

HUMANITIES INSTITUTE

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***The Hero of the Mountain People / Too Elinin Baatyry* (1935)**

Raykan Shukurbekov (1913–1962)

References:

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OVERVIEW

Author

Raykan Shukurbekov (1913–1962) was a Kyrgyz writer, playwright, poet, actor, and translator. He was born in Ak-Chiy village, now Suuluu-Maimak, in the Kara-Buura district of Talas Province. Although he died at the age of forty-nine, he made a significant contribution to Kyrgyz literature and theater.

Because schools were still scarce in Kyrgyz villages during the 1920s, Shukurbekov received his early education at an orphanage in Jambyl from 1923 to 1926. His first work, the short story “Jarkynai” (*Jarkynai*), appeared in the journal *On the Path of New Culture* in 1929. From 1929 to 1933, he studied at the pedagogical technical school in Frunze, now Bishkek. After graduation, he joined the Kyrgyz State Theater.

His play *Struggle* (*Küröş*) opened the 1934–35 season of the Kyrgyz State Drama Theater and was among the first original Kyrgyz plays staged after the First Congress of Kyrgyz Writers. Shukurbekov also performed one of its leading roles. His later plays included *Among the Graves* (*Beyit arasynda*, 1934), *Aidar* (*Aidar*, 1936), and *Japalak Jatpasov* (*Japalak Jatpasov*, 1936).

After returning from the war with injuries, he focused on writing. His comedies included *Two Friends* (*Eki dos*), *The Green Forest* (*Jashyl tokoy*), *My Village* (*Menin aylym*), and *The Blessing of a Good Person* (*Jakshynyn sharapaty*). His poetry collections were *Songs and Fables* (*Yrlar jana tamsilder*, 1957), *Echoes of Ala-Too* (*Ala-Too jangyrygy*, 1958), *Songs* (*Yrlar*, 1961), and *Selected Songs* (*Tandalgan yrlar*, 1963). He also wrote children's books, including *A Letter of Congratulations* (*Kuttuktoo katy*), *Two Hares* (*Eki koyon*), *The Crow* (*Karga*), and *The Dog's Tale* (*Ittin jomogu*).

Shukurbekov was also an important translator who brought major Russian and European literary works to Kyrgyz readers. He translated *Woe from Wit*, stories by Anton Chekhov, *Song of the Stormy Petrel*, and works by Friedrich Schiller and Molière. He also translated 118 fables by Ivan Krylov. His greatest translation achievement was rendering more than 21,000 lines of *Shahnameh* by Ferdowsi into Kyrgyz. Raykan Shukurbekov died in 1962, at the age of forty-nine.

Novella

R. Shukurbekov's novella *The Hero of the Mountain People* (*Too Elinin Baatyry*) was written in 1935. The work was republished in 1969. However, since Shukurbekov mainly wrote poetry, plays, and translations, his works in this genre are quite limited. In 2016, a collected edition of the author's complete works was compiled and published by the National Academy of Sciences of Kyrgyzstan.

Background

The novella is rooted in the historical trauma of the Kyrgyz people during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. For generations, ordinary Kyrgyz laborers suffered under a deeply unjust social order. Wealthy landowners exploited poor workers, denying them fair wages, beating them, and treating them as servants. Corrupt local officials collaborated with the Russian colonial administration, betraying

their own people for power and privilege. This system of oppression left the poor without rights, dignity, or hope.

In 1916, the Russian Empire issued a decree forcing Central Asian men into rear military labor during the First World War. The order ignited widespread resistance among the Kyrgyz people, who revolted against both colonial authority and local oppressors. The uprising was brutally crushed by Russian troops, resulting in massacres and the destruction of villages. Tens of thousands of Kyrgyz families were forced to flee across the freezing Tien Shan mountains into China in a mass exodus known as Urkun. In exile, refugees suffered starvation, slavery, family separation, and death. After the 1917 Russian Revolution, survivors began returning to a devastated homeland. Arstan's story captures this collective memory of oppression, resistance, exile, and the enduring struggle for freedom and justice.

MAIN CHARACTERS

Sharshen – storyteller who narrates Arstan's tragic life story

Arstan – brave laborer and protagonist who struggles against oppression and injustice

Arstan's Father – elderly, impoverished worker representing the suffering of ordinary people

Arstan's Son – infant child protected by Arstan throughout his hardships

Derbish – cruel landowner who exploits and oppresses the poor

Ashyrkul – manipulative landowner who pursues and attacks Arstan

Tutkuchbay – jealous landowner who betrays Arstan

Shamyrgan – corrupt official who conspires against Arstan

Vasily – Russian soldier and loyal friend of Arstan

Vasily's Mother – compassionate woman who provides shelter and support to Arstan

Baiynjyrgal – Kalmyk nobleman who employs Arstan

Nurdum – exploitative merchant in Kulja city, China

Sanan – wealthy Kalmyk man whom Arstan defies and resists

SYNOPSIS

On the shores of Lake Issyk-Kul in 1933, three renowned Kyrgyz artists: Karamoldo, Osmonkul, and Sharshen, are stranded when their cart breaks down. Through the night, they share music and stories, and Sharshen recounts the tragic life of Arstan.

Born into poverty, Arstan loses his mother young and is forced into servitude under cruel landowners—Derbish, Ashyrkul, and Tutkuchbay—who exploit, humiliate, and betray him despite his strength, honesty, and courage. He survives wolf attacks, robbers' bullets, and imprisonment in a deep well. His sister drowns fleeing persecution, but Arstan eventually reunites with his father, marries, and has a son.

In 1916, when Russian imperial authorities demand Kyrgyz men for wartime labor, Arstan leads resistance against the injustice. The uprising is brutally crushed, forcing his people to flee across the Tien Shan into China. In exile, he witnesses families being sold at slave markets, is betrayed by companions in Ürümqi, and enslaved by a merchant. He escapes and returns home, where his wife dies of grief upon seeing him.

Carrying his son back to a devastated homeland, Arstan finds refuge with a Russian friend, Vasily, but enemies pursue them. In a final gunfight, both men fall wounded into the lake, leaving Arstan's child crying alone on the shore.

SCENES

Three Masters of Kyrgyz Oral Art At the end of July or the beginning of August, a cart stood sunk in the sand near Lake Issyk-Kul. Beside it sat three celebrated Kyrgyz artists: the komuz player Karamoldo, the singer and improviser Osmonkul, and the witty folk humorist Sharshen. Each possessed a different artistic gift. Karamoldo, wearing a white kalpak and black chapan, represented instrumental music; Osmonkul was a master of poetic speech and song; and Sharshen delighted people with his sharp humor and comic stories.

A Night of Songs on the Shores of Issyk-Kul During a journey to Tosor village in 1933, the travelers spent the night at Sharpyldak village after their horse cart broke down. Unable to sleep, they spent the night sharing songs, stories, and music. The famous singer Osmonkul performed with his komuz, while Karamoldo played traditional melodies that vividly evoked the spirit of Kyrgyz horsemen and the beauty of nature. As the group listened, the quiet waters of Issyk-Kul and the cry of a swan inspired reflections on the lake's ancient legend—that a great city once sank beneath its waters after an earthquake. The narrator pauses these thoughts to hear Sharshen's remarkable story.

Arstan: A Life Shaped by Poverty and Injustice Sharshen recounts the life of Arstan, a courageous young man who grew up amid hardship and social inequality. Orphaned after his mother died from illness and buried in secrecy by his impoverished father, Arstan matured through relentless labor, becoming admired for his strength, skill, and intelligence. Despite his abilities, poverty forced him into the service of the wealthy landowner Derbish, whose immense herds symbolized privilege and exploitation. Greedy and calculating, Derbish sought every opportunity to deny fair payment to his workers while preserving his wealth. Through Arstan's story, the narrative exposes the stark contrast between the dignity of honest labor and the cruelty of an unjust social order.

Derbish Humiliates Arstan The wealthy landowner Derbish instructed his senior wife to ration bread and provide only the bare minimum to workers while looking for ways to avoid paying their wages. When Arstan returned to the village riding one of Derbish's mares after protecting the herd in the mountains, Derbish became furious. Although Arstan respectfully explained that he had ridden the mare only to guard the horses from wolves, Derbish ignored him, struck him, tore his hat, and publicly humiliated him. Arstan remained calm despite the abuse. Other servants sided with the landowner and insulted him, exposing the cruelty, greed, and injustice that governed rural society.

Arstan Leaves in Search of a Better Life After being beaten and humiliated, Arstan quietly wiped the blood from his face and decided to leave Derbish's service. Before the village elders, he explained that he had faithfully tended the landowner's horses for two years through hunger, cold, and hardship, yet had never received his rightful wages. Even after accepting unfair deductions for a dead foal, he asked only for the pay he had earned. Derbish refused and dismissed him. That night, Arstan sat alone in silence, refusing to surrender to despair. With only a loyal dog beside him, he crossed a dangerous river and set out alone toward an uncertain future.

Arstan's Ordeal and Return Home After wandering for days, Arstan reached an abandoned cemetery, where he rested among old graves before fighting off a wolf that attacked him. Continuing his journey, he accidentally entered the hideout of a band of robbers. Mistaking him for a threat, they surrounded him and shot him before leaving him for dead. The bullet wounded his arm rather than killing him. Regaining consciousness, Arstan struggled across the barren landscape despite hunger, exhaustion, and intense heat. At dawn, he finally reached his father's hut, where he found his aged father and starving younger sister on the brink of death. Promising to find bread, Arstan resolved to save his family.

Arstan Enters the Service of Another Landowner Struggling to support his starving family, Arstan found work with another wealthy landowner, Ashyrkul. Although Ashyrkul appeared kind and soft-spoken, he was manipulative, exploiting his servants with pleasant words while avoiding fair treatment. After months of loyal service, Arstan's aging father visited the wealthy landowner Ashyrkul to collect the calf that had been promised as payment. Ashyrkul welcomed the old man warmly, distracting him with hospitality, religious conversation, and flattering words while secretly searching for a way to avoid honoring his promise. Meanwhile, Arstan, weakened by severe illness, staggered into the house, collapsing from exhaustion and fever. His father was devastated by his condition, while the wealthy guests showed little genuine concern. Eventually, Ashyrkul pointed to a stray calf without even providing a rope, expecting the old man to manage alone. Believing the promise had been fulfilled, the grateful father left, unaware that Ashyrkul intended to reclaim the animal later.

The Price of Poverty Arstan's family sank deeper into misery as hunger and hardship consumed their lives. His young sister endured constant starvation while their frail father worked for the wealthy Ashyrkul

without fair wages. During a violent storm, a mare disappeared, and Ashyrkul brutally accused the old shepherd of negligence, beating him mercilessly. To avoid further punishment, the father agreed to work another year without pay as compensation. The abuse shattered the family. The old man lay bleeding and unconscious while his daughter wept beside him, and Arstan, still weakened by illness, watched helplessly.

Arstan Wins His Freedom and Sets Out into Uncertainty After nearly a year of service, Arstan finally neared the end of his obligation to the wealthy Ashyrkul. While guarding the herd, he confronted three horse thieves, overpowered them despite being badly beaten, and recovered the stolen horses. The villagers praised his bravery, and the captured thieves were handed over. His reward was a horse, symbolizing his long-awaited freedom. Yet misfortune continued when the horse died before he could sell it. Ashamed to depend on charity, Arstan chose to leave with his elderly father and young sister. Together they journeyed toward the distant Ala-Too Mountains, spending the night beside a quiet lake, uncertain of what the future would bring.

Arstan Enters the Service of Tutkuchbay Seeking refuge near relatives in the mountains, Arstan found work in the household of the wealthy Tutkuchbay. Although outwardly generous, Tutkuchbay was a deeply contradictory man. He was compassionate toward animals and sometimes kind to guests, yet he constantly criticized others, envied his neighbors, loved gossip, and sought respect by belittling those around him. Despite his age, he remained morally corrupt, marrying a girl much younger than his own daughter and behaving inappropriately toward young women. Arstan accepted employment as a shepherd for only two goats and one sheep per year, entering another household where exploitation and injustice awaited him.

Arstan Captures the Horse Thieves One night, while Arstan was guarding Tagay Bay's horses, three thieves secretly approached the herd. They intended to steal the horses and escape before anyone noticed. The thieves attacked Arstan, but he fought back bravely. Despite being outnumbered, he defeated all three men and tied them up. Later, when Tagay Bay heard about the incident, he could hardly believe that one young man had overcome such dangerous thieves. Arstan did not boast about his victory; he simply told the truth. Everyone who heard the story admired his courage, strength, and honesty.

Tutkuchbay After learning the truth about the thieves, Tutkuchbay's attitude toward Arstan changed. He secretly planned to send Arstan to Tagay and accuse him of robbery, but he could not reveal his intention. Meanwhile, Tagay rewarded Arstan with money, food, and respect, accepting him as a worthy man. Later, Tutkuchbay sent Arstan away and tried to harm him through betrayal. However, Arstan refused to commit evil acts against his benefactor. When Tutkuchbay received a letter from Tagay concerning his daughter, he became jealous and began plotting against Arstan, fearing his growing reputation.

Arstan's Betrayal and the Well Arstan worked in the fields until sunset, unaware of the danger around him. Tutkuchbay secretly planned to send him to Tagay bai at night and force him into theft, but Arstan refused to become a thief. Later, while Arstan slept, three men came with knives to kill him, but the dogs frightened them away. The next day, Tutkuchbay ordered Arstan to dig a well. Arstan worked for five days inside the deep pit, seeing only the stars above. His family waited for him, but rumors spread that he had disappeared or been killed.

The Old Man's Escape and Arstan's Return After hearing the rumor that Arstan had been killed, the old man, Arstan's father, decided to leave the village with his daughter. At midnight, he took her hand and quietly escaped. Tutkuchbay noticed their departure, raised an alarm, and sent men to chase them. While traveling through the darkness, the old man and his daughter reached a flooded river. As the girl stepped forward, the ground collapsed, and the strong current carried her away. The old man could not save her and continued his journey alone in deep sorrow. Meanwhile, Arstan was released from the well and sent away. He rejected the thieves' way of life and returned home. His father rejoiced when he saw his son alive. Later, Arstan married a young woman who had suffered hardships and began a new life.

The Birth of Arstan's Son and the Theft of His Horse . The family remained helpless and poor. Years later, Arstan continued working for the rich, but he never forgot the injustice he had faced. When a young woman came into his life, he married her and began a new chapter. However, the memory of his lost horse and past suffering remained with him. During a stormy winter night, Arstan sat silently beside the dying fire while his wife suffered from labor pains. The old man helped her as she gave birth to a baby boy. Soon after the child was born, Ashyrkul's men came secretly and took Arstan's horse

Arstan Learns About the Secret Order In 1916, Arstan returned home exhausted after hearing that a secret letter had arrived from Akchozun village. The letter was sent to Shamyrgan, a respected local official. Shamyrgan invited Mullah, Kojomkul ruler, Talip, and other village nobles and elders to hear the letter. Mullah opened the envelope and read the message aloud. The letter contained a confidential order from the Russian imperial authorities and was sent through official channels. The elders listened carefully and discussed its meaning. Arstan and the villagers realized that the order was important and could affect their lives.

The Call for Forced Labor In 1916, during World War I, the Russian Empire ordered the people of Turkestan to provide men for rear military labor. A secret letter arrived ordering local leaders to collect men without causing unrest. The order demanded nineteen men from every hundred households. The villagers gathered in grief because many families had only one son. They sacrificed a horse in honor of the emperor but felt helpless and angry. Arstan, a respected young warrior, stood before the people with his spear. When asked what they should do, he declared that they must unite and face their fate together. He then rode away to resist the injustice.

The Letter Against Arstan After receiving the order from the Russian authorities, Shamyrgan the local leader wrote a secret letter to the Russian official, requesting permission to have Arstan killed. He blamed Arstan for uniting the villagers and opposing the forced recruitment of men for military labor. Shamyrgan described the people as rebellious and asked the authorities to punish them. After reading the letter, Shamyrgan became furious and insulted the Kyrgyz people for resisting the order. He promised to gather support from the authorities and destroy the resistance. The letter revealed his betrayal of his own people and his loyalty to the colonial administration.

The First Clash of the Uprising After Arstan attacked and captured the bolush's messenger, news of resistance spread. The Russian authorities sent soldiers from Tashkent to suppress the uprising. Fear and anger spread among the villagers as rumors of battles reached them. Troops surrounded Pishpek, and armed forces moved against Kyrgyz communities. Arstan gathered his people and ordered them to mount their horses and attack. The Kyrgyz warriors fought bravely with spears and horses against the soldiers' weapons. During the battle, many people were killed. Arstan's horse was wounded, and the fighters were forced to retreat. The conflict marked the beginning of violent repression.

The Aftermath of the Defeat After the battle, Ashyrkul searched among the dead soldiers and villagers, looking for Arstan. He found many victims, including women and children, killed during the violence, but Arstan's body was never discovered. Ashyrkul continued searching and sent troops to capture the remaining rebels, but Arstan escaped. The people, devastated by the massacre and fear of further attacks, were forced to leave their homeland. Arstan, separated from his people and without a horse, followed the fleeing groups on foot. Villages were abandoned, homes were left behind, and families departed with sorrow, leaving their lands and memories behind.

The Kyrgyz Exodus to China After the brutal suppression of the 1916 uprising, the Kyrgyz people were forced to flee their homeland and seek refuge in China. Families left with children, elderly relatives, and livestock, carrying only what they could save. The journey across the mountains became a tragedy as people suffered from hunger, cold, exhaustion, and loss. Many died along the way, while others were separated from their loved ones. Arstan witnessed the suffering of his people and questioned why they had to endure such injustice. The refugees crossed mountain passes toward Turpan and Kashgar, leaving behind their villages, lands, and ancestral homes.

The Exodus across the Mountains Snow covered the Tien Shan peaks as the Kyrgyz refugees crossed the mountains toward China. Exhausted people dragged their children, elders, and belongings through the cold wilderness. Dogs followed the herd, horses stumbled from fatigue, and camels carried heavy loads. Arstan silently watched his suffering people, carrying the sorrow of the nation. Women cried, children trembled, and the elderly mourned their lost homeland. Near the Muzart River, Kalmyks offered help and promised protection. Suddenly, soldiers approached, and panic spread. People rushed toward the river, where cries, fear, and tragedy filled the dark night.

Among the Kalmyks The Kyrgyz refugees suffered after losing their homeland and seeking shelter among Kalmyk communities in China. Families were broken, young women were taken away, and desperate mothers cried for help. The people exchanged their last possessions for survival and lived in underground shelters during the cold winter. Arstan sat by the fire with his family, listening to the suffering around him. A refugee named Omuraly arrived, mourning his lost children and wife. Arstan decided to serve a wealthy man to survive. Later, he defended a young Kyrgyz woman, Bukosh, and rescued her from being taken away by force.

Arstan's Defiance The people praised Arstan for saving the young woman and admired his courage. Later that night, the wealthy Kalmyk man Sanan summoned him. Sitting beside the fire, Sanan questioned Arstan about his identity and why he had come. Arstan boldly spoke of the Kyrgyz tragedy, their suffering, and their search for refuge. When Sanan's elder insulted the Kyrgyz people, Arstan defended his nation's honor. He warned that injustice could not be forgotten. Sanan demanded compensation for the beaten men, but Arstan refused to bow. Instead, he paid with his own strength, defeated them, and walked away proudly into the night.

The Slave Market Arstan arrived at Cholok-Terek market with a wealthy man who bought servants. Amid horses, fruits, meat, and goods, he saw a father selling his fourteen-year-old daughter, Kulbarchyn. The girl's mother wept, and the father bowed in shame. Nearby, another old man sold his seven-year-old son after losing everything. The market echoed with cries of parents and children torn apart. Seeing the suffering, Arstan turned to the crowd and shouted that the Kyrgyz people had lost their land, children, and dignity. The rich men avoided his angry gaze and hurried away.

Arstan's Arrival at the Wealthy Man's House The refugees suffered from hunger, cold, and despair. At the market, children cried for bread while people fought over scraps. Arstan, unable to bear the misery, returned to the wealthy man's house. On the way, he found an abandoned five-year-old child and carried him, but the boy died from the cold. At the house, Arstan met Sultan and other wealthy men. They offered him service under Baiynjyrgal, a respected Kalmyk nobleman. Arstan agreed only to hear their proposal. The wealthy men discussed employing him, unaware of his anger and pain.

Arstan's Life in Exile Arstan was hired to work for Baiynjyrgal after the long journey of the refugees. During the harsh winter, he cared for horses, cattle, and the household while living with his wife and child in a small shelter. Despite hunger and cold, Baiynjyrgal respected his courage and kindness. When spring arrived, the snow melted, but the homeland remained empty and wounded. The refugees mourned their lost land and people. Arstan became acquainted with poor locals and learned about the lives of different wealthy families. At night, displaced people gathered around fires, remembering their homeland and crying for their lost future.

The Journey to Kulja Baiynjyrgal, Turdakun, and Sultan prepared a wagon and horses for their night journey to Kulja city. They packed meat, bread, sweetened roasted barley powder, manty, butter, cream, and dried foods for the road. They dressed warmly in layered clothing, wearing extra coats and hats against the cold. Before leaving, Baiynjyrgal spent the night advising his wife: protect the livestock, secure the house, care for the children, and treat Arstan's family well. He reminded her to respect Arstan and his father. After giving his final instructions, he finally fell asleep before dawn, preparing for the difficult journey ahead.

Departure into Exile Arstan, Baiynjyrgal, Turdakun, and Sultan set out for Kulja at night, carrying food and supplies for the difficult journey ahead. Before leaving, Baiynjyrgal gave instructions to his wife about caring for the animals and household. Arstan's parents and wife wept as they parted, fearing they might never meet again. On the road, the travelers faced darkness, cold winds, and exhaustion. Arstan looked back toward the mountains and remembered his homeland, the Ala-Too and Chuy valleys. Although he moved toward an unknown land, his heart remained attached to his native soil. The journey symbolized the painful separation of the Kyrgyz refugees from their homeland.

A Stranger in Kulja The wagon carrying Arstan and his companions continued toward Kulja, the city of the Ili Valley in Xinjiang, leaving the Tekes valley behind. In Tekes, the refugees still suffered from hunger, loss, and death. When Arstan arrived in Kulja, he entered an unfamiliar but multicultural world where Uyghurs, Chinese, and other peoples lived together. The busy streets, mosques, markets, and houses of the city contrasted sharply with the hardships of exile. The travelers stayed at the home of Nurdum, a wealthy merchant. After sharing food and stories, the men rested. Arstan quietly observed the city, remembering his homeland with sorrow and longing.

The Merchant of Kulja and the Price of Survival Arstan arrived in Kulja, a wealthy but harsh city where poverty and inequality were everywhere. He learned that a poor local man, Islam, had been killed after opposing the rich merchant Nurdum, who had taken his sister. Nurdum bought and sold goods at high prices, leaving the poor hungry. Arstan's companions tried to sell their donkey and cart, but Nurdum stubbornly lowered the price. After long bargaining, they realized they could not get a fair deal. They decided to leave Kulja and continue their journey toward Ürümqi, carrying their memories of injustice and hardship.

The Difficult Road to Ürümqi The road to Ürümqi, a distant city in Xinjiang, China, was long and dangerous, crossing deserts, mountains, forests, and empty lands. Arstan wished to return to his homeland, but his companions insisted on continuing toward Ürümqi. After refusing, he was captured by Nurdum's men, chained to a tree, and beaten for two days. Weak from hunger and exhaustion, he finally agreed to continue the journey. Leaving Kulja behind, Arstan drove the donkeys while the merchants followed. Along the way, they witnessed poverty, violence, and suffering, revealing the harsh realities of life in exile.

The News of Return and the Desert Crossing While Arstan and his companions were traveling from Kulja toward Ürümqi, news reached the Kyrgyz refugees in Tekes that the Russian Tsarist Empire had collapsed after the 1917 Revolution. They heard that the situation in their homeland had changed and that Kyrgyz people who had fled to Xinjiang after the 1916 uprising could return. The refugees remembered their native lands—Issyk-Kul, Chuy, Tokmok, Bishkek, At-Bashy, Naryn, Kochkor, and Karakol—and many wept with longing. However, uncertainty remained. Arstan's journey continued through a vast desert where he faced unbearable heat, thirst, exhaustion, and the struggle for survival.

Through the Desert to Ürümqi Arstan and his companions struggled across the endless desert after they had left Kulja. Exhausted by hunger, thirst, and sandstorms, their horses weakened, and Sultan's horse died. Baiynjyrgal suffered from the harsh journey, while Arstan worried about the fate of his homeland and the displaced Kyrgyz people. He criticized the wealthy men for caring only about themselves, reminding them of their suffering relatives and abandoned homeland. After many days of hardship, they finally reached Ürümqi at midnight. The city appeared dark and unfamiliar. They approached a gate, knocked, and heard a Chinese voice answer them, marking their arrival in a foreign land.

Arstan's Captivity in Ürümqi Arstan and his companions arrived at a Chinese merchant's house in Ürümqi, where they rested after their exhausting journey. The city's cruelty and suffering deeply saddened him. After selling their goods, the wealthy men decided to return to Tekes, but they sold Arstan to the merchant Iriksha. Arstan woke up alone and discovered that his companions had left him behind. Heartbroken, he remembered his homeland, family, and lost hopes. The merchant forced him into servitude, treating him like an animal. The once-proud warrior became a captive, separated from his people and deprived of his freedom.

Arstan's Escape from Captivity Many days passed, and Arstan slowly regained his freedom of movement. He wandered around the courtyard, the chains on his feet still making noise. Sometimes he looked through the window, then closed it again, waiting for the right moment. One dark night, he broke the gate lock and escaped into the silent city. His eyes burned with determination. He returned to the yard, chose a horse, took bread from a bag, and removed the window bars. Then he rushed toward Tekes. As Ürümqi disappeared behind him, Arstan began his uncertain journey back to his homeland, driven by longing and hope.

The Return from Exile In late autumn, Arstan returned to Tekes city in Xinjiang after years of hardship in Urumqi. He found his family devastated by poverty, illness, and suffering. His wife, who had hidden her pain for a long time, died when she finally saw him again. Arstan mourned beside the extinguished fire, holding his child and grieving the loss of his family. After burying his loved ones, he left the place of tragedy. Carrying his son and a walking stick, he joined the remaining refugees and traveled toward Ala-Too, the ancestral Kyrgyz land beyond the mountains.

Return to the Silent Homeland Arstan finally reached Ala-Too, the land he had dreamed of during years of exile. The mountains stood silently, but his homeland had changed: villages were abandoned, homes destroyed, and traces of life disappeared. Seeing the empty land, Arstan, the strong warrior who had endured suffering without tears, wept like a child. He remembered Urumqi, Kulja, and the hardships of the refugees. Carrying his child, he walked toward the abandoned village and mourned the loss of his people. The Kyrgyz refugees slowly followed him, returning from distant Chinese lands, searching for a place to rebuild their lives.

False Hopes After reaching his homeland near Lake Issyk-Kul, Arstan remembered the false hopes of freedom after the fall of the Russian Tsar. The promised changes had not brought peace; instead, the people continued to suffer. One night, he met Vasiliy, a wounded Russian soldier who had returned from war. Vasiliy remembered a Kyrgyz young man who had worked with him at a mill before the uprising. Arstan revealed himself. They embraced and cried together. Vasiliy explained that during the uprising, many Kyrgyz people had been killed and many had fled to China. Arstan silently listened, overwhelmed by grief.

A Shelter for the Returning Arstan Vasiliy invited Arstan into his home and treated him with kindness. The exhausted warrior entered carrying his child and carrying the pain of years of suffering. Vasiliy's mother was shocked to see Arstan's injured body and respected his courage. She learned that he had carried his child all the way back from exile. Vasiliy explained that the new rulers were dangerous and that Kyrgyz people were still being persecuted. Despite fear, they decided to protect Arstan. The house became a temporary refuge for the returning man. Arstan finally found compassion after years of hardship and loneliness.

The Wounds After the war, Arstan and Vasily shared their painful memories in a quiet village house. Vasily showed his injured leg and spoke about battles, while Arstan remembered the suffering of his people during the uprising and exile. He said he had seen hunger, violence, and the destruction of his homeland rather than glory. Vasily's mother listened silently and recognized Arstan as the man who had saved people during the Kyrgyz uprising. She gave him Vasily's repaired blue shirt. Arstan accepted it, grateful for the kindness and friendship he found among strangers.

The Final Escape and Sacrifice Arstan, Vasily, and Arstan's child tried to escape through the dark night while armed enemies followed them. Two men, Alesha and Ashyrkul, attacked them, accusing them of supporting the new government. After a gunfight, Vasily and Arstan fought bravely despite their wounds. Vasily continued shooting until his bullets ran out, while Arstan protected his child. Both men were finally wounded and fell into the lake together. The child cried beside the shore as violence continued around him. Their sacrifice showed the tragedy of war, oppression, and the suffering of ordinary people.

A Night of Memories and Visions After Sharshen finished his story, he and the others sat silently, unable to speak. The peaceful July night surrounded them: flowers, butterflies, animals, and the quiet mountains were all asleep. Only they remained awake, lost in painful thoughts and memories. Before dawn, they finally fell into a restless sleep. Dreams mixed with reality: a warrior arrived from Urumchi, a tiger jumped, and a gray-faced man embraced Vasily before falling into the lake. Again and again, visions appeared—drums, soldiers, Arstan riding a horse, and people laughing. When he woke, he heard only a child's desperate cry beside the lake.

CHARACTER ANALYSIS

Arstan

Arstan is a man whose life feels less like a single biography and more like the collective soul of an entire people poured into one body. Born into crushing poverty and orphaned young, he grows up knowing hunger, cold, and injustice intimately. Yet he never becomes bitter or broken. Instead, Arstan carries himself with a quiet dignity that unsettles the powerful and inspires the weak. Through his shepherding, his resistance, his exile, and his final sacrifice, we witness a man who refuses to let cruelty define him, remaining human against impossible odds.

Courageous Arstan is deeply courageous, though his bravery is never loud or boastful. It is steady and rooted, showing itself in moments when most men would flee. He faces down wolves in the mountains, overpowers armed thieves despite being outnumbered and beaten, and stands before frightened villagers to urge unity against the Russian decree. What makes his bravery so human is that he never seeks glory for it. When Tagay Bay marvels that one young man defeated three thieves, Arstan simply tells the truth without embellishment. His courage flows not from recklessness but from a profound sense of duty, an unwillingness to abandon those who depend on him.

Enduring Arstan is remarkably enduring, possessing an astonishing capacity to withstand suffering. Life strikes him relentlessly: he is cheated of wages, beaten by landowners, shot by robbers, imprisoned in a well, and sold into slavery. Any of these blows could shatter a person, yet Arstan keeps rising. He crosses freezing mountains, survives scorching deserts, and carries his infant son through unimaginable loss. His endurance is not cold or numb; it is fueled by love for his family and homeland. Even when he weeps like a child upon seeing his abandoned village, that grief reveals the tender heart that made his long suffering meaningful rather than merely stubborn.

Honest Arstan is profoundly honest, possessing an unbending moral core that separates him from the corrupt world around him. Though poverty and betrayal would justify revenge, he consistently refuses to become what he hates. When Tutkuchbay pressures him to steal, Arstan rejects the thieves' path entirely, choosing hardship over dishonor. Even toward his exploitative employer Tagay, he refuses to commit evil. This honesty is deeply human because it costs him dearly, keeping him poor and vulnerable while dishonest men prosper. Yet Arstan understands that his dignity is the one thing no landowner, official, or empire can steal from him, and he guards it fiercely.

Compassionate Arstan is genuinely compassionate, carrying a gentle, caring nature that makes his tragedy all the more moving. In exile, surrounded by his own suffering, he still finds room to feel others' pain. He defends the young woman Bukosh from being taken by force, cries out for the children sold at the slave market, and lifts an abandoned child from the cold, grieving when the boy dies in his arms. His compassion is not weakness but the truest measure of his humanity. Even as the world hardens around him with greed and violence, Arstan chooses tenderness again and again, protecting his son to his final breath.

Arstan's Father

Arstan's father is one of the most quietly heartbreaking figures in the story, an elderly man who has spent his entire life bent under the weight of poverty and grief. He buries his wife in secret because he cannot afford a proper funeral, raises his children alone through hunger and hardship, and continues to labor for cruel landowners even in his frailest years. Though the world offers him nothing but suffering, he clings to love for his son and daughter with a tenderness that never fades. His presence in the story reminds us that oppression wounds not only the strong but also the gentle and old.

Devoted Arstan's father is deeply devoted to his children, and this devotion shapes every choice he makes. Despite his age and weakness, he continues working long days for wealthy men like Ashyrkul just to bring home scraps of food. He walks great distances to request his son's unpaid wages, enduring humiliation from powerful men without complaint because his family's survival matters more than his pride. When rumors spread that Arstan has been killed, he takes his daughter's hand and flees into the night to protect her. His devotion is quiet but unwavering, the steady love of a father who has nothing left to give but himself.

Humble Arstan's father is profoundly humble, carrying himself with the meekness of a man who has never known power or comfort. When Ashyrkul distracts him with flattering words and religious talk, he accepts the hospitality gratefully, unaware he is being deceived. He bows before wealthy men, thanks them for meager promises, and leaves without demanding what is rightfully his. This humility is not weakness but a lifetime of survival in a society where the poor cannot afford pride. It makes his suffering all the more painful to witness, because he asks so little from the world yet is repeatedly denied even that.

Suffering Arstan's father is a man defined by suffering, bearing losses that would break most people many times over. He loses his wife to illness, buries her in shame, watches his children starve, endures brutal beatings from Ashyrkul over a lost mare, and eventually loses his young daughter to a flooded river during their desperate escape. Each blow carves deeper lines into his frail body and weary heart. Yet his suffering is never dramatic or self-pitying; it is quiet, aching, and constant. Through him, the story shows how oppression grinds down generations, turning ordinary fathers into silent witnesses of tragedies they cannot prevent.

Loving Arstan's father is tenderly loving, and this love is the light that makes his hard life bearable. He rejoices with tears when Arstan returns alive after being presumed dead, embracing his son as though holding him could erase years of grief. He mourns his lost daughter with a sorrow too deep for words, carrying her memory as he continues walking alone. Even in his weakest moments, he offers Arstan warmth, guidance, and quiet encouragement. His love is not expressed in grand gestures but in small, faithful acts, the kind of love that survives poverty, exile, and loss because it asks for nothing in return.

Ashyrkul

Ashyrkul stands as one of the most sinister figures in Arstan's story, a landowner whose danger lies precisely in his ability to disguise cruelty behind a gentle mask. Unlike the openly brutal Derbish, Ashyrkul weaponizes charm, hospitality, and soft words to exploit those beneath him. He represents a more insidious form of oppression, one that smiles while it robs and flatters while it betrays. From cheating Arstan's father of a promised calf to hunting Arstan across the countryside in the story's final chapters, Ashyrkul embodies the enduring nature of injustice. He is the oppressor who survives every regime, adapting his tactics to serve whoever holds power, always ensuring the poor remain crushed beneath him.

Deceptive Ashyrkul is profoundly deceptive, mastering the art of appearing generous while giving nothing of value. He welcomes Arstan's aging father warmly, distracting him with food and religious conversation while secretly plotting to avoid honoring his debt. When he finally points to a stray calf as pay-

ment, he offers no rope, and even intends to reclaim the animal later. This calculated dishonesty is more dangerous than open theft because it exploits trust and gratitude. The old man leaves believing he has been treated fairly, unaware he has been robbed. Ashyrkul's deception reveals how the powerful manipulate not just resources but perception itself, turning kindness into a tool of exploitation.

Ruthless Beneath his pleasant exterior, Ashyrkul is coldly ruthless, willing to inflict violence whenever his interests are threatened. When a mare disappears during a storm, he beats Arstan's frail, elderly father mercilessly, leaving him bleeding and unconscious. He shows no mercy for age, weakness, or years of loyal service, caring only for his lost property. This ruthlessness resurfaces at the story's climax, when he leads armed men to hunt down Arstan and Vasily, pursuing them into the night with lethal intent. His cruelty is not impulsive but strategic, deployed precisely to maintain control and eliminate anyone who challenges his authority or dignity.

Exploitative Ashyrkul is deeply exploitative, treating human beings as disposable instruments for his own enrichment. He extracts nearly a year of labor from Arstan without proper payment and forces Arstan's father into an additional year of unpaid work as false compensation for the lost mare. He understands the desperation of the poor and uses their hunger against them, offering just enough hope to keep them working while never delivering true reward. His exploitation is systematic, part of a larger social order that treats laborers as property. Through Ashyrkul, the story exposes how wealth is built not on merit but on the relentless consumption of others' suffering.

Vindictive Ashyrkul is bitterly vindictive, never forgetting a slight and pursuing revenge long after any reasonable person would relent. His hatred for Arstan follows him across years and borders, from the fields of his household to the shores of Lake Issyk-Kul. Even after Arstan has fled to China, endured exile, and returned broken and grieving, Ashyrkul cannot let him rest. He aligns himself with the new rulers merely as an excuse to hunt down his old enemy, driving Arstan to his tragic death. This vindictiveness reveals the personal malice beneath his greed; for Ashyrkul, oppression is not only profitable but deeply satisfying, a way to assert dominance over those he despises.

Tutkuchbay

Tutkuchbay represents the psychological complexity and moral decay of the ruling landowner class (*bais*) in early twentieth-century Kyrgyzstan. Unlike one-dimensional villains who are purely monstrous, Tutkuchbay is a deeply contradictory human being whose cruelty is masked by social pleasantries and occasional generosity. He welcomes guests with warmth and shows tenderness toward animals, yet ruthlessly exploits human beings for his own economic benefit. Through Tutkuchbay, the author illustrates how unchecked power and privilege corrode a person's soul, turning a man driven by ordinary human frailties like jealousy, pride, and fear into a treacherous oppressor capable of extreme violence against those below him.

Deceitful Tutkuchbay is masterfully deceitful, using a polished exterior of hospitality and kindness to hide his manipulative nature. Outwardly, he appears generous, presenting himself as a respectable elder who honors social customs and even shows genuine compassion toward livestock. However, this charm is a calculated shield designed to exploit vulnerable laborers like Arstan, whom he hires for a mere pittance of two goats and one sheep per year. Tutkuchbay rarely confronts his victims directly; instead, he relies on pleasant words, secret plots, and hidden agendas. His deceit exposes how the wealthy class maintained moral superiority in public while practicing ruthless exploitation in private.

Insecure Beneath his wealth and social standing, Tutkuchbay is profoundly insecure. Rather than finding peace in his status, he is consumed by envy of his neighbors and constantly seeks validation by belittling others and spreading gossip. His insecurity turns into paranoia when Arstan single-handedly captures three dangerous horse thieves and earns the widespread respect of Tagay Bay. Instead of appreciating his servant's heroism, Tutkuchbay feels deeply threatened by Arstan's growing reputation and

moral superiority. His inability to tolerate a poor laborer receiving honor reveals a fragile ego that must destroy another person's dignity just to maintain its own illusion of dominance.

Treacherous Driven by his envy and fear, Tutkuchbay becomes cold-bloodedly treacherous against the very man who served him faithfully. Unable to openly attack Arstan without losing social standing, he secretly conspires to frame him for robbery and later sends armed men to assassinate him in his sleep. When those attempts fail, he orders Arstan to dig a deep well and cruelly traps him inside the pit for five days, attempting to erase him entirely. Tutkuchbay's treachery highlights the terrifying reality of the feudal system: when a wealthy landowner felt threatened by a poor worker's strength, betrayal and murder became effortless tools of control.

Corrupt Tutkuchbay is fundamentally corrupt, marked by a deep moral decay that extends beyond his economic greed into his personal life. Despite his advanced age, he uses his wealth and influence to marry a bride much younger than his own daughter and behaves inappropriately toward the young women in his household. This moral decay demonstrates that his oppression of workers like Arstan is not merely a matter of financial calculation, but the result of a lifestyle devoid of basic ethics and self-restraint. His corruption symbolizes the broader decline of a traditional social order that valued wealth and appetite over human dignity and justice.

THEMES

Classes: Inequality, Oppression, Exploitation

From the moment he was old enough to hold a staff, Arstan learned that his body did not belong to him. It belonged to men with fat herds and cold eyes. He rose before dawn, drove other men's horses through freezing mountain passes, and returned with cracked lips and an empty stomach, only to be met with suspicion and contempt.

One afternoon, after protecting Derbish's herd from wolves all night, Arstan rode back to the village on a tired mare. The landowner's face twisted with rage. Without listening to a single word of explanation, Derbish struck him across the face, tore his only kalpak from his head, and threw it into the dust. Arstan stood bleeding in front of the entire village while other servants, hoping to please their master, laughed and insulted him. In that moment, something inside the young man quietly broke. Not his spirit, but his last illusion that hard work and honesty would be rewarded.

Years later, his elderly father dragged his frail body to Ashyrkul's house to collect the calf they had been promised after months of labor. Ashyrkul greeted the old man with sweet words and endless cups of tea, speaking of God and hospitality while secretly planning how to cheat him. When Arstan, burning with fever, staggered in and collapsed, his father wept at the sight of his broken son. Ashyrkul finally pointed to a stray calf with no rope. The old man thanked him with trembling gratitude, not knowing the rich man had already decided to take the animal back by force.

The deepest wound came from Tutkuchbay. After Arstan heroically captured three horse thieves, the wealthy man grew jealous of the respect his poor shepherd received. Instead of thanks, he ordered Arstan thrown into a deep well. For five days the young man dug in darkness, seeing only a circle of stars above, while his father and young sister waited in terror, hearing rumors that he had been killed.

These were not isolated cruelties. They were the daily texture of life for the poor. Arstan's back bore the scars, his father's spirit was slowly crushed, and his little sister cried herself to sleep with hunger. Through every humiliation, Arstan clung desperately to his dignity, refusing to beg or break. Yet the system was designed to grind men like him into dust. The landowners did not merely steal wages; they stole years, pride, and hope itself.

Illustrative Moment: The most piercing scene occurs when Arstan's starving father visits Ashyrkul to collect his son's wages: a single calf. Ashyrkul welcomes him warmly with tea and religious conversation, performing generosity while plotting betrayal. When the moment arrives, he simply points toward a stray calf in the distance without offering a rope. The frail old man stumbles after the skittish animal with trembling hands, desperate to bring home food for his daughter. Ashyrkul watches, already planning to

reclaim the calf later. This moment captures the cruelty of exploitation at its most intimate: a starving father chasing a shadow of justice that was never meant to be caught.

Exile: Trauma

Historical trauma in Arstan is not framed as a distant political event or a dry timeline of the 1916 Urkun; it is lived on the skin and carried in the bones of ordinary people. The brutal suppression of the Kyrgyz uprising and the subsequent exodus into China are humanized through moments of intimate, unbearable loss that shatter the soul far more than any battlefield defeat.

The true weight of this tragedy is felt during the desperate crossing of the freezing Tien Shan passes. We do not just see a fleeing crowd; we see exhausted mothers dragging shivering infants through deep snow, elderly parents stumbling until their hearts give out, and families abandoning their few possessions just to take one more breath. Yet, the most agonizing wound of exile is what starvation forces parents to endure. At the Cholok-Terek market, the trauma of a broken nation is distilled into the sound of weeping mothers and shame-bowed fathers selling their own children just so they might survive. Arstan watches a father surrender his fourteen-year-old daughter for scraps, realizing that colonialism has robbed his people not only of their land, but of their very right to protect their kin.

This collective grief becomes deeply personal when Arstan finds an abandoned five-year-old orphan shivering on the road. He lifts the child to his chest, trying to pour his own warmth into him, only to feel the small body quietly slip into death in his arms. And years later, when Arstan finally crosses the mountains back to Ala-Too, he finds no victory, only ruined villages, cold hearths, and silence. Standing in the ruins of his homeland, the stoic warrior weeps like a child. This is historical trauma: the hollow echo of a home where those you loved no longer breathe.

Illustrative moment: Historical trauma unfolds at the Cholok-Terek slave market. Amid the noise of horses and traders, Arstan sees a father standing beside his fourteen-year-old daughter, Kulbarchyn, offering her for sale. The girl's mother weeps uncontrollably while the father bows his head, unable to meet anyone's eyes, crushed beneath a shame no parent should ever know. Nearby, another old man sells his seven-year-old son after losing everything to exile. Unable to bear the sight, Arstan turns to the crowd and cries out that the Kyrgyz people have lost their land, their children, and their dignity. The rich men avert their eyes and hurry away.

Struggle: Resistance and the Struggle for Freedom

Resistance in Arstan's story is not the triumphant march of heroes; it is the desperate, trembling courage of ordinary people who have nothing left to lose but their dignity. It begins quietly, long before any battle. It lives in the way Arstan wipes the blood from his face after Derbish's beating and walks away rather than kneel. It lives in his refusal to steal for Tutkuchbay, choosing the darkness of the well over the darkness of dishonor. These small acts of defiance are the seeds of something larger.

In 1916, when the Tsar's decree arrives demanding nineteen men from every hundred households, the village drowns in grief. Mothers clutch their only sons; old men weep openly. Fear hangs over the gathering like smoke. In this moment of paralysis, Arstan steps forward with his spear in hand. He does not promise victory. He does not pretend the empire can be easily defeated. He simply tells his people the one truth that matters: they must unite and face their fate together. Then he mounts his horse and rides toward the storm.

The uprising itself is heartbreakingly human. Kyrgyz horsemen armed with spears charge against soldiers carrying rifles. They know the odds. They fight anyway, because submission means watching their sons taken and their spirits broken forever. Many fall. Arstan's horse is wounded beneath him, and the fighters are forced to retreat as blood soaks the earth.

Yet resistance does not end with defeat. It continues in exile, when Arstan defies the wealthy Sanan to protect a helpless woman. It continues when he breaks his chains in Ürümqi and rides into the night. And it ends, finally, at the edge of Issyk-Kul, where Arstan and Vasily fire their last bullets side by side, two friends from enemy nations, proving that the struggle for freedom is not about winning. It is about refusing, until the very last breath, to surrender your soul.

Illustrative Moment: The defining moment of resistance comes when the village gathers in despair after the Tsar's decree. Families weep, knowing their only sons will be taken for forced labor. Helpless, they sacrifice a horse in the emperor's honor, hoping submission might spare them. Then Arstan appears before the crowd, standing tall with his spear in hand. When the people ask what they should do, he does not offer false comfort. He declares that they must unite and face their fate together, then rides away to resist the injustice. In that single image—one poor shepherd raising his spear against an empire—the quiet dignity of a man becomes the defiant voice of an entire nation.

Survival: Resilience

Resilience in Arstan's story is not the cold, unfeeling hardness of stone, but the flexible, enduring strength of a willow bending in a storm without breaking. It is the quiet refusal to let suffering turn a human being into something less than human. Throughout his life, Arstan faces a relentless barrage of cruelties designed to strip him of his worth: he is cheated of wages, beaten publicly, shot by robbers, trapped in a deep well, and sold into slavery. Yet, in every instance where despair would be the logical response, Arstan chooses a different path. He wipes the blood from his face and keeps walking.

His dignity is most visible in what he refuses to do. When Tutkuchbay pressures him to steal, Arstan rejects the easy path of crime, choosing starvation over dishonor. Even when sold into captivity in Ürümqi and treated like an animal, he does not lose his sense of self. He waits, watches, and plans his escape, driven by the love for his family rather than hatred for his captors. This resilience is deeply human because it costs him everything; he remains poor, wounded, and grieving while corrupt men prosper. Yet he understands that his moral core is the one possession no landowner or empire can seize.

The ultimate test of this dignity comes during the return journey. After escaping chains, Arstan finds his wife dying and his homeland in ruins. Instead of collapsing into bitterness, he lifts his infant son onto his shoulder and begins the long trek back across the mountains. He carries the child through snow and hunger, protecting him with a tenderness that defies the brutality of the world around him. In the end, Arstan's resilience is not about surviving to win, but about surviving to remain kind. He dies as he lived: a man who could be broken in body but never in spirit, proving that true freedom lies in holding onto one's humanity even when the world tries to crush it.

Illustrative Moment: The purest display of Arstan's dignity occurs after he escapes the deep well where Tutkuchbay left him to die. Weak, starving, and covered in mud, he stumbles upon a group of thieves who offer him food and shelter in exchange for joining their band. It would be easy to accept; the world has given him nothing but pain, and revenge against the rich would feel sweet. But Arstan looks at the stolen goods and then at his own trembling hands. He shakes his head, turns his back on the warm fire and full belly, and walks alone into the freezing night. He chooses hunger and uncertainty over becoming the very thing he hates, proving that his soul belongs only to himself.