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**IN SEARCH OF EXISTENCE: CHINGIZ AITMATOV'S PHILOSOPHY OF MAN**

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**Abstract**

In this article, the authors have carried out the first study of the existential and philosophical ideas in Chingiz Aitmatov's work and revealed previously obscure forms in which existence manifests. The authors substantiate the idea that the great Kyrgyz-Russian author expanded and developed F. Dostoevsky's, A. Camus', K. Hamsun's and G. Marquez's traditions of the literary existential philosophy in his work. The success of the study is due to the application of methods of hermeneutics, systematic-comparative analysis and philosophic generalization. Based on the analysis of episodes from Aitmatov's various works and the comparison of the episodes with philosophical principles of existentialism, the authors conclude that the manifestations of the existential principle have been revealed in completely different phenomena of the human world and nature, spiritual and physiological being, be it children, animals, death, moral choice, etc. The forms of existences discovered during the study do not occur in works by prominent existentialists. The discovery of existential philosophy in Aitmatov's works justifies the conclusion that he was not only one of the great humanist writers but also a philosopher-writer who contributed substantially to the philosophy of existentialism.

**Keywords**

Literature – Philosophy – Existence – Ethics, nature – Animals – Human

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## Introduction

The modern philosophical discourse is characterized by particular interdisciplinarity, a constant movement beyond strictly defined scientific philosophizing. One of the most distinct signs of this process is the subtle, deep and already irreversible interconnection of literature and philosophy. This interconnection is equally typical of Russian and Eastern philosophical cultures. In this context, H. Gadamer's reflection on "the poverty of post-Hegelian philosophy" in his 1977 article "Philosophy and poetry" is particularly significant.

Gadamer's following words concisely capture the essence of the transformation of the European philosophical tradition that also characterizes the modern philosophical process. He writes, "The philosophy to be found in the universities of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries forfeited its status – and not only as a consequence of Schopenhauer's insulting tirades. This occurred when it was confronted by great writers who were also outsiders, like Kierkegaard and Nietzsche, but even more when it was overshadowed by those great luminaries of the novel, particularly by the French (Stendhal, Balzac, Zola) and by the Russians (Gogol, Dostoevsky, Tolstoy)"<sup>1</sup>.

Of particular importance is the fact that a prominent Eastern philosopher put Russian philosopher-thinkers on a par with the great "novelists" who changed the philosophical paradigm. Gadamer could not mention Russian writers of the 20<sup>th</sup> century who continued the tradition, including such symbolic figures of the philosophical-literary process as Andrei Platonov and Chingiz Aitmatov. It was these writers that posed the most pressing and fundamental problems of human existence in existential terms. However, there are very few studies of prominent 20<sup>th</sup>-century writers as existentialist philosophers and there is no such study on Aitmatov. For example, the five-volume publication "Research, articles, speeches (on Ch. Aitmatov's work)"<sup>2</sup> deals with moral, ethical and humanist aspects in Aitmatov's work. However, there is no mention of the writer's existentialism. In this respect, this article is one of the first works on the existential philosophy of this great writer and philosopher who revealed his previously obscure forms of existence manifestation.

## Main analytical approaches to Aitmatov's works

Let us take a closer look at the consideration of the philosophical views of Aitmatov who has become noticeably more interesting in modern literature. There is no need to speak about the scale of his person and yet we will cite the following words spoken for the 90th anniversary of the writer since they reflect a certain established trend. K.U. Kambarova writes, "These days is the 90th anniversary of the birth of the writer, philosopher and public figure Chingiz Aitmatov who is unparalleled in modern world literature. This is due to the fact that Ch. Aitmatov is not just a writer with his distinctive artistic system of image, but a writer, thinker, and philosopher. It is this aspect of his personality that attracts the attention of the entire world community since in his work he poses the universal, most urgent moral and philosophical problems of existence"<sup>3</sup>.

<sup>1</sup> H.-G. Gadamer, *Filosofiya i poeziya. Aktualnost prekrasnogo* (Moscow: Iskusstvo, 1991).

<sup>2</sup> A. A. Akmatoliev y N. Yisaeva, *Issledovaniya, stati, vystupleniya (o tvorchestve Ch. Aitmatova)* (Bishkek: "Kipland", 2010-2018).

<sup>3</sup> K. U. Kambarova, *Chingiz Aitmatov – pisatel, filosof i gumanist. Nauka, novye tekhnologii i innovatsii* Kyrgyzstana num 8 (2018).

In these words, the philosophical aspect of the writer's work is set as fundamental. Despite the obvious philosophical quality of Aitmatov's work, this aspect has not been sufficiently studied. There is an exception, namely, the work of a famous literary critic and philosopher S.G. Semenova who, starting from the 1980s comprehensively considered Aitmatov's work philosophically<sup>4</sup>.

One should also mention the works that touch upon various philosophical aspects of Aitmatov's work<sup>5</sup>. In most research works devoted to Aitmatov, his work is characterized as humanistic and he appears as a humanist of the highest level who contributes to the development of the dialogue of cultures, the bonding of peoples, the development of universal values, etc. "Rooted in two great civilizations – Eastern and Western – Aitmatov's prose had a special cultural meaning and made it possible to hear the dialogue of two cultures that took place in the soul of one person"<sup>6</sup>.

Semenova classifies Aitmatov's work as "natural philosophical prose" since the main question in it is "the question of the nature of man, of his relation to the eternal realities of being: nature, its creatures, space, other people, life and death, the question of the roots of evil in human nature, the possibility of its ascent or the danger of descent, the threat of an anthropological disaster"<sup>7</sup>. However fair this and other assessments might be, we are predominantly interested in the existential layer of Aitmatov's thinking. A person in complete nakedness of their spiritual nature, with all the problems, tragedy and ambiguity of existence is the main subject of Aitmatov's philosophical exploration that could be called existential.

### **Aitmatov's existentialism**

What gives reason to classify Aitmatov as an existential type of writer? First of all, it must be said that it was in literature that existentialism as a philosophical trend became very widespread. Those dramatic bends of the human inner world, where unconscious irrational impulses often dwell, are more accessible to artistic practice than to analytical. Moreover, it was for good reason that the first high appraisal of the novel by Aitmatov "Jamila" was given by the famous French writer Louis Aragon, a contemporary and compatriot of such vivid figures of existential philosophical literature as J.-P. Sartre, A. Camus and G. Marquez.

<sup>4</sup> S. Semenova, *Preodolenie tragedii: "Vechnye voprosy" v literature* (Moscow: Sovetskii pisatel, 1989); S. Semenova, *Metafizika russkoi literatury* (Moscow: "PoRog", 2004) y S. G. Semenova, *Russkaya literatura XIX-XX vekov: O poetiki k miroponimaniyu* (Moscow: Akademicheskii proekt; Paradigma, 2016).

<sup>5</sup> U. Asanova, *Filosofiya krizisa kultury v tvorchestve Ch. Aitmatova. Ch. Aitmatov i dukhovnaya kultura: Sb. statei* (Bishkek, 1999); G. Gachev, *Chingiz Aitmatov v svete mirovoi kultury* (Frunze: Adabiyat, 1989); A. S. Zhantaev y Z. T. Isakbaeva, "Trud kak tsennost v romanakh Chingiza Aitmatova", *Rossiiskaya nauka i obrazovanie segodnya: problemy i perspektivy* Vol: 3 num 22 (2018); A. G. Kovalenko, *Chingiz Aitmatov i russkaya literatura XX veka*", *Vestnik RUDN* num 2 (2015); T. Mekhmet, "Filosofskii vzglyad na dobro i zlo v povesti Chingiza Aitmatova "Jamila", *Vestnik Mezhdunarodnogo Universiteta Kyrgyzstana* Vol: 2 num 30 (2016); Zh. Saadanbekov, *Filosofiya Chingiza Aitmatova* (Bishkek, 2013) y R. M. Syrdbaeva, "Vzaimovliyaniya poetiki tvorchestva Chingiza Aitmatova i kyrgyzskogo i mirovogo iskusstv", *Izvestiya NAN KR* num 3–4 (2014).

<sup>6</sup> M. A. Chernyak, "Chingiz Aitmatov desyat' let spustya: roman "Kogda padayut gory (Vechnaya nevesta)", *Vestnik Gertsenovskogo universiteta* Vol: 6 num 44 (2014).

<sup>7</sup> S. G. Semenova, *Russkaya literatura XIX-XX vekov: O poetiki k miroponimaniyu* (Moscow: Akademicheskii proekt; Paradigma, 2016).

If we set aside the classical interpretations of existence from Kierkegaard to Heidegger, which, of course, would lead us directly to Aitmatov's work, but, unfortunately, are not the purpose of this article, then we can focus on the understanding of existence that can be found in K. Jaspers' work. This understanding helps to show the writer's literary activity as predominantly existential, as the latter is directed to the main thing in human existence, to its meaning.

Let us turn to Jaspers who talks about this in "Reason and Existenz". "Existenz, although never itself becoming an object or form, carries the meaning of every mode of the Encompassing <...> we find here the very axis about which everything in the world turns if it is to have any genuine meaning for us". Further, he concludes: "without Existenz everything seems empty, hollowed out, without ground, fake, because everything has turned into endless masks, mere possibilities, or mere empirical existence"<sup>8</sup>.

Therefore, one could say that existence is a non-objectified foundation of human life wherein the meaning and the authenticity concur. This concurrence in the traditions of Russian philosophy can be called the moral beginning of man that is characterized, first of all, by inner self-search, suffering and compassion of the soul and is, therefore, the basis for the love of truth and the search for truth. Authenticity is the search for truth through compassion, through the fight with the unknown. This is the distinctive feature of Russian existentialism that is characterized, above all, by the focus on the ethical aspects of human life<sup>9</sup>.

Philosophical reflection on the work of Aitmatov yields several important topics that are directly related to existential philosophy. Sartre's words that "Man is, indeed, a project which possesses a subjective life, instead of being a kind of moss, or a fungus or a cauliflower..."<sup>10</sup> are reflected in Aitmatov's numerous works with artistic preciseness. The writer is very attentive to the inner world of characters, their thoughts, suffering and search for a way out of the absurdity of their life situation. The writer and philosopher Aitmatov through national forms of human existence reveals the shades of existential collisions of the human soul that have scarcely been explored before. This could be called an innovative method in existential literature.

One of the writer's vivid existential thoughts appears already in the first lines of the third part of the novel "The Place of the Skull": "People look for fate, fate looks for people... And life keeps going in circle... And if it is true that fate always tries to hit its target, then this is what happened this time. Everything happened exceptionally simply and therefore inevitably like fate..."<sup>11</sup>. Here it is once again appropriate to recall the aforementioned work by Jaspers wherein the philosopher mentions the how crucial Kierkegaard and Nietzsche are for the modern situation in philosophy, noting, among all, the *discovery of destiny* in their philosophy: "In the situation of philosophizing, as well as in the real life of men, Kierkegaard and Nietzsche appear as the expression of destinies, destinies which nobody noticed then"<sup>12</sup>.

<sup>8</sup> K. Jaspers, Reason and existenz (Moscow: Kanon+, 2013), 53-56.

<sup>9</sup> V. V. Varava, "Osevoe vremya" russkoi filosofii: otkrytie ekzistentsii. Forum noveishei vostochnoevropeskoj istorii i kultury", num 1-2 (2018). Retrieved from: <http://www1.ku-eichstaett.de/ZIMOS/forum/inhaltruss29.html>

<sup>10</sup> J.-P. Sartre, Existentialism Is a Humanism. Sumerki bogov (Moscow: Politizdat, 1990), 321.

<sup>11</sup> Ch. Aitmatov, Plakha (Moscow: Molodaya Gvardiya, 1987).

<sup>12</sup> K. Jaspers. Reason and existenz. (Moscow: Kanon+, 2013), 12.

Thus, the plot of Aitmatov's work follows the path paved by fate as the thread, resulting in a not simply episodic but also existential chain of events that the writer's characters find themselves in.

Then what are the existential paths that Aitmatov's rational and spiritual way follows?

It starts in childhood. The foundations for Aitmatov's existentialism start to take shape already in "Jamila" and "Farewell, Gulsary!" and become systemic and develop in "The White Steamship". This is the first instance of *children's existence* if this term is appropriate. "The boy realized that something terrible had happened. <...> Such dense fear and disquiet settled over the boy that he could barely eat. There is nothing worse than silence at the dinner table, when people are absorbed in their own anger. 'Maybe it's our fault', the boy said mentally to his schoolbag, which lay on the windowsill. The boy's heart rolled down to the floor, slipped across the room, climbed to the windowsill, nearer to the schoolbag, and whispered to it"<sup>13</sup> ("The White Steamship").

The artistic vision of the inner world helps the writer find both descriptive and precise words that convey the very substance of the existential situation of the human soul. Aitmatov reveals the essence of human existence through the comparison with a natural disaster: "The danger of landslides is that the disaster is approaching imperceptibly, day after day, ... and all it takes is a small earthquake, thunder or heavy rain to make the mountain start to slowly and irreversibly slide down. ...the landslide is threatening and there are no forces that could stop it... Something like this can happen to a person when he is completely alone with his unspeakable conflicts and is torn, tormented, not daring to tell anyone about it, because no one in the world can help or understand him."<sup>14</sup> ("The Day Lasts More than a Hundred Years").

At this point, it is appropriate to mention Camus. In his philosophical work "The Stranger" the main character Meursault welcomes death as deliverance, an escape from the absurdity of the world that is foreign to him. To quote Camus, in the conflicts and the absurdity of their life conditions men "find reasons for faith and hope in the hopelessness when life seems like a terrifying alphabet of death"<sup>15</sup>. This is what Yedigei does in "The Day Lasts More than a Hundred Years". The death of the boy as his transformation into a fish in "The White Steamship" is the confirmation of unfairness and cruelty, the search for the dream – the white steamship – is its unreachable symbol like the top of the mountain for Sisyphus' rock. This is the author's key thought, one could say, the core motif of all Aitmatov's works, "Did you know that you would never turn into a fish, that you would never reach Issyk-Kul, or see the white ship, or say to it: 'Hello, white ship, it's I'? There's only one thing I can say now: you rejected what your child's soul was unable to make peace with. Your life was like a flash of lightning that gleamed once and went out. And lightning is born of the sky. And the sky is eternal. And that is my consolation. And also, that the child's conscience in man is like the bud in a seed; without the bud the seed will not grow. And whatever awaits us in the world, truth shall abide forever, as long as men are born and die"<sup>16</sup>.

<sup>13</sup> Ch.T. Aitmatov, *Sobranie sochinenii v 3 t.* (Moscow: "Molodaya gvardiya". 1983), 97.

<sup>14</sup> Ch.T. Aitmatov... 453.

<sup>15</sup> A. Camus, *Hope and the Absurd in the Works of Franz Kafka/ From "The Myth of Sisyphus"*. Albert Camus. *Collected works* (Moscow: Prometei, 1989), 404.

<sup>16</sup> Ch.T. Aitmatov, *Sobranie sochinenii...* 113.

The writer's most important existential task is the *examination of death* as one of the main principles of human existence. According to O.F. Bollnow, "This is not at all about an objective examination of death in general, but exclusively about the attitude of an individual person to their own death, about the question of what death means as the coming end of human life for this life itself"<sup>17</sup>. This idea is characteristic of Aitmatov's work which makes him part of the existential tradition.

The author clearly expresses his existentialist philosophy in inner *human* suffering, in Jesus' fear of death. "Mama! – he whispered quietly. – Mama, if only you know how hard it is for me! It was yesterday night in Gethsemane on the Mount of Olives that I suffered, was terrified with grief that came over me like the black night, was restless and, staying awake with my disciples, could not calm down and due to the sense of foreboding had sweat of blood. And then I begged God, my heavenly Father. 'Father, I said. – Oh, if only You would give Your blessing for this cup to pass me! Although, it is not by my will, but by Your will'. And here it is – this cup, full to the brim, will not pass me, will not spare me, it is moving closer inexorably, and something that you may foresee will happen..."<sup>18</sup> ("The Place of the Skull").

For the writer, death is not only an axiologically neutral substance of existence but also the moral absolute that a person answers to regardless of their faith or lack thereof. As Jesus says to Pontius Pilate, "God cares what a person thinks before death, and God passes judgment on people based on their thoughts <...> as the very last thoughts are always pure and the most sincere, they contain only truth and no cunning"<sup>19</sup> ("The Place of the Skull").

If one compares the inner conflicts of the characters from "The Day Lasts More than a Hundred Years" and "The Place of the Skull", one can see Aitmatov's multifaceted existential reflection wherein facing death is accompanied by substantial inner moral work. This type of philosophy is not inferior to the works by the renowned icons of existential literature Camus and Sartre, it is even superior in its subtlety and realism.

Perhaps the main difference between Aitmatov and other existential writers is that in his works there is hope for a "white steamship". There is not just absurdity caused by purely facing the horror of death, but the triumph of justice and morality achieved by going through suffering, injustice and cruelty.

There are existentially positive characters, such as old man Momun, Yedigei, Buranny, Boston, as well as existentially negative ones – Sabitzhan, Orozkul, Bazarbai and others. The inner monologue of the angry Orozkul can be viewed as a vivid example of negative existence: "Ah, if only I had more power – I'd twist some bigger fellows to my will. I'd get them crawling in the dust. If only they gave me – oh, even a collective farm or a Soviet farm to manage. I'd show them how to run things. Giving people too much leeway. And then they complain there's no respect for chairmen and directors. Take some low-down shepherd, and he talks with the authorities as if he was an equal"<sup>20</sup>. Here one can see the socio-political bases and supports for rising tyranny. This is an example of how negative personal existence contributes to the establishment of terrible social reality.

<sup>17</sup> O. F. Bollnow, *Filosofiya ekzistentsializma* (SPb.: Lan, 1999), 102.

<sup>18</sup> Ch. Aitmatov, *Plakha...* 187.

<sup>19</sup> Ch. Aitmatov, *Plakha...* 189.

<sup>20</sup> Ch. Aitmatov, *Plakha...* 270.

A very important topic for Aitmatov with significant moral impact is historical memory as part of his vision of existence. The topic runs through all his works, which makes them part of the traditions of Russian philosophical literature where memory is a core value and category. In “The Day Lasts More than a Hundred Years”, Aitmatov explores the notion of historical memory introduced in “The White Steamship” through the legend of the Horned Mother Deer in its various forms and on various levels. Aitmatov shows different levels and methods of depriving or restricting human memory, which is inherently socio-historical in nature and determines the essence of man. He writes that “a mankurt slave who was forcibly deprived of his memory” was very valuable and was worth ten healthy slaves to an owner. “The mankurt did not know who he had been, whence and from what tribe he had come, did not know his name, could not remember his childhood, father or mother – in short, he could not recognize himself as a human being”<sup>21</sup> (“The Day Lasts More than a Hundred Years”). If the mankurt is an example of physically depriving an individual of memory, then any kind of totalitarianism, including the Stalinist form, and intentional distortion of history, is a socio-political type of mankurtization.

### Existential nature in the animal world

Another important philosophical idea in Aitmatov's works refers to the problem of the noosphere, the interaction of nature and human beings. This is an acutely dramatic, if not a tragic topic that reveals the inner conflicts of the modern man who, having departed from nature long ago, harms it irreversibly. The relationship with nature is far from any kind of harmony; rather, this is nature's revenge for violating the fundamental values of human existence, the laws of Nature. The old man Mamun kills a red deer and deprives himself of the future: his grandson “swims away like a fish”. Bazarbai steals the wolf cubs, Boston shoots Tashchainar and loses his son in an attempt to kill Akbara, then shoots Bazarbai and dies.

Unlike Dostoevsky, Camus or Hamsun, Aitmatov *sees existential nature even in the animal world*. This is exemplified by she-wolf Akbara in the novel “The Place of the Skull” and the foxes in the novel “The Day Lasts More than a Hundred Years”, suffering for their offspring and looking for a way out in a hopeless situation like the main characters of these novels. By revealing the existential nature of animals, Aitmatov offers a more vivid view of the total harmony of society and nature, man and animal. The artistic depiction of suffering in the animal world is one of the efficient means of protecting nature from barbaric treatment by humans that M.Ch. Tobias and J.G. Morrison write about, “Unfortunately, no sociological model could agree with the self-destruction or the biggest extinction of living organisms that has ever occurred in flora and fauna”<sup>22</sup>. The writer's creative skill and deep philosophical intuition make it possible to see and feel that the existence of the human soul is diverse and determined by the internal essence of each individual, whether humane or cruel, adult or child.

### Conclusions

The study of Aitmatov shows the uniqueness of his work as a great modern writer that is achieved by synthesizing the achievements of 19<sup>th</sup>- and 20<sup>th</sup>-century wordsmiths. Balsac, Zola, Turgenev, Tostoy and others masterfully, subtly and in detail described their

<sup>21</sup> Ch.T. Aitmatov, *Sobranie sochinenii*... 351.

<sup>22</sup> M. Ch. Tobias y J. G. Morrison, *The Metaphysics of Protection* (Moscow: Prospekt, 2016), 18.



time and the personalities of their contemporaries. Hugo, Dickens and Fowles revealed the social and psychological intrigue. Gogol, Dostoevsky, Hesse, Sagan, Hamsun, Marquez, Camus and Sartre were great explorers of the human existential world. In his works, Aitmatov creatively combines all these sides of the literary art and, in doing so, demonstrates comprehensive knowledge of history and of the reality of his time, his homeland and the people that surround him, their unique inner worlds, the slightest nuance of human emotion, suffering and expectation. The philosophical study concludes that the absolute mastery of the artistic analysis of the inner world elevates him to the level of world-class existentialist philosophers.

The study substantiated the notion that the existential nature of animals' souls is Aitmatov's unique discovery and an original way of fighting to protect nature from human cruelty.

The existential philosophy of redemption that was developed particularly in the novel "The Place of the Skull" was discovered and analyzed. The philosophy should be viewed as Aitmatov's contribution to the philosophy of existentialism. This constitutes the prophetic and prescient meaning of the writer's work.

One of the results of the study is the conclusion that Aitmatov as a great writer acts as a prominent philosopher not of the abstract-armchair variety. He is an existentialist philosopher of the very human life and soul who can see its deepest contradictions and its inescapable tragedy, but who gives his readers the chance to see light and hope.

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