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Genealogy of Being in Postcolonial Kazakh Culture: Re-Reading the *Words of Edification*

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ABSTRACT

Contemporary post/decolonial discourses in Kazakhstan have completely excluded the following issue from the field of narrative: the question of critically reevaluating the pre-colonial cultural structure. These discourses consider current issues mostly as a result of colonialism and overemphasize external factors. It is important to read and decipher the symbols of the cultural structure to understand the origins of authoritarianism and other socio-political problems. This article aims to investigate the origins of notions of the human being and its existence in the postcolonial Kazakh culture through comparing it to its pre-colonial cultural context. I will be working with Abai's *Words of Edification*, which is a collection of texts written in prose in the form of a free philosophical meditation, and it is an apt source for the investigation of the origin of the notion of human existence. The politicization of Abai's figure starting from the Soviet period and continuing in the postcolonial era obscures the initial questions in the text, and several lines from the *Words of Edification* engendered the utmost controversy and overshadowed the rest of the text. The aim of this article is to demythologize the poet's image and focus on symbols hitherto unread.

摘要

当代哈萨克斯坦的后/去殖民话语完全排除了以下问题：批判性地重新评估前殖民文化结构的问题。这些话语主要将当前问题视为殖民主义的结果，并过分强调外部因素。阅读和解读文化结构的符号以了解专制主义和其他社会政治问题的起源很重要。本文旨在通过将后殖民哈萨克文化中的人类及其存在观念与其前殖民文化背景进行比较，来调查这些观念的起源。作者使用阿拜的《启迪之言》，这是一部以散文形式自由哲学沉思写成的文本集，是研究人类存在观念起源的合适来源。从苏联时期开始，阿拜的形象政治化，并在后殖民时代继续，掩盖了文本中的最初问题，并且《启迪之言》中的几句话引起了最大的争议，掩盖了文本的其余部分。本文的目的是揭开诗人形象的神秘面纱，并专注于迄今为止未读的符号。

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后殖民哈萨克斯坦; 去殖民化知识; 阿拜的神话化; 非西方存在主义; 现代性/殖民性; 去殖民话语; 前殖民文化结构

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1. Re-evaluating cultural concepts in the transitional period

Toward the end of the 19th century an “event” took place in the history of Kazakh culture. This “event” put forward the notions about the human being and its existence as an issue for Kazakh society. The discussions about humanity and freedom in modern Kazakh society are so widespread and ubiquitous that the origins of these notions often get overlooked. If we are to define culture as “a system of inherited conceptions expressed in symbolic forms” (Geertz 89) and note that this system is constantly changing, we observe that conceptualizations of the human being and its existence also undergo constant change depending on a particular culture’s historical circumstances. Our modern understanding of the human is a recent invention and is associated with the period of European modernity starting from the 16th century. (Foucault 386). While the Western notions of the human being and its existence were a direct consequence of modernity, the same notions in Kazakh culture are a result of a resistance to modernity and colonialism. This resistance is also associated with the need to reevaluate cultural concepts in the transitional period that was the 19th century. All these forms of resistance can be traced back to the aforementioned “event.” Regarding Central Asian studies, Erica Marat writes: “. . . Central Asian studies can now offer more to global studies on the decoloniality of political and social processes” (Marat 479). However, we cannot deny that misinterpretations and omissions remain. One such omission is the dearth of philosophical considerations concerning the societal issues of the region. It is important to read and decipher the symbols of the cultural structure to understand origins of authoritarianism and other socio-political problems. This article aims to investigate the origins of notions of the human being and its existence in the postcolonial Kazakh culture by comparing it to its pre-colonial cultural context. The project of uncovering the origins of these notions is an integral part of the larger task of decolonizing knowledge (Mignolo 2007) in the post-colonial context. The argument I develop in this article aims to build on this project and further expands it through integration of the Kazakh context. I argue that the transformation of notions of the human being and its existence within Kazakh culture in the 19th century are linked to two historical factors. First, Kazakh people’s resistance to the modernist/colonial worldview that would deny their humanity. Second, Kazakh thinkers’ critique of their own culture, which was in deep crisis even before Russian colonial expansion. In particular, their critique of the notions of the human and its existence is important for my analysis. Looking into the local reaction to these crises reveals the persistent relevance of the critique produced in that period. Post and decolonial discourses in modern Kazakh society overlook the issue of reevaluation of the pre-colonial cultural structures. Internal self-criticism that comes from within a certain culture (Dussel 45) is the only way in which a culture can survive and develop.

2. Demythologizing Abai

In the question of Being, nations with a colonial history often consider Being to be a direct consequence of colonization. Little attention is paid to analyzing this issue within the context of pre-colonial cultural structures. The peculiarities of Kazakh colonial history, as well as its pre-colonial cultural context prevents us from directly applying postcolonial theories to the Kazakh case without modifications. Since Being is primarily

characterized by its “thrownness” to a particular historical cultural context (Heidegger, 1927) the ways of studying Being should also be dependent on context. I focus on the reevaluation of the pre-colonial cultural structures through an analysis of literary texts. Namely, I will be working with Abai’s *Words of Edification*, which is a collection of texts written in prose in the form of a free philosophical meditation and it is an apt source for the investigation of the history/origin of the notion of the human being and its existence in the context of Kazakh culture. In this context, Abai is not merely a poet, but rather “an author of subsequent discourses” (Foucault). In other words, Abai is the author of the “event” that I mentioned in the beginning of the article. Naomi Caffee, who researches the question of postcolonial identity in the works of Central Asian authors writes: “The Stalin-era refashioning of Pushkin into a Soviet cultural icon sheds light on Abai’s own rise to the status of Kazakhstan’s national poet” (15). After “Kazakhstan gained independence in December 1991, Abai remained the state’s main canonical figure in nation-building and cultural understanding of Kazakhs. Abai became one of the most ubiquitous and undisputable images of Kazakh modernity that the post-independent political elites widely used in their political projects” (Kudaibergenova 26). The discourses that developed around this poet and his works are directly linked to Kazakhs’ self-understanding as a nation. As a result of politicization of Abai’s figure starting from the Soviet period and continuing in the postcolonial era, the questions of Being in the poet’s texts are obscured to a considerable degree. Several lines from the *Words of Edification* that engendered the most controversy overshadowed the rest of the text. The aim of this article is to demythologize the poet’s image and conduct through an in-depth analysis of his text. Thus, a hermeneutic phenomenological method is used to analyze this text. This method allows us to bracket out the politicized readings, and to re-read the text to uncover meanings that were hitherto overlooked. Hans Robert Jauss emphasized the social and historical dimensions of a text’s reception. Texts change meaning in different eras, as they are read differently by quite distinct audiences (Rivkin and Ryan. 2017, 298). When Abai’s text is approached through limitless possibilities of meaning creation (Derrida, 1967), one can reveal meanings that have not been reconstructed from the text before. One can also ask how these meanings were historically constructed and yet have not been inferred from the text in the Soviet and postcolonial periods. Overlooked meanings are important since they can reveal a society’s hidden fears.

3. “What is to be done!”

The “event” was created by Abai, and it was a text about Being and the freedom inherent to human existence. As mentioned earlier, this “event” emerged not only as a reaction to colonialism but also as the society’s internal self-criticism. The focus, then, should shift to the 19th century. This period covers early modernity brought about through colonialism and the disintegration of traditional social structures. This is a key transitional period between the traditional social structure and the subsequent Soviet period. The period of rejection of traditional values and the absence of new values to replace them constitute a time of anomie (Durkheim, 1969), which lies at the heart of many transformations that took place in this era. When a society faces unexpected and fast economic and social changes, it falls into the condition of anomie. Durkheim used this concept to explain the transition of

European nations from a traditional to a modern social system, within which he used the concept to study the issue of suicide: “Such changes put people in new situations in which the old norms no longer apply but new ones have yet to develop. Periods of disruption unleash currents of anomie – moods of rootlessness and normlessness – and these currents lead to an increase in rates of anomic suicide” (Ritzer 95). Under such conditions, a society may lose its “ontological security” (Giddens). The “event” was born as a response to this time and the most fundamental change from this period is the transformation of the notions of the human being and its existence.

Abai had become the national poet as a result of a Soviet-led cultural project starting from 1933 (Batayeva, 2020). Naomi Caffee writes: “The twenty-first century finds Abai undergoing yet another wave of makeovers, this time cast in the pantheon of national founding fathers for the independent republic of Kazakhstan” (18). The *Words of Edification* – the work that I selected for the purposes of this investigation – caused Abai to be respected for the critical words that he directed against his own people. In particular, a lot of attention was paid to the section about the Kazakh nation. This is the reason why the author is so highly politicized. This politicization, however, eventually overshadowed the author’s intended meaning. This is the reason why Dina Kudaibergenova called researchers to re-read the canonized texts of Abai and rethink them in new contexts. She stated the objective as a “return to ‘pure Abai’” – Abai and his oeuvre before he was read through Socialist Realist lenses or canonized into the national hero (22). Furthermore, I will consider some examples from the *Words of Edification* that caused the most controversy and facilitated the author’s politicization.

Excerpts from the Second, Third, and Ninth Words:

There is nothing to say about the Russians. We cannot be compared even to their servants. Where did our boasting and sense of superiority disappear?... What are the reasons that Kazakhs regard each other as foes, do not wish well upon each other, speak little truth, blindly pursue rank, and languish in idleness?... I myself am Kazakh. Do I hate Kazakhs, or do I love them? If I loved them, would I not rejoice for their deeds? I harbour no hopes of setting them rights, or that they shall learn and set themselves right. (Abai. [1890–1892] 2003, 175–183. Translated by Dulat Ilyassov)

Excerpts from the Twenty-fifth and Forty-first Words:

One should master the language of Russians. Wisdom, arts, sciences all are with Russians. That is because they knew the language of the world. If you speak the Russian’s tongue, your eyes shall be open... It is impossible to convince a Kazakh of anything without threats or bribes, but with reason only. The ignorance that is deep in his flesh, carved on his bones, and acquired from mother’s breasts has long ago erased any trace of humanity in him. When spoken he cannot stand still – either his mind or eyes wander. What is to be done! (Abai. [1894–1897] 2003, 201–235. Translated by. D. I)

These are the lines that are the most politicized. It is important to note here that Abai wrote these passages before the official Soviet colonial regime was established and before the campaign of rewriting cultural texts. The texts were written between 1890 and 1898. Thus, one cannot apply to these texts the concept of “double consciousness” (1903) first proposed by Du Bois and later elaborated by Fanon (1952). In other words, we cannot link this text to the colonial gaze that defines the postcolonial subject or to his “desire to

be normal” (Bissenova 33). I should argue that these words were not written under the pressure of colonial epistemology. On the contrary, the texts show the transformation and transition into a new era that is internal to Kazakh society.

4. Intertextual voices in the words of edification

If we can bracket out all the politicized interpretation hitherto attached to this text, the text can speak for itself. It will also allow a glimpse into the author’s inner turmoil in writing these lines: “Gadamer argues that instability is an inherent characteristic of a text. There is no possibility of knowing the literary text ‘as it is’” (Eagleton 62). The aim of this investigation is not to find the text as it is but to let the text speak for itself. The study of Abai’s texts largely limited their focus to Abai’s own voice in his works. However, the voices of people or groups that Abai criticized are seldom considered. According to Bakhtin, language is a co-existence of present and past, i.e., co-existence of ideological contradictions of different epochs in the past and the present (291). A close reading of Abai’s text can reveal two contradictory voices. The quotations that precede the words “*deydi*,” “*depti*” (*they said*) constitute one voice, while Abai constitutes the other. The polyphony in the text, where at least two voices co-exist, reveals the intersubjectivity present in the text. This merits a consideration of the text as a complex intertext. For instance, the sayings and phrases that Abai critiques are excerpts from poems of the zhyrau (steppe poetic and oratorical tradition particularly prominent in the 15th to 18th centuries). In another instance, the sentences in quotation marks that come before “*deydi*” and “*depti*” are direct quotations from the quotidian communication of Abai’s contemporaries. Since these are direct quotations, one may assume that these sentences are minimally affected by Abai’s own voice and represent a credible piece of communication from outside the text. Kristeva calls such intertexts “a mosaic of quotations.” She argues that “all text is a case of absorption and transformation of another” (Kristeva 37). Thus, one should consider these two voices to be intertextual voices. Following the threads of intertextuality is one way of enabling the text to speak for itself. My argument is illustrated in the following visual formula (Figure 1).

V₁ (Voice) represents the voices of people in the sayings and quotations that Abai critiques. V₂ represents Abai’s own voice. C₁ - C₄ stands for the concepts that can be deduced from Abai’s voice. Abai’s voice should be considered through these four main concepts. Also given are the citations to *Words of Edification* where these concepts are present. For example, the Twentieth Word discusses the notion of the world.

4.1. Domain of zhyrau

Let us start with the first voice. Abai’s *Words of Edification* are meditations written in prose. Here, Abai critiques the sayings and phrases that are widely used in his time. The phrases and sayings in question originate from somewhere between the 15th and 18th centuries. Authors of those sayings are the zhyrau. Since “the words of the zhyrau often turned into popular sayings,” (Maghauyin 150), these sayings speak of the values of their times. Who are the zhyrau? Auezov writes about the zhyrau: “Bukhar’s words were not merely literary. His words represented an exercise of power from a governing body”

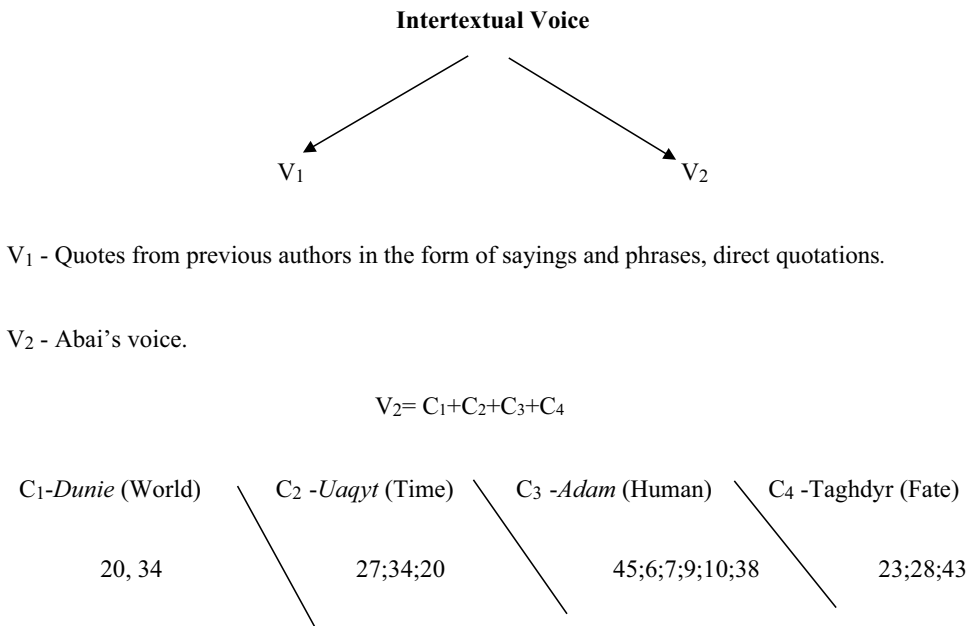


Figure 1. Structure of “the words of edification” - “qara sozder”.

(2014, 7:265-266). Thus, Auezov argues that the zhyrau were a political institution. Auezov writes further:

Zhyrau poets' main function was not only poetry. They were expected to guide the people and govern them. Since these individuals were functionally politicians engaged in government, one can expect that the values propagated in their texts reflect the values and interests of the ruling class – khans and biys. (196–206)

Zhyraus, I would argue, were also the group engaged in knowledge production. Modern history textbooks propagate the idea that zhyraus were independent from the khan's (the Chinggisid nobility) influence. However, the existence of a group of intellectuals independent from institutions of power does not agree with the historical evidence. Auezov proposes the idea that before the arrival of modern written literary tradition, the traditional oral poetry of the zhyrau were collected from the sayings widespread among the people, which were repackaged and retold by the zhyrau. Thus, this poetry never contained any ideas that were outside the orally produced canon of the people: “All that is new and that is old comes from the people to the people. These poets would not see it as their function to contradict this canon and offer iconoclastic new ideas” (Auezov 193). The three centuries of the zhyrau rule did not produce any significant innovation: “The study of zhyrau poetry has gained prominence starting with the works of Mukhtar Maghauiy. Later, researchers like S. Negimov and Y. Tursunov studied the rhyme structure, semantic and aesthetic properties of zhyrau poetry” (Zhanabayev and Nagymzhanova 11–12). These researchers also voiced the idea that zhyraus had considerable influence on the formation of cultural structures of the time. However, researchers never sufficiently explored the question of Being behind the zhyrau poetry

in their treatment of the human being and its existence. This might be caused by the dearth of profound intellectual discourses around Being in the poetry of this period.

Thus, one may assume that the V₁ (the first voice) reflects the discourses of this particular period, which Abai then critiques. Thinkers of this period did not ask the questions: what is a human being? what is its existence? The human being was always considered around/in relation to other issues, and was never put forward as a separate problem. The “Abai event,” then, emerged a reaction to not only colonialism but as a critique of these notions in his own culture.

4.2. Discourse of modernity in the Words of Edification

Let us turn to the second voice. Since every text is perpetually being written here and now (Barthes, 1967), a reading of the *Words of Edification* today would result in the following text: World, Time, Human, Fate. This is a collection of words/concepts that resulted from the intertextual analysis of all 45 *Words of Edification*. My authorial re-entextualization of it would be the following: “Humans come into the world for a time only to resist fate. His resistance is futile. However, that resistance reveals the very structure of his Being.” Thus, we can reconstruct the model of Being developed by Abai from his authorial voice in the text. This is a very modern definition. For instance, the Sixth and Seventh Words characterize human existence thus: “*kongil tiri bolu*” - to be lively in spirit/existential being ([1891] 2003, 180). “*Kongilmen koru*” - to see through one’s spirit/existential seeing ([1891] 2003, 181). I would argue that these characteristics echo notions of human existence developed in the existentialism of Kierkegaard and Heidegger through the paradigm of existential phenomenology. In the Thirty-eighth Word Abai talks of the limitedness of human cognition ([1896] 2003, 221). A further analysis of the Word reveals that since human cognition is limited, absolute truth is unattainable. Further, in the Twenty-eighth and Forty-third Words Abai discusses a human being’s relation to fate thusly:

Whenever someone does good or bad deeds, are we to say that they were merely following God’s command? No. If you were to understand that good and bad are God’s creation, but your deeds are a creation of your own, you would not err. Otherwise, no. He who says “If God Himself did not give me reason, what hope for me?” as well as that who says “Do you think God created the two of us equal?” wishes to lay blame on God and absolve himself. Did God say to him not to see, hear, or not to commit to mind that which he sees or hears? (Abai. [1895–1898] 2003, 207–237. Translated by D. I)

I suggest that by interpreting Abai’s God as fate or social structure, we would be closer to Abai’s original intention. The human being in Abai’s view is not a mere animator of an external will. Abai’s human is a being capable of creation and shaping himself. He is perpetually creating himself through choosing what to be.

In addition, if we pay attention to the concepts of “Time” and “World” in the words, this will further reveal the concept of human existence. Abai’s conception of time can be seen in the following lines from the Twenty-seventh Word: “A human being is always concerned with his future, past, and his present” ([1894] 2003, 205). Here, we can note that Abai is shifting from the preceding mythical explanation of the relations between a human being and time. Ethnographer Shokan Walikhanov writes: “fleeing from death

is a mortal sin in Islam and is totally prohibited, while the myths of shamanic peoples always depict fleeing from death” (ed. by Daurenbekov and Tursunov 29). As a representative of the rational school of thought does not subscribe to the then conventional ideas of the eternality of a human being. On the contrary, he emphasizes earthly existence, especially, the finitude of time allotted to man. His philosophy develops in the relation between this finitude and the question of Being. Abai’s thoughts on the world are expressed in the Twentieth Word, where he writes: “world is not constant, nor is human strengths and earthly existence” ([1889] 2003, 196). Heidegger calls the World a “holistic network of interconnected relational significance” (Wheeler, 2020). The World is constantly changing through the human activity of ascribing significance. The World is a web of meaning-creation. In summation, the analysis identified Abai’s authorial voice to be constituted by four elements: C_1 -World; C_2 -Time; C_3 -Human; C_4 -Fate. The integration of the four constitutes a concept of a full ontology of human existence. The formula is as follows: $V_2 = C_1 + C_2 + C_3 + C_4$. Abai’s Being shows that by his time the conceptualization of human existence in Kazakh culture had radically changed. Abai presents a break from his predecessors who did not consider human existence to be a problem in itself. The human was always only considered within the context of his relations.

A text or a work of art is not a product of an individual author, but of his or her historical period. Heidegger says that poetry is the birth of truth and a happening of historical truth: “Poetry in the broad sense is happening of Truth” (Young 32). This leads me to make the following conclusion about Abai’s *Words of Edification*. The historical period in which Abai’s work was produced was a transitory, liminal period in which radical cultural and cognitive shifts were taking place. These cultural and cognitive shifts were triggered by the change in the ontological concepts of human existence. As I noted in the introductory section, the understanding of these concepts in our present time is a direct result of modernity. However, this connection between ontology and modernity is seldom explored outside of the West and in the post-colonial contexts. For example, Heidegger’s ontology based on the structure of Dasein, to a certain degree, is 20th century European culture’s self-interpretation. We can’t deny that “Dasein as a model is a European man” (Torres 251). Nevertheless, we noted some similarities between the ontologies of Heidegger and Abai. For example, for Heidegger and Dasein in its being is concerned with that being as an issue: “Dasein is concerned with its being in the sense that it must choose the way it is” (Paul 24). Dasein’s understanding of its existence always unfolds in terms of its possibilities to be or not to be itself (Farrell 54). “Sartre’s famous assertion that existence precedes essence made Heidegger’s existentialism known widely. What this statement suggests is that there is no pre-given or essential nature that determines us. We exist for ourselves as self-making or self-defining beings” (Kevin, 2023). Heidegger considers “Being in a broad sense as creation or birth” (Heidegger, 1971). These parallels between Abai and Heidegger can be explained as follows: to a certain degree both philosophies are born out of the same air of crisis engendered by modernity: “Heidegger’s Being is born out of the malaise associated with the ‘loss of meaning’ that defines the European culture of the early XX century” (Guignon 29). Besides, through radically critiquing modernity, Heidegger revived the Nietzschean tradition (Dosse 365). When seen from this perspective, the “Abai event” represents

a treatment of modernity within the context of Kazakh society and a critique of it. If we were to set as our task the decolonization of the deconstruction of modernity/coloniality itself, we start finding the authentic way of such a deconstruction from cultures that were colonized. While the Western concepts of the human being and its existence are born out of modernity, then in our Kazakh culture nowadays the notion of the human being and its existence were born out of resistance to this very project of modernization. Besides, the main driving force of the birth of this resistance was the need to reevaluate the notions of the human being and its existence in its own culture.

5. Conclusion

Once upon a time in Kazakh history a text was written in 1890–1898. It was a text about Being and the freedom inherent to human existence. It was a product of resistance. First, it was a resistance against the project of colonization/modernization which denied humanity to colonial subjects. Second, this emerged as a critique toward the notion of the human being and its existence in its own culture that had been in a deep crisis. This text needs to be re-read in the modern context for two reasons. First, the current post/decolonial discourses in Kazakhstan overlook the issue of reevaluating the pre-colonial cultural structure. These discourses tend to evaluate most issues as consequences of colonization, thereby overemphasizing the effect of external factors, which lead to a hindrance of a true understanding of the issues under consideration. Second, in our conventional treatment of the issues of the human being and its existence we overly rely on theories of Western schools of thought. The history of those same issues in the peripheral context remains overlooked and understudied. It is important that each society has its own particular conceptualization of human existence and its freedom and sees these as issues in themselves. The development of Western traditions of thought is directly linked to the history of these concepts. Therefore, the task of independently developing these concepts and problematizing them is a condition for the autonomous development of any culture.

Although it is not directly in line with my topic, I want to conclude this article with the following words from Abai's Forty-fifth Word: 'We cannot create science purely in our souls, but only through seeing, sensing, and reasoning that which is already created.'

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