how poor people are treated by others.

When Mukay returns to his family, hunger becomes even more serious. The family depends on very little food. Elebes sometimes drinks tea with roasted wheat *talkan* only once a day. The children watch the food closely because even a spoonful matters to them. One day, when Janymjan is preparing wheat, the children ask for some. During an argument, the wheat falls onto the ground. The children immediately pick it up and eat it. The scene shows how desperate their hunger has become.

Mukay and his brothers also collect berries in the mountains and exchange them for bread. Later, Mukay works in opium fields and grinds wheat because he needs food. After the family escapes to China,

their situation becomes even worse. They beg Uyghur families for bread. They lose their cow, their last valuable possession. Mukay's youngest brother dies, while other family members are separated.

Even after escaping Mamirmazin, Mukay survives by collecting rhubarb roots and exchanging them for bread. Later, he gathers blackberries and trades them for food. Hunger therefore shapes Mukay's entire childhood. It forces him to work, beg, travel, and endure terrible conditions. Yet it also shows his determination to survive. Mukay never simply gives up. He keeps searching for food and continues moving forward, even when almost everything has been taken from him.

Illustrative Moment: A powerful moment showing Mukay's struggle with hunger happens when he and Iymankul escape from Mamirmazin and reach Kyrgyz Say. They have no money, no home, and nobody they know. They go from house to house asking for work and food, but people refuse to help them. With nowhere else to turn, they have to beg. Then they hear that people will give them bread in exchange for rhubarb roots from the mountains. Mukay and Iymankul climb the hills, collect the roots, and bring them back to town. For Mukay, the roots are more than something to sell. They are a way to stay alive. He is willing to climb the mountains and work for whatever small amount of food he can get. He does not wait for someone to rescue him. Instead, he searches for any possible way to survive.

Family: Separation

Family is one of the strongest themes in Mukay's story. From the beginning, his family is large, but their life is difficult. After Mukay's parents die, the children depend on their relatives. Elebes and Burmake take care of them, and Beishembi, Janymjan, and their three children live with them. Even though the household is crowded and there is very little food, the family tries to stay together.

As the years pass, however, hunger, death, and displacement begin to tear the family apart. The loss of their parents is only the beginning. During the difficult years in Kyzyl-Kiya, the children already live with the fear of losing the people who protect them. Later, the 1916 uprising forces the family to leave their homeland. They flee toward China with thousands of other Kyrgyz people. During the journey, families are separated, people disappear, and many die.

Life in China makes the situation even worse. Mukay's youngest brother dies in a Dungan village. His two sisters remain in China, while Eshpay and Ashymkan are also left there. Burmake, Elebes, and Beishembi die after the family has been displaced. Janymjan leaves with her only son to search for relatives. Mukay's elder brother Bechel disappears. One by one, the people who once shared the same home end up in different places.

Even after so many losses, Mukay does not stop thinking about his family. When he escapes from Mamirmazin, he could continue on his own. Instead, he returns to Aksuu to look for his brothers. He finds Bekkul and convinces him to come home with him. Their decision to return together shows how strong their bond remains.

The ending is painful because Mukay and Bekkul reach Issyk-Kul, but most of their family is no longer with them. Some are dead, some are missing, and some are still in China. The novel shows that separation can destroy a family physically, but it does not completely erase the love and loyalty between those who survive.

Illustrative Moment: A strong moment showing family and separation comes after Beishembi's death. While he is alive, he is one of the people who keeps the family together and looks after the children. After his death, everything begins to change. Janymjan takes her only son and leaves to search for relatives. Eshpay stays with Sherpende, while Mukay, Bekkul, and Ashymkan remain with Mamirmazin. The people who once lived under the same roof are now scattered among different places and different people. Mukay has no way to bring everyone back together.

The Uprising and Flight to China

The 1916 uprising is one of the biggest turning points in Mukay's life. People have been suffering under Russian rule for a long time. Their land has been taken, taxes have become heavier, and poor men are being chosen for the Labor Army. Wealthy families try to protect their own sons, while poor families have fewer choices. Anger keeps growing until fighting finally breaks out in Karkyra.

Once the uprising begins, people can no longer stay in their villages. They leave their homes and head toward China. Mukay and his family join the thousands of Kyrgyz refugees. They take their animals with them but leave behind their homes, fields, and everything they cannot carry. The journey is frightening from the beginning because they know Russian soldiers are following them.

At the border, the refugees become trapped between Russian soldiers behind them and Chinese border guards ahead. Gunfire breaks out as people try to cross into China. Everyone is trying to get through at the same time. Horses, women, children, and men are all mixed together. The journey becomes chaotic, and many people die.

Reaching China does not mean that their suffering is over. The refugees arrive hungry, exhausted, and without homes. Families are separated, and many people lose the relatives who traveled with them. Mukay's family also begins to fall apart. Some die, some disappear, and others are left behind in different places.

For Mukay, escaping to China is both a way to survive and a painful separation from his homeland. Even after spending years there, he never forgets Issyk-Kul. The hope of returning home stays with him throughout his life.

Illustrative Moment: One of the most powerful moments comes when the refugees reach the Chinese border. They are already exhausted from the journey, but there is no time to rest. Russian soldiers are shooting from behind, while Chinese guards are firing from the other side. The crowd rushes toward the Muzart River, trying to get across before more people are killed. Men, women, children, and horses all struggle through the water at the same time. In the confusion, a woman carrying her babies in a cradle is swept away by the river. People keep moving because stopping could mean death. The scene captures the panic of the escape and the terrible price of leaving home.