

HUMANITIES INSTITUTE
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THE GRAY-HAIRED WOMAN / AK CHACH AYAL (1976) Zuura Sooronbaeva (1924-2012)

Reference:

Sooronbaeva, Z. (2021). *The gray-haired woman*. Bishkek. 100 Pages.

OVERVIEW

Author

Early Life and Journalism Zuura Sooronbaeva was born on August 15, 1924, in the village of Jolgot in the Ak-Suu district of Kyrgyzstan. After graduating from secondary school in 1940, she began working as a secretary-typist at the newspaper *Ysyk-Kol Pravdasy* (*Issyk-Kul Truth*). Between 1959 and 1974, she worked as a correspondent for the regional newspaper *Kommunistik Emgek* (*Communist Labor*), later returning to *Ysyk-Kol Pravdasy*, where she continued her journalism career until 1979.

Poetry and Literary Beginnings Sooronbaeva entered literature as a poet. Her first poetry collection, *My Village* (*Menin Aiylym*), was published in 1960. Her 1966 collection *Friendship* (*Dostuk*) included both poems and the narrative poems *Friendship* (*Dostuk*) and *Adopted Son* (*Asyrandy uul*). Although critics initially doubted her transition from poetry to prose, she soon proved herself as a talented fiction writer.



Success as a Prose Writer Her first major prose work, the novella *The Aster Flowers* (*Astra Gülü*), was published in 1971 and brought her widespread fame. During the 1970s, she produced several important works, including *Orphans* (*Jetimder*), *Andrey* (*Andrei*), and *The Gray-Haired Woman* (*Ak Chach Ayal*). The 1980s were also highly productive years for her. During this period, she published the collection *The Mountains Know* (*Toolor Bilet*), the children's book *Rest, Mother* (*Es Alchy, Apa*), and the novella *Letter from Leningrad* (*Leningraddan Kelgen Kat*). Her writings attracted readers through their realistic and emotionally rich portrayal of ordinary people and everyday life. One of her best-known works, the novel *The Stranger* (*Choochun Kishi*), was published in 1988. Focusing on the painful emotional relationship between a husband and wife, the novel became highly popular and earned Sooronbaeva renewed literary acclaim. At readers' request, a sequel was published in 2002, and the novel remains relevant today.

Drama and Theatre Sooronbaeva also wrote several plays, including *The Groom* (*Erkek Kolukmu*), *Broken Shrine* (*Sinğan Mazar*), *Wealth and Love* (*Baylyk jana Mahabat*), and *Fiery Dawn* (*Örttüü Tang*). Her play *Broken Shrine* (*Sinğan Mazar*) was translated into Kazakh under the title *Illness* (*IlDET*) and staged at the Abai Zhambul Theatre. It was later performed in both Kazakhstan and Russia.

Honors and Legacy Sooronbaeva became a member of the Soviet Journalists' Union in 1953 and the Soviet Writers' Union in 1954. She received several state honors, including certificates of merit from the Supreme Soviet of the Kyrgyzstan, the medal For Valiant Labor during World War II, and the commemorative medal dedicated to Lenin's centenary. In 1995, she was awarded the title of People's Writer of Kyrgyzstan. Her name was later given to the school she attended in her native village and to a street in the city of Karakol.

Personal Life and Unfulfilled Love Many of the emotional and tragic themes in Sooronbaeva's works were inspired by real-life experiences. Like many of her characters, she also experienced unfulfilled love. Throughout her life, she loved one man, a young man named Sharip. The two shared deep feelings, but their hopes of building a life together were shattered when World War II began and Sharip left for the front. As a result, their dream of being together never came true. Although Sooronbaeva later married twice, she never found the happiness she longed for. She met Sharip again only in the final years of her life. Much of her later years were devoted to her only son, as well as her grandchildren and great-grandchildren.

Novella The novella *The Gray-Haired Woman* was published in 1976 and is one of the most well-known and widely loved works among Kyrgyz readers. The metaphor "gray-haired woman" symbolizes Zulay's premature aging caused by lifelong grief and waiting for her missing husband. It also reflects the emotional scars of war and the endurance of women who carry loss across their lives.

During the early years of Kyrgyzstan's independence, the reading culture temporarily declined due to the country's political and economic transition. However, after 2005, interest in national literary heritage was revived, and many works by Kyrgyz writers were republished. Among them, *The Gray-Haired Woman* gained renewed attention and is now being read again by a younger generation of readers.

Background

Zuura Sooronbaeva tells her own life story, which later becomes the emotional basis of *The Gray-Haired Woman*. As a young teacher, she meets a man named Sharip, and they quickly fall in love. Their relationship is interrupted when World War II begins, and Sharip is sent to the front before they can properly be together.

After his departure, she is forced into an unwanted marriage. However, she never stops loving Sharip and continues to think about him. Unable to accept her situation, she leaves her husband and returns to her relatives. Later, she is married again, but her heart remains with Sharip, and she continues to wait for him, believing he will return.

Sharip also searches for her during the war, but eventually marries another woman when he cannot find her. Despite this, both of them continue to remember their first love, though they never meet again.

She raises her child while carrying emotional pain and lifelong hope. In her memory, Sharip remains her only true love. Her story becomes one of waiting, separation, and unfulfilled love shaped by war, forming the emotional core of her literary work.

MAIN CHARACTERS

Zulay – central character; woman who loses husband in WWII, spends life waiting, raises son alone; endurance and sacrifice

Shabdanbek / Baatyrbek – Zulay's husband; WWII soldier, missing in war; returns wounded, unrecognizable, later Baatyrbek; identity revealed at end

Kapaz – son of Zulay and Shabdanbek; kolkhoz livestock specialist; represents postwar generation

Meeri – Kapaz's wife; young shepherd girl; educated rural youth balancing tradition and modernization

Usup – post office worker; proposes to Zulay; causes separation of Zulay and Shabdanbek by sending false letter about her marriage

SYNOPSIS

The Gray-Haired Woman follows the life of Zulay and her family in Soviet Kyrgyzstan during the 1960s–1970s, shaped by the long aftermath of World War II.

Zulay marries Shabdanbek, a soldier who returns from the war for a short time. He is also the close friend of her late brother Janysh, which strengthens their bond. Soon after their marriage, Shabdanbek is sent back to the front and later goes missing, leaving Zulay alone with their son, Kapaz.

Years of hardship follow as Zulay struggles to survive in difficult rural conditions while raising her child and waiting for her husband's return. Kapaz grows up in a kolkhoz environment and becomes a livestock specialist, building his own life in rural society. He later marries Meeri, forming a new family within the postwar generation.

The story also introduces Baatyrbek, a respected but war-scarred horse herder. The hidden truth of the past emerges when Zulay recognizes a knife in his home, revealing a connection to her lost husband. Under pressure, Baatyrbek confesses that he is actually Shabdanbek, explaining that war injuries and false information led to years of separation and misunderstanding.

After decades of loss, the family is emotionally reunited, but their happiness is short-lived as Zulay's health declines. Before her death, she reconciles with Shabdanbek and asks Kapaz to preserve family unity. After her passing, Kapaz accepts Shabdanbek as his father.

SCENES

Baatyrbek, a Horse Herder and War Veteran Kapaz, a livestock specialist from the Lenindik Kolkhoz, meets a horse herder from the neighboring kolkhoz, "Kyrgyzstan's 40 Years of Anniversary." Inside his yurt, the old man shares his life story. He is a World War II veteran whose face is destroyed in the war, leaving him with only one eye. He deeply regrets that God does not grant him children. He marries four times; his first bride leaves during the war, and he divorces twice for various reasons, but his current wife is a good woman. He offers Kapaz *kymyz*, fermented mare's milk. In traditional Kyrgyz culture, sacred "white drinks" called *ak* are never sold. Nomads fear the spiritual consequences, so sharing freely becomes the nomad's code.

Echoes of the War The herder reveals more about his past: when he returns from the war hospital, his first bride has already married another man. Curious about his guest, the elder asks about Kapaz. Kapaz explains that he works at the *Lenindik* kolkhoz and is the only son of a widowed mother because his father falls in World War II. The old man sighs, noting that not all women possess such loyalty; many love one man and then another. Kapaz proudly confirms that his mother never remarries. Eventually, Kapaz must leave. The herder warmly invites him to stay for dinner, but Kapaz declines. Walking to his car, Kapaz notices a fit, strong woman riding gracefully across the pasture.

The Beauty of Labor At the Karkyra pasture, between Kyrgyzstan and Kazakhstan, a grand holiday honors shepherds and herders. Following speeches about livestock success, the awarding ceremony begins. The crowd erupts in applause for Baatyrbek Asankadyrov, a horse herder of the "Kyrgyzstan's 40th Anniversary" Kolkhoz. Kapaz is surprised to see the veteran again. Baatyrbek receives the prestigious Order of the October Revolution, adding it to the medals already on his chest. Watching him, Kapaz realizes that true beauty lies in labor, not physical appearance. Baatyrbek announces his farm's triumph: hundred foals from hundred mares. After the ceremony, Baatyrbek invites Kapaz for lunch, but Kapaz must depart.

Kapaz's Story

The Wild Rhubarb Fight Though Kapaz currently lives in a village in the Ysyk-Kol region for his work, he originally comes from the Chuy region. His mind often returns to a painful childhood memory. One weekend, Kapaz and his classmates go on a mountain trip to collect plants for a herbarium and to pick *yshkyn*, a wild mountain rhubarb. During the excursion, Kapaz forms a close friendship with a girl named Gulbarchyn. A classmate named Ydyrys grows deeply jealous of their bond. While the children are gathering *yshkyn*, tension finally explodes into a bitter fight. In anger, Ydyrys cruelly insults Kapaz, claiming that his real father is a soldier from the Ysyk-Kol region and that he is actually the son of his sister Zulay.

The Truth About Kapaz Distraught by the rumor, Kapaz asks his parents, Kyna and Tologon, whether he is truly Zulay's son. Shocked by the accusation, Tologon confronts Ydyrys's family, who quickly apologize for the cruel lie. Kapaz later finds comfort while reading letters from Shabdanbek, Zulay's husband who dies in World War II. Tragedy soon strikes again when Tologon dies. Zulay supports the family by working at the state road maintenance agency. When Kyna dies just as Kapaz finishes school, Zulay moves in with him. She later works as a milkmaid. Through her hard labor and sacrifice, Kapaz enters the agricultural university.

Kapaz Visits His Mother Zulay While studying at the agricultural university, Kapaz visits his mother Zulay during the summer holidays. She lives alone in a small village and suffers from illness. Although she is only forty years old, her hair has already turned gray, making her look much older. Zulay warmly welcomes Kapaz because he is the only person she truly has, and Kapaz also has only his mother Zulay. One day, Kapaz asks whether she and his father Shabdanbek were happy together before the war. Zulay avoids the question and hides her pain. She says she still waits for Shabdanbek and thinks about the siblings who were lost during the war. She cries often, and grief has made her look like an old woman with gray hair. She explains that she lived with Shabdanbek for only one week before he left for the war. She also says she lives only for Kapaz.

Kapaz's Professional Career and Life

Kapaz's Agricultural Work Kapaz works at the kolkhoz and cultivates virgin lands, using fertilizers to improve the soil on almost one thousand acres of land. He begins growing sainfoin and oats. However, some officials, especially agronomists, are against his approach, even though there is very little hay available for cattle even in the fertile lands. Because of this situation, Kapaz asks the local people to collect hay not only in the lowlands but also in the mountain areas. Some people agree, while others disagree with his idea. Despite the arguments, the chairman of the kolkhoz supports Kapaz's plan. He decides to attract extra workers from the cities to help prepare enough hay for the winter season.

Visit to Meeri's Shepherd Pasture Kapaz visits the pasture of Meeri, a young girl, and her parents. Her father is a shepherd. Meeri lived with her aunt, where she studied at a Russian-medium school and learned to be more open-minded, while students from Kyrgyz-medium schools were usually shy according to tradition and national character. She could not enter the university because her father suddenly fell and injured his back, so she planned to try next year. At the shepherd's tent they have dinner together. Afterward, Meeri asks whether she and Kapaz can guard the sheep yard from wolves during the night. This suggestion makes her father uncomfortable because an unmarried girl is not supposed to stay overnight with a young man. However, Meeri does not see anything wrong with it, and her father finally agrees, having no choice.

Night Watch and Silent Understanding In the sheep yard, Meeri and Kapaz talk about shepherding methods and whether it is better to drive sheep with a dog or not. Meeri shares a story about sheep becoming frightened of a dog and mistaking it for a wolf. Kapaz brings books by Aitmatov and other writers, and Meeri is very happy. Kapaz also talks about his mother, saying she is very sick and may die at any time. He wants to bring her from the Chuy valley to this village, but she refuses to leave her home. Kapaz already loves Meeri and carries this feeling silently in his heart. Meeri and Kapaz guard the sheep together throughout the night. In the morning, as Kapaz leaves on horseback, he kisses Meeri on the forehead.

Hay Harvest, Autumn Return, and Reunion At the pasture lands, local people gather hay that is turned into silage. They are happy and believe it will help them greatly during winter. As autumn arrives, everyone returns to the villages, but Meeri remains in the pasture, and her parents worry about when she will come back. Kapaz comforts them, saying she will return soon. He rests in his house, reads newspapers, and sees the whip made by Baatyrbek, the herder. He misses Baatyrbek and thinks about him. He also thinks that if he marries Meeri, Baatyrbek will become their mentor, a respected elder who would guide and support them in life. In the morning, Meeri arrives, and they enjoy breakfast together.

Meeri's Success and the Marriage Proposal After returning from the pasture, Meeri gives the government a group of special sheep raised for meat. Each sheep weighs about one hundred fifty-seven pounds. This becomes a major success, and her family and the kolkhoz are proud of her achievement. A few days later, the chairman of the kolkhoz, along with two or three officials, visits Meeri's parents to formally ask for her hand in marriage on behalf of Kapaz, according to custom. The parents respond that if Meeri agrees and if the young people like each other, they accept the match. However, they insist that there must be no elopement and that all wedding traditions must be properly observed. The chairman assures them that Kapaz will follow every tradition and marry according to custom, saying the proverb: *Kalyngsyz kyz bolso da, kaadasyz kyz bolboit*, meaning even if a girl is given in marriage without bride price, she is never married without observing proper wedding traditions.

Kapaz's Return, and a New Home When Kapaz learns that Meeri's parents have agreed to the marriage, he leaves for the Chuy region to bring his mother. Meanwhile, a new house is built for Kapaz. When Kapaz and his mother arrive at his previous residence, they are surprised to find the house empty. Soon they learn that all his belongings have been moved to the new house, and the kolkhoz has also bought new furniture for him. Kapaz is overjoyed. He realizes that he is not alone, as he once thought, and that the people around him support him greatly. When they arrive at the new house, they are delighted and filled with happiness and joy at what they see. According to Kyrgyz tradition, they are asked for *suiunchu*, a customary request for a small reward given to someone who brings good news. Kapaz and his mother happily give *suiunchu* in Soviet rubles.

The Wedding

Meeri's Wedding Preparations and Zulay's Visit Kapaz cannot see Meeri because she is preparing for the wedding. She becomes thoughtful and quiet, while her family treats her with special care, knowing that she will soon leave for another family. The day before the wedding, Meeri's parents invite Zulay, Kapaz's mother. They expect her to be a beautiful and strong woman. However, they meet a thin, gray-haired woman who looks much older than her fifty years. Meeri's mother feels that Zulay must have suffered greatly in her life. Zulay, being new to the Ysyk-Kol region, feels more ill there because of the high altitude and difficult conditions. She knows that Shabdanbek, Kapaz's father, was from this same kolkhoz, but she never tells Kapaz, fearing that he might face something bad or painful if he learns too much about that past.

The Wedding Ceremony and Celebration The wedding begins. The groom arrives, and two daughters-in-law announce his arrival and ask for *suiunchu*. Baalkan, Meeri's mother, gives the *suiunchu*. Kapaz enters the house after completing several traditional rituals. The wedding continues for two days. Then Meeri leaves her paternal home, and her mother cries at her departure. A Volga car provided by the kolkhoz arrives, and Meeri is taken to the kolkhoz club house, where weddings, concerts, films, and discos are usually held. Other guests arrive in a kolkhoz bus. Meeri and Kapaz wear wedding clothes and look happy together. The tables are richly laid with fruits and vegetables. The wedding ceremony begins, and the head of the village council gives a speech, congratulating the couple and presenting their marriage certificate. After this, people open champagne and drink in celebration. Everyone wishes the couple happiness and a long life together.

Zulay's Wedding Speech and Sudden Illness During the wedding celebration, Zulay stands up to give a speech. She thanks everyone for their kindness and hospitality and says that she remembers only two truly happy moments in her life: the day she married Kapaz's father, Shabdanbek, and the day she first saw Kapaz after his birth. Now, she says, a third joyful event has entered her life because she is gaining another child, her daughter-in-law Meeri. Zulay blesses the young couple and tells them to live happily together. Overcome with emotion, she begins to cry. Meanwhile, Kapaz looks around for Baatyrbek, the horse herder, and his wife, but they are absent from the wedding. Eventually, the celebration ends, and everyone returns home. Soon afterward, Zulay becomes seriously ill and is taken to the hospital in the district center.

Baatyrbek's Visit and Memories of Shabdanbek Baatyrbek, the herder, and his wife visit the home of Kapaz and Meeri, but only Meeri is there. Later, she tells Zulay about their visit. When Zulay asks who the guests are, Kapaz explains that Baatyrbek is the horse herder he greatly respects. Kapaz then shows

photographs of his father, Shabdanbek, proudly saying that he received the Orders of Lenin, the Red Star, and Glory for his bravery during the war. Listening quietly, Zulay says that she never loses hope that Shabdanbek might somehow return one day. Meeri adds that Kapaz closely resembles his father in appearance. Hearing this, Kapaz asks his mother to tell him more about his father and the life they once shared together.

Zulay's Memory of War and Loss

Zulay Remembers the Beginning of the War Zulay begins telling her story. When World War II started, she was studying in the ninth grade, but she could not continue her education because of the difficult war-time conditions. She had two elder brothers, Janysh and Baiysh. Their family lived in a district where road construction workers and specialists were employed. Her parents became deeply unhappy when the brothers left for the war. At that time, Zulay's father worked as a road operator, and Zulay herself also began working at the road department to help support the family. During those years, workers started building the Frunze–Rybachye railway line, an important project connecting Frunze, now called Bishkek, with the Ysyk-Kol region.

Janysh's Letter from Military School Zulay remembers how her eldest brother, Janysh, once sent a letter to the family. He wrote that he had started studying at a military school for one year. In his letter, Janysh proudly mentioned that there were only two Kyrgyz students there: himself and his close friend. He also sent a photograph of himself together with that friend. Janysh's friend added greetings to the family and asked them to write about the news and life in Kyrgyzstan. The family became very happy after receiving the letter and carefully admired the photograph of the two young men. They often mentioned Janysh's friend warmly and sent their greetings to him as well.

Letters between Zulay and Janysh's Friend One day, Zulay was asked to write two separate letters, one to her brother Janysh and another to his friend. After that, Janysh's friend began writing directly to Zulay and asked her to send him more letters. Gradually, a warm closeness developed between them through their correspondence. Later, Janysh and his friend wrote another letter saying that they had completed their military studies and were being sent separately to the front lines. The family became very sad after hearing this news. They believed that Janysh's friend would probably never write again because of the dangers of war. However, he continued sending letters to Zulay, and their bond grew even stronger despite the distance and uncertainty. Janysh and Baiysh died in the war, leaving the family devastated.

Shabdanbek Returns to Tologon's Family The wounded soldiers began helping with the road construction while waiting for the mountain road to reopen. Meanwhile, the driver suddenly asked Tologon's father whether he was Tologon and said that his sons' friend had arrived and had already been dropped off at their home. Zulay and her father hurried back home and saw Shabdanbek, Janysh's friend, waiting there. The family was still grieving deeply after losing their sons, and Zulay cried constantly. However, her mother gently told her that Shabdanbek himself was wounded and should not be troubled with endless crying. He had been injured in the shoulder and received a one-month leave from the army. As soon as he arrived, he came directly to Tologon's family home. Seeing him, Tologon wept heavily, remembering his lost sons and the suffering brought by the war.

Love Grows in Tologon's House The next day, Zulay asked for permission to stay home from work, and the family spent time together with Shabdanbek. His presence brought happiness back into the house after so much grief and loss. During those days, Zulay and Shabdanbek fell deeply in love with each other. Shabdanbek wanted to marry her, but he did not know how to tell her parents. A neighbor woman became the mediator between the young couple and the family. She asked whether they were truly certain about marriage, even though Shabdanbek would soon return to the front. Zulay and Shabdanbek answered firmly that they were sure about their decision and wanted to stay together despite the war.

Marriage Before Returning to the Front That same day, the neighbor woman spoke with Zulay's parents and asked for permission for the marriage. Zulay's father said that the war was already nearing its end and

that Shabdanbek was the best match for his daughter, but he believed they should marry only after the war finished. However, the young couple strongly wished to marry immediately because they feared separation and uncertainty. After many discussions, they finally received permission to register their marriage. Zulay and Shabdanbek were married, but their happiness lasted only a short time. Soon afterward, Shabdanbek returned to the front lines and left for the war again.

Shabdanbek's Letters and the Birth of Kapaz After Shabdanbek leaves for the front, Zulay waits for his letters with deep hope. He writes that he is sent to the Ukrainian front and later informs her that he is awarded the Order of Glory for a successful attack. In his next letter, he says he is transferred to another division, and after that, he disappears without any further news. Zulay continues waiting, going to the post office every day, but receives no information. She cries constantly, holding on to hope. During this painful waiting, she gives birth to a boy and names him Kapaz, meaning "trap" or "cage," reflecting her life of loss, longing, and emotional confinement.

After the War and Zulay's New Life The war ends, and Zulay's parents move back to their home village from the railway and road depot. Zulay, however, remains at the depot, hoping that if Shabdanbek returns, he will be able to find her in the same place. She continues to work hard and eventually joins the Communist Party. For her dedication, she is awarded a motorcycle by the government. She also attends a three-month training course and receives a driver's license. After this, Zulay begins working with even greater enthusiasm and determination, fully devoted to her responsibilities and life's duties.

False Hope and Usup's Marriage Proposal One day, Zulay returns home from work, and the neighbor woman who once helped arrange her marriage excitedly tells her that Shabdanbek has returned. Overwhelmed with happiness, Zulay runs home immediately, but she discovers that Shabdanbek is not there. Instead, the neighbor woman has become astonished by the strong resemblance between young Kapaz and his father, Shabdanbek. Kapaz, who is around ten years old, has come from the village to visit his mother because he is mostly raised by his grandparents. He explains that he traveled to the city with Usup, a post office worker who has feelings for Zulay. Kapaz innocently tells her that Usup asks him to persuade Zulay to marry him. However, Zulay has already refused Usup's proposals several times.

Zulay's Suspicions and Tologon's Final Years While telling her story to Meeri, her daughter-in-law, Zulay says that perhaps Usup may have hidden or failed to deliver some of Shabdanbek's letters because he wanted to marry her himself. However, she also knows that Shabdanbek officially goes missing during the war, and no one learns his true fate. That same day, young Kapaz tells Zulay that his grandfather Tologon is seriously ill. Zulay buys tea and cookies, and together they ride by motorcycle to visit her parents. Tologon is already very weak and can no longer walk, but he stubbornly refuses to see a doctor. Two years later, Tologon dies. After his death, Zulay's life becomes truly difficult, filled with hard work, loneliness, and deep depression.

Zulay Reveals the Truth About Shabdanbek While speaking to her son Kapaz and her daughter-in-law Meeri, Zulay says that she worked at the road department for seventeen years while continuing to wait for Shabdanbek's return. During those long years, she grows old before her time, becomes worn out by hardship, and her hair turns gray from sorrow and endless waiting. For the first time, Zulay finally reveals that Shabdanbek is originally from the Ysyk-Kol region. Kapaz becomes surprised and asks why she never tells him this before. Zulay explains that her father, Tologon, does not want Kapaz to grow up dreaming of searching for his father in distant Ysyk-Kol, since the Chuy valley and Ysyk-Kol are far apart. Kapaz says that perhaps he can search the archives and discover information about his father. However, Zulay still hides the exact village where Shabdanbek comes from.

A Visit to Baatyrbek's House

Kapaz's Questions About His Father and Zulay's Illness Kapaz says that he wants to know more about his paternal origins, including his relatives, cousins, and tribal roots. However, that same day, Zulay suddenly becomes ill. The local medical center sends a nurse to give her injections, and after some treatment

she begins feeling better. Later, Zulay, Kapaz, and Meeri go to visit Baatyrbek as guests. Baatyrbek is not home at first, but his wife warmly welcomes them and prepares a generous table. Looking at Zulay, she thinks that Zulay appears much older than herself because of the difficult life she has endured. When Baatyrbek finally arrives, he greets Zulay warmly. Time and war have greatly changed both his face and voice. As he looks at Zulay carefully, he feels that he has seen her somewhere before, but he cannot remember where.

Baatyrbek Speaks about the War and His Life During the gathering, Baatyrbek explains that he and Kapaz first met at the pasture and since then have become almost like father and son. He proudly says that Kapaz works honestly and well, helping the kolkhoz become more prosperous. Zulay thanks Baatyrbek for his kindness and hospitality, saying that Kapaz is alone in this region and needs good people around him. Later, Kapaz asks Baatyrbek to share stories from the war years. However, Baatyrbek replies that he has no wish to remember those terrible days. He says that even his military awards, orders, and medals never bring him happiness because the war leaves him wounded and destroys his face and one eye. Instead of speaking about battles, Baatyrbek says he would rather tell them the story of his own personal life.

Dinner at Baatyrbek's House Meanwhile, the chairman of the kolkhoz arrives with his wife. They praise the kymyz prepared by Asylkan and speak warmly about kolkhoz life, the hay harvest, and preparations for winter. Soon, the most lavish part of the dinner is served: the meat of an entire sheep, a traditional and honorable meal prepared for respected guests. Baatyrbek asks his wife to bring his personal knife, the folding knife traditionally carried by men. She brings him a silver-plated knife with a horn handle. Baatyrbek carefully takes the knife in his hands and says that it holds a special place in his life and is his favorite possession. He smiles quietly and says that he and the knife have been companions and faithful friends for many years.

Zulay Recognizes the Knife As soon as Zulay sees the knife in Baatyrbek's hands, she becomes deeply shocked. While everyone else is busy eating the meat and enjoying the dinner, she feels herself trembling inside. Strange thoughts begin rushing through her mind. She wonders whether this is fate, mystery, or some unbelievable coincidence. Zulay stares at the silver-plated knife with the horn handle and suddenly remembers that the knife once belonged to her own father, who had later given it to Shabdanbek before the war.

Zulay is in Deep Thought She begins thinking that perhaps, before his death or disappearance, Shabdanbek may have passed the knife to this man. From that moment, Zulay becomes certain that Baatyrbek must somehow know Shabdanbek or be connected to him. Quietly, she asks herself whether she should ask about the knife. Meanwhile, Kapaz notices that his mother is not eating and asks what is wrong. Baatyrbek also kindly tells her to eat. Unable to hold back her emotions any longer, Zulay suddenly begins to cry.

Zulay Becomes Disturbed at the Dinner Everyone at the table thinks Zulay suddenly becomes ill again. Kapaz quickly asks Meeri whether she has brought her medicine. However, Zulay says she feels healthy. The guests begin wondering why she looks so strange and restless. After sitting silently for some time, Zulay says that she wants to ask Baatyrbek something important. Looking directly at him, she asks where he got the knife. Baatyrbek becomes startled and replies that the knife belongs to him. Zulay immediately grows emotional and says he is lying. She insists that the knife once belonged to Shabdanbek, Kapaz's father, before the war.

Baatyrbek Recognizes Zulay Hearing Zulay's words, Kapaz carefully takes the knife and also asks Baatyrbek where he got it. Baatyrbek suddenly grows pale and dizzy. His hands begin trembling, and he struggles to speak. The room becomes silent as everyone watches him with confusion. Finally, in a weak and shaking voice, Baatyrbek asks, "Are you Zulay?" Zulay quietly answers that she is indeed Zulay. She adds that perhaps Shabdanbek once told him that his wife's name was Zulay. At that moment, the guests begin sensing that a hidden connection from the war years is slowly being revealed before their eyes.

Baatyrbek Reveals His True Identity The room falls silent as everyone waits for Baatyrbek to speak. Finally, with a trembling voice, he reveals that he is actually Shabdanbek. Because the war badly destroys his face and leaves him wounded and unrecognizable, nobody is able to recognize him after his return. During the war, he receives many military orders and medals for bravery, and people begin calling him Baatyrbek, meaning “hero,” because of his courage in battle.

Hearing these words, Zulay becomes overwhelmed with shock and emotion. Unable to believe what she hears, she cries out, “Oh my God, you are alive?” Tears fill her eyes as the truth, hidden for many years, is finally revealed.

Shabdanbek Learns the Truth about Zulay Shabdanbek, who now lives as Baatyrbek, asks Zulay why she married Usup after the war. He explains that Usup once sent him letters saying that he and Zulay were already married and even had a baby together. Shabdanbek says that he still keeps those letters and believed them for many years. Hearing this, Zulay immediately tells him that she never married Usup at all. Kapaz also speaks emotionally and says that Zulay waited for Shabdanbek throughout her entire life and never stopped hoping for his return.

The Family Reunites after Many Years After hearing the truth, Shabdanbek becomes overwhelmed with guilt and sorrow. He apologizes to Zulay and falls to his knees before her. Kapaz quickly tells him to stand up. Trembling with emotion, Shabdanbek embraces Kapaz and repeatedly says, “My son, my son.” Then he hugs Zulay tightly. After many years of separation, pain, and misunderstanding, they finally forgive one another. Together they say that it was the war that destroyed their lives and separated them for so many years. With tears in their eyes, they curse the cruel war that stole their youth, love, and happiness.

The Truth is revealed Suddenly Zulay falls and faints. An ambulance arrives quickly and gives her injections. The doctor checks her condition and says she is okay and stable. Kapaz looks at Shabdanbek in silence, thinking inside that he is a cruel man for believing gossip without checking the truth and for not searching for his family properly. Shabdanbek remains silent for a long time. Then he says he did not know he had a son and never had any intention of losing his wife deliberately. He explains that he was seriously wounded in the Belarus lands during the war and suffered heavily. Zulay slowly raises her head and asks why he did not look for her when he returned from the hospital. Shabdanbek answers that he was afraid she would not accept him anymore because of his destroyed face and changed appearance.

Usup’s Letters Shabdanbek explains that he received letters from Usup claiming that Zulay had already married him and started a new family. Because of these letters, he believes he has lost Zulay forever and does not attempt to return or search for her. He says this misunderstanding is the main reason he stays away for so many years. Then he asks his wife to bring out old photographs. His wife, still shocked by the situation, brings them. Kapaz recognizes the photos of his mother and father, confirming the past connection.

Emotional Reunion and Acceptance Seeing the photographs, Shabdanbek begins to cry, overwhelmed by guilt and sorrow. The chairman of the kolkhoz comforts him, saying that life is unpredictable and many tragic misunderstandings happen during war. He adds that Usup is guilty for all the confusion and separation. In the end, Zulay speaks calmly and says that she would accept Shabdanbek even now, despite his destroyed face and the suffering he has endured.

Zulay’s Final Words and Kapaz Accepts His Father Shabdanbek shows Usup’s letter, and Zulay immediately recognizes Usup’s handwriting. Shabdanbek says he deeply regrets everything and hopes Kapaz will make Zulay happy in her remaining life. Kapaz gently says, “Let’s go, mother.” Zulay is taken to the hospital, where she becomes very weak. Before her death, she speaks softly to Kapaz and asks him not to lose ties with his father and to forgive the past. After her passing, Kapaz accepts Shabdanbek as his father.

CHARACTER ANALYSIS

Zulay

Zulay is the central figure of *The Gray-Haired Woman*, a woman whose life is shaped by war, separation, and endurance. She marries Shabdanbek just before he leaves for World War II and never sees him again. Believing he is missing, she raises their son Kapaz alone while working in harsh conditions in agriculture and road maintenance. She refuses Usup's marriage proposals and remains emotionally loyal to her husband throughout her life. Years later, she discovers Shabdanbek is alive but has lived under another identity due to war injuries and misunderstandings. Her life reflects waiting, sacrifice, and unbroken hope.

Unwavering Zulay's most defining quality is her loyalty. For over thirty years, she stays devoted to Shabdanbek, a man she lived with for only one week before the war took him away. This is not a passive kind of waiting. She actively turns down Usup's repeated marriage proposals and chooses to remain at the old road depot, hoping that if Shabdanbek ever comes back, he will know where to find her. While everyone around her moves on with their lives, Zulay holds onto this one quiet belief. Her love for Shabdanbek does not fade with time or weaken under pressure. It simply stays, steady and unshakable, proving that some bonds go beyond distance, years, and even silence.

Self-Sacrificing Zulay pours everything she has into giving Kapaz a better life. After her father dies, she becomes the only person holding the family together. She takes on backbreaking work at the road department and later as a milkmaid, never once complaining about how tired or lonely she feels. All of this effort has one purpose: to make sure Kapaz can go to university and build a future she never had the chance to live. She gives up her health, her youth, and her own happiness so that her son can stand on his own. For Zulay, being a mother is not just a role. It is her entire reason for living.

Grief-Stricken Zulay carries her sadness not just in her heart but on her body. Even though she is only in her forties and later fifties, she looks like an old woman. Her hair turns gray not from age but from years of crying, worrying, and waiting for news that never comes. When Meeri's parents meet her for the first time before the wedding, they expect a strong and healthy woman. Instead they see someone thin, pale, and worn down by life. Zulay's grief is not something she talks about openly. It lives quietly inside her, slowly eating away at her strength and making her age far beyond her years.

Forgiving What makes Zulay truly remarkable is her ability to forgive. When the truth about Shabdanbek finally comes out at the dinner table, she does not shout or blame him. She does not ask why he never searched for her or why he believed Usup's lies without questioning them. Instead she simply says that she would accept him even now, with his scarred face and all the lost years between them. On her deathbed, her last words to Kapaz are not about her own pain. She asks him to stay close to his father and to let go of the past. Even in her final moments, Zulay thinks not of herself but of bringing her broken family together.

Shabdanbek

Shabdanbek, later known as Baatyrbek, is one of the most tragic and complex characters in the story. He is a young Kyrgyz soldier who falls in love with Zulay during a brief wartime leave and marries her just one week before returning to the front. The war destroys his face, takes one of his eyes, and strips away the man he once was. After receiving false letters from Usup claiming that Zulay had remarried, he believes he has lost everything. Too ashamed of his appearance and too broken by betrayal, he never returns home. Instead he builds a new life under a new name, becoming Baatyrbek, a respected horse herder. His story shows how war does not only kill people on the battlefield but continues to destroy lives and families long after the fighting ends.

Brave Shabdanbek is a genuinely brave man, both on the battlefield and in everyday life. During the war he fights with such courage that he earns some of the highest military honors, including the Orders of Lenin, the Red Star, and Glory. His bravery is so well known among fellow soldiers that they begin calling him Baatyrbek, meaning hero. But his courage does not end with the war. After returning home with a destroyed face and a broken heart, he rebuilds his entire life from nothing. He becomes a successful horse herder,

achieving the remarkable record of raising one hundred foals from one hundred mares. His bravery is not loud or dramatic. It is the quiet, stubborn kind that keeps a person going when everything has been taken away.

Wounded Shabdanbek is deeply wounded, not just physically but emotionally. The war leaves him with a disfigured face and only one eye, making him unrecognizable even to the people who once knew him. But the deeper wounds are invisible. He carries the belief that his wife has abandoned him and married another man. This false knowledge eats at him for decades. He never speaks about the war willingly, telling Kapaz that he has no wish to remember those terrible days. Even his military medals bring him no happiness. When the truth finally comes out at the dinner table, his hands tremble and his voice breaks. He is a man who has spent a lifetime burying his pain under hard work and silence.

Ashamed Shame is the force that keeps Shabdanbek away from his family for over thirty years. When the war ends and he returns from the hospital, he is afraid that Zulay will not accept him because of his destroyed appearance. He looks nothing like the young man she married, and he cannot bear the thought of her seeing what the war has done to him. This shame is made worse by Usup's letters, which convince him that Zulay has already moved on. Rather than face possible rejection, he chooses to disappear completely and start a new life where nobody knows who he really was. His shame is not weakness. It is the painful reaction of a proud man who feels the war has stolen everything that once made him whole.

Remorseful When the truth is finally revealed at the dinner table, Shabdanbek is overwhelmed by deep remorse. He realizes that Zulay never betrayed him, never married Usup, and spent her entire life waiting for him. The weight of thirty lost years crashes down on him at once. He falls to his knees before Zulay, apologizing with tears in his eyes. He embraces Kapaz and repeats the words my son over and over, as if trying to make up for all the years he missed. His regret is not just about believing Usup's lies. It is about the family he could have had, the wife who grew old waiting for him, and the son who grew up without a father. In the end, he curses the war for stealing everything from them.

Kapaz

Kapaz is the central character of the story, a young agricultural specialist whose life has been shaped by absence and mystery. His very name, which means trap or cage, reflects the emotional confinement his mother Zulay feels when she gives birth to him while waiting for a husband who never returns. Growing up without a father in the Chuy region, Kapaz is raised by his mother and grandparents. Despite a childhood marked by cruel rumors about his origins and the early loss of his grandparents, he becomes a hardworking and educated man. His journey through the story is ultimately a search for identity, belonging, and the father he never knew.

Hardworking Kapaz is defined by his dedication to honest labor. After graduating from the agricultural university, he throws himself fully into his work at the kolkhoz. He cultivates nearly one thousand acres of virgin land, introduces new crops like sainfoin and oats, and fights to ensure enough hay is stored for winter even when officials disagree with his methods. Baatyrbek himself praises Kapaz for working honestly and helping the kolkhoz become more prosperous. Kapaz does not seek praise or recognition for his efforts. He simply does what needs to be done because he believes in the value of hard work. This quality clearly comes from watching his mother sacrifice everything for his future.

Respectful Kapaz carries a deep respect for the people around him, especially his elders. From the very first meeting with Baatyrbek at the pasture, he treats the old herder with genuine admiration, not because of his medals or awards but because of his character and work ethic. He dreams that if he marries Meeri, Baatyrbek will become their mentor and guide in life. He also deeply respects his mother Zulay, never questioning her decisions even when she hides painful truths from him. When traditional customs require a formal marriage proposal through the kolkhoz chairman, Kapaz follows every step without shortcuts. His respect for others is not performed or forced. It comes naturally from the values his mother quietly planted in him.

Emotionally Reserved Kapaz carries his feelings quietly inside himself rather than expressing them openly. When he falls in love with Meeri, he does not declare his feelings with grand words. Instead he carries this love silently in his heart and shows it through small gestures like bringing her books and kissing her forehead as he leaves in the morning. When his mother hides the truth about his father's origins, Kapaz asks questions but does not push too hard. Even when the shocking revelation happens at the dinner table, his reaction is not explosive anger but quiet, thoughtful silence. He looks at Shabdanbek and thinks carefully rather than shouting. His emotional reserve is not coldness. It is the quiet strength of a man who has learned to process pain internally.

Forgiving Kapaz's final and most powerful trait is his ability to forgive. When he discovers that Baatyrbek, the man he admires so deeply, is actually his father Shabdanbek, his first reaction is quiet anger. He thinks to himself that Shabdanbek is a cruel man for believing gossip without checking the truth and for never searching for his family. Yet when his dying mother asks him to let go of the past and stay close to his father, Kapaz listens. He does not argue or resist. He simply says let us go mother and takes her to the hospital. After Zulay passes away, Kapaz honors her final wish and accepts Shabdanbek as his father. His forgiveness is not instant or easy. It is a conscious choice made out of love for his mother and a willingness to heal rather than hold onto bitterness.

THEMES

Work: Socialist Labor and Awards In the Soviet Union, the entire economy was built around a system called five year plans. These plans, which ran from 1928 until the collapse of the Soviet state in 1991, set specific production targets for every sector of the economy, from heavy industry to agriculture. Every kolkhoz, every farm, and every individual worker received clear goals that they were expected to meet within a set period.

For shepherds, herders, and peasants in Kyrgyzstan, these targets shaped their daily lives. A horse herder like Baatyrbek might be expected to raise one hundred foals from one hundred mares in a single season. A shepherd could be tasked with producing one thousand lambs from one thousand sheep. Cotton farmers had tonnage quotas for their fields, and livestock workers had to reach a certain weight per animal, sometimes eighty kilograms of meat per fattened sheep. These were not suggestions. They were obligations that determined a person's standing in the community and in the eyes of the state.

When workers fulfilled or exceeded their plans, the rewards could be life changing. The government handed out medals, honorary titles, and prestigious state orders such as the Order of the October Revolution, which Baatyrbek receives in the story. Some outstanding workers were awarded motorcycles or even cars. Others earned free trips to resort hospitals and sanatoriums where they could rest and recover from years of physical labor. For rural people living in remote mountain pastures, these rewards represented recognition, dignity, and proof that their exhausting work mattered to the larger society.

However, this system also created enormous pressure. Workers who failed to meet their targets faced public shame, criticism from officials, and reduced support from the state. The line between pride and punishment was thin. In the story, Kapaz faces resistance from agronomists and officials when he proposes new farming methods, showing how the plan driven system sometimes discouraged innovation and independent thinking. Despite this, characters like Baatyrbek and Zulay pour their entire lives into their labor, not just because the state demands it but because work becomes their way of surviving loneliness, grief, and the invisible wounds of war.

Illustrative moment: Baatyrbek's achievement is quantified and rewarded. He announces his farm's triumph: achieving "a hundred foals from a hundred mares," a perfect fulfillment of a demanding plan. For this, he is awarded the "prestigious Order of the October Revolution," which he adds to the other medals already on his chest. These awards were not just symbolic; they were tangible proof of his status as a "hero of labor," a highly respected title in the Soviet Union.

Gender: Women's Toil In traditional Kyrgyz society, a woman's role was centered around the home. She was expected to be a keeper of the household, and a mother of children. However, the Soviet system dramatically changed this reality. The state declared equality between men and women and pushed women into the workforce alongside men. While this emancipation gave women new rights and opportunities, it also placed enormous physical burdens on their bodies, especially in rural Kyrgyzstan where the labor was harsh and unforgiving.

Zulay's life is the clearest example of this double burden. After Shabdanbek disappears during the war, she does not have the luxury of staying home and grieving. She works alongside men at the railway construction site, helping build the Frunze to Rybachye line. Later she takes on road construction and maintenance work, jobs that demand heavy physical strength and long hours in extreme weather. Eventually she becomes a milkmaid, waking before dawn and working late into the evening. These are not jobs designed for comfort. They break the body slowly over years. The story makes it painfully clear that Zulay's gray hair and aged appearance are not simply the result of time passing. They are the visible scars of decades spent doing labor that was never meant for one person to carry alone. Grief hollowed her from the inside, and hard work wore her down from the outside.

Meeri represents the next generation of Kyrgyz women carrying this same weight. Though she is young and full of energy, her daily life is far from easy. She herds sheep across mountain pastures, watches over them through cold nights to protect them from wolves, and drives the flock back to the village when the season ends. When Kapaz hears that Meeri is driving the sheep alone, he does not go to help her or ride alongside her. She manages the journey by herself, proving her strength and independence. Her success in raising sheep that each weigh one hundred and fifty seven pounds shows that she works just as hard as any man on the kolkhoz.

Beyond these individual stories, women across Soviet Kyrgyzstan were expected to participate in every kind of agricultural labor. During harvest season, they worked in the fields collecting hay, digging potatoes, pulling onions, and picking cotton under the hot sun. These tasks were physically exhausting and often lasted from early morning until dark. Women did all of this while still being expected to cook meals, care for children, and maintain their homes. The Soviet system gave them equality on paper, but in practice it simply doubled their responsibilities without reducing any of the old ones.

Illustrative moment: When Meeri's parents meet Zulay for the first time before the wedding, they expect to see a strong and capable woman. Instead they find a thin, gray haired figure who looks far older than her fifty years. Meeri's mother immediately senses that this woman has suffered deeply throughout her life. Zulay's worn body and tired eyes tell a story that words cannot fully express. She is the living proof of what happens when a woman is asked to carry the weight of war, loss, motherhood, and backbreaking labor all at once, with no one beside her to share the load.

War: Scars In this *novella*, every major character carries wounds from World War II, some visible on the outside and others hidden deep within. The war takes young men from their families, destroys their bodies, and sends them back as strangers. It leaves women waiting alone for decades, aging before their time. It creates children who grow up without fathers and spend their lives searching for answers that never come.

Shabdanbek's scars are the most obvious. The war destroys his face so completely that no one from his past can recognize him. He loses one eye and returns from the hospital looking like a different person entirely. But the deeper damage is invisible. He is so ashamed of his appearance that he cannot bring himself to go home to Zulay. He believes that the woman he loves will not accept a man who looks the way he does now. This shame, born directly from the war, keeps him away from his family for over thirty years. When Kapaz asks him to share stories from the front, Baatyrbek refuses. He says he has no wish to remember those terrible days. Even his medals and military orders bring him no happiness. They are reminders of everything the war cost him, not symbols of glory.

Zulay's scars are quieter but equally devastating. She never sees a battlefield, but the war takes everything from her. It kills both her brothers, Janysh and Baiysh. It takes her husband after only one week of marriage. It leaves her alone with a newborn child and no answers about whether Shabdanbek is alive or dead. The years of waiting, crying, and hoping slowly transform her from a young woman into someone who looks decades older than her actual age. Her gray hair, her thin body, and her constant tears are all scars of the war, just written on a different kind of body.

Kapaz carries scars he did not earn himself. He grows up without a father and spends his childhood defending himself against cruel rumors about his origins. His very name, meaning trap or cage, is a scar in itself, reflecting the emotional prison his mother lives in when she gives birth to him. He never fights in any war, yet the war shapes every part of his life. It determines where he grows up, who raises him, and the painful questions that follow him into adulthood.

Even the relationship between Zulay and Shabdanbek is a casualty of war. They love each other deeply, but the war separates them before their love has a chance to grow. Usup's false letters succeed

only because the war creates the perfect conditions for deception: distance, silence, fear, and broken communication. Without the war, Usup's lies would have been discovered immediately. But in a world where millions of soldiers disappear without a trace, a forged letter is easy to believe.

The story shows that war destroys trust, youth, love, and families. It turns brave men into hiding strangers and loyal women into exhausted shadows of themselves. The scars it leaves are not limited to one generation. They pass down to children like Kapaz, who inherit the pain without ever understanding its full source.

Illustrative moment: At the dinner table in Baatyrbek's house, the truth finally surfaces after thirty years of silence. Shabdanbek's hands tremble and his voice breaks as he admits who he really is. Zulay stares at the man sitting across from her, the man she waited a lifetime for, and barely recognizes him. In that single moment, the full cruelty of war becomes visible. Two people who loved each other are sitting in the same room, yet the war has changed them so completely that they almost cannot find each other. When they finally embrace, they do not celebrate. They weep together and curse the war that stole their youth, their love, and their life together.

Ethics: Nomad Codes For the Kyrgyz people, the Nomad Code is a set of unwritten laws and taboos that have protected their identity as a nation for centuries. These rules are not kept out of obligation but out of a deep, silent respect for tradition. They provide a sense of order, honor, and community that keeps the people connected to their ancestors and to each other.

One of the most sacred principles is *Ak satylbait*, which means white drinks are never sold. Drinks like milk, yogurt, and especially kymyz, fermented mare's milk, are considered sacred. In the past, selling these was unthinkable; they were a gift from the mountains to be shared freely with anyone who visited the pasture. Even today, though life is changing, the spirit of this rule remains. Families still send kymyz from the high pastures to relatives in the city as a way of sharing the life giving energy of the mountains. To sell white drinks was to risk a spiritual curse; to share them was to bless the community.

Marriage traditions also reflect this deep respect for human dignity. There is a famous proverb: *Kalyngsyz kyz bolso da, kaadasyz kyz bolboit*. This means that even if a girl is married without a bride price, she must never be married without the proper wedding rituals. For Meeri's parents, the money mattered far less than the honor and dignity of their daughter. The rituals are a way of showing respect to the girl's tribe and ensuring she enters her new home with pride.

A very important part of this code is the role of *okul ata* and *okul ene*, the mentors of a newlywed couple. In Kyrgyz culture, there is a strict hierarchy and a sense of subordination between generations. Because of this deep respect, young people are often too shy or reserved to discuss their personal marriage problems or intimate issues directly with their own parents. The *okul ata* and *okul ene* act as a bridge. They provide the guidance and advice that a couple might be too embarrassed to ask for at home. Kapaz respects Baatyrbek so much that he hopes the old herder will take on this mentoring role for him and Meeri.

Finally, the tradition of *suiunchu* ensures that good news is always celebrated. When a person brings happy news, like the arrival of a groom or the completion of a new house, they ask for a small reward. Whether it is money, food, or clothes, *suiunchu* turns a private joy into a shared community celebration. These codes are the invisible threads that hold the Kyrgyz people together.

Illustrative moments: When Kapaz arrives at his new house with his mother, the neighbors and friends who helped build it immediately ask for *suiunchu*. Kapaz and Zulay happily hand over Soviet rubles as a reward for the good news. This moment shows that even in a modern era, the ancient nomad code still brings warmth and connection to their lives. Similarly, when the kolkhoz chairman formally proposes to Meeri's parents, he promises to follow every traditional ritual, proving that Kapaz's worth is measured by his respect for these sacred customs.

Love: Waiting In many stories, love is about being together, but for Zulay and Shabdanbek, love is defined by the thirty years they spent apart. They were married for only one week before World War II tore them away from each other. That seven-day period became the foundation for a lifetime of waiting. For Zulay, love was a stubborn, daily choice. She refused to believe her husband was dead, even when no letters came. She turned down every offer of a new life, including the persistent proposals from Usup, because she had already given her heart to a memory. She stayed at the old road depot, keeping her life exactly where he had left it, just in case he ever found his way back.

On the other side of this silence, Shabdanbek's love was a heavy burden of shame. He was so badly wounded that he did not recognize himself in the mirror. When he was told through forged letters that Zulay had remarried, his love did not die; it became a deep wound. He believed he was protecting her by staying away, thinking a broken and disfigured man like him would only bring her more grief. He lived as Baatyrbek, working the land and earning medals, but he carried his wife's photograph like a secret treasure. Their love was a tragic conversation held across three decades of silence and misunderstanding.

Their story shows that while war can steal a person's youth, health, and home, it cannot entirely destroy the connection between two souls who once chose each other.

Illustrative moment: At the dinner table, after the truth is finally revealed, the room falls into a heavy, emotional silence. Shabdanbek, the man everyone knew as the hero Baatyrbek, falls to his knees before Zulay. The weight of thirty lost years crashes down on them both. As they embrace, they do not find the young couple they used to be; instead, they find two people worn down by life and labor. With tears in their eyes, they do not celebrate their reunion with joy, but instead, they weep and curse the war together. In that embrace, their love is finally released from its "trap," proving that even after a lifetime of waiting, their hearts still belonged to one another.