

Koko, the Orphan (1965)

Tologon Kasymbek (1931-2011)

OVERVIEW

Author

Tologon Kasymbek was born on January 15, 1931, in Ak-Jol village, Aksy District, Jalal-Abad Region, Kyrgyzstan, as Kudaiberdi, the son of his father Kasymbek's second marriage. His father, an educated man, introduced him to historical narratives and oral traditions, which later influenced Tologon's literary works. Kasymbek's death when Tologon was fifteen forced him into a life of hardship, shaping his resilience and commitment to learning.

He studied Kyrgyz Language and Literature at Kyrgyz State University and began publishing fiction while still a student. After graduating in 1957, he held key cultural positions, including chief editor of *Ala-Too* (1960–1973) and later of the State Committee for Publishing under the Council of Ministers of the Kyrgyz SSR.

Kasymbek's literary career began with *The Little Horseman* (1952). He gained national recognition with *Alymkan*, later adapted into a film. His autobiographical novella *I Aspire to Be a Good Person* (*Adam Bolgum Kelet*, 1965) reflects his own life experiences.

He is best known for historical novels. *Flourishing* (*Kelkel*) explores Kyrgyz life before and after Soviet rule, while *The Raid* (*Baskyn*) and *The Massacre* (*Kyrgyn*) depict historical events and figures such as Baytik, Shabdan Batyr, Kurmanjan Datka, Toktogul Akyn, and Jantay Khan. His most celebrated novel, *The Broken Sword* (*Syngan Kylych*, 1966), was translated into all major Soviet languages and into English in 1980.

Tologon Kasymbek is a deeply loved and celebrated author in Kyrgyzstan, renowned for his mastery of historical novels. Through his works, he vividly brings to life the history, culture, and traditions of the Kyrgyz people, portraying their struggles, resilience, and values across generations. His novels combine meticulous historical research with compelling storytelling, offering readers both education and inspiration. Kasymbek's writings not only preserve the memory of important historical events and figures but also explore universal themes of honor, courage, and human dignity, earning him a lasting place in Kyrgyz literature and the hearts of readers.

Novella

The novella was originally published in Russian in 1958 under the title *Koke* (*Koko*). It was later translated into Kyrgyz under the title *An Orphan* (*Jetim*). This essay is based on the audio version of the novella in Kyrgyz.

Background

The novella explores themes of orphanhood, family, and the struggles of rural life, portraying a society marked by war, loss, and postwar challenges. The protagonist, Koko, embodies the vulnerability of children left orphaned due to war and illness, highlighting the harsh realities faced by those without parental care. Through Koko's experiences under the harsh guardianship of his aunt Sheker, the novella examines neglect, abuse, and the conflict between selfishness and moral responsibility. The story also reflects traditional village life, local customs, and the importance of community support, ultimately emphasizing the value of compassion, education, and humane guidance in shaping a child's future. The Kyrgyz translation, *An Orphan*, made these themes accessible to Kyrgyz-speaking audiences, preserving the emotional and social depth of the original Russian text.

MAIN CHARACTERS

Koko – Orphan, Sheker's nephew
Sheker – Aunt, guardian
Raimjan – Teacher, Rasul's father, prospective adopter
Rasul – Son of Raimjan, friend of Koko
Saaragul – Raimjan's mother, supporter of Koko
Shirin – Raimjan's wife, caregiver
Choro – Villager, suitor of Sheker

SYNOPSIS

Koko is a young boy, left orphaned by war and illness, now living under the care of his aunt, Sheker. Sheker's harshness makes him neglected and dirty: she starves him, punishes him, and keeps him from school, caring little for his well-being. When a teacher comes to send him to the orphanage, Sheker refuses, insisting Koko must remain under her control. Raimjan, a local teacher and war veteran, sees the boy's suffering and decides to adopt him, offering safety, guidance, and love. Sheker fiercely resists, creating conflict and chaos, clinging to authority. Amid this tension, Koko finds moments of comfort with Rasul, a village friend. Eventually, with the intervention of compassionate adults as Raimjan, Saaragul, and Shirin, Koko escapes Sheker's neglect. He is finally embraced, cleansed, and nurtured, stepping toward education, care, and a hopeful future.

SCENES

The Dark Afternoon Four people sit in a dark room: three men and one woman. It is afternoon, but the light is weak. The window has four small panes; two are broken and covered with paper. The room feels like evening. Choro sits in the middle and feels superior. They drink *bozo*, a thick, slightly sour fermented grain drink with mild alcohol. The thin young man drinks and sings. Choro praises his voice. The third man encourages the singer. The singer teases the woman who serves them. The woman remains indifferent. She only wants them to finish the bozo.

Bozo and Fire Choro leans back. "Sheker, your bozo is cold. Heat it—don't be afraid. We will pay." "How much have you drunk?" he asks. "Thirty bowls," Sheker replies. "We have much money," Choro laughs. "We could pay three makers." Sheker jumps up, screaming, "Koko! Where did he slip away?" A very thin, squalid boy rushes in. "Sheker *apa* (mother), I am here. Make a dry reeds fire; we will heat the bozo." "Why are you still here, useless wretch!" she snaps. She pours bozo from black buckwheat, readies a cotton filter. "So awkward, you can do nothing right," she scolds.

Koko's Afternoon Koko stands small and trembling. Sheker glares at him, eyes sharp with hate. He does nothing. His thin body leans under the weight of chores. He looks awful, dirty, sickly, his long hair matted. His hands, up to the elbows, are raw and wounded, streaked with dirt and perhaps infection. He murmurs as he scrubs, murmurs with the rag, feeling guilt for nothing. Every motion worries him, what will Sheker say? His eyes dart toward her, but she does not notice. The orphan boy works in silence, abused for his weakness, unseen except by his own weary heart.

Koko by the Oven The pot is full of bozo again. The men drink, laughing, talking nonsense. The singer stops his song; drunken voices fill the room. Sheker does not care, she only wants money. Koko sits by the oven, small and birdlike, innocent. He scratches himself, spits on the fire. Choro calls, "Come, darling." Koko hesitates. Sheker screams, cursing, forcing him to obey. His body remembers past pain, last time they made him drink too much. Sheker strikes him with the fire stick. He springs up, trembling.

Koko is Abused Koko rises and approaches Choro, small and hesitant. Choro frowns, irritated by the boy's unwillingness. Sheker strikes him again with the fire stick, sharp on his ribs. Yet Choro seems pleased by his patience. "My wolf," he murmurs softly, "drink some bozo." Koko sips cautiously, eyes darting toward Sheker, every movement measured. Sheker snaps, "O useless wretch! You little bastard! If you want, say

it! If not, get out, damn brat!" Another man leans close, threatening, growling, and urging him to drink. Koko wants the warmth, the taste, but their words press on him. Sadness wells, heavy and silent, in the small boy who bears all without protest.

Five Pinches Koko shakes his head. "I do not want." Choro leans close. "You have to." The third man urges him too. Sheker snaps, "You able to argue, bastard? Get out and go!" Koko drinks the whole bowl, trembling. He stands, ready to leave. Choro stops him. "My boy, you can't go." The drunk men laugh, mocking him. "You have to pay for what you drank. Maybe eight, nine more cups someday," one jeers. The other grins. "Pay or we'll pinch your head five times. Your head will ache." Sheker laughs cruelly. "You have no brain, no sense. Give it to pinch then!" Koko's small body shakes. Fear and sadness curl around him like smoke. He sips the bitter warmth, trapped in a room that sees him only as a tool, a boy to command, mock, and abuse.

The Orphan's Trial Koko's anger flares. "Will Sheker let this pass?" he wonders, Koko is hoping Sheker will take his side, not the men's. As he hesitates, his worn, patched pants tear. One leg gets caught in Choro's hand. Sheker strikes him sharply. "You tore your pants!" they scold. Choro shoves him forward, saying he mustn't think twice. The drunk men laugh, mocking him as spoiled and weak. Choro presses Koko's head to his shoulder, pinching hard. "Hold still, or I'll pull your hair," he warns. Another joins, pinching. Koko screams, the small boy trembling, every nerve alive. No one expected him to resist, yet he does.

Koko's Fury Koko bursts, cursing wildly, his small voice sharp with rage. The drunken men stop laughing, stunned. "What have I done to you?" he cries, tears streaming. He scolds Choro too. "Don't speak to the elder like that!" Sheker storms out, dust swirling. Choro says nothing, murmuring, "Hold your tongue." Koko does not flinch. Choro, twisting cruelly, speaks of his father: "Your father died like a beggar in the fields, no one buried him properly." Koko trembles, furious and helpless, the weight of words and shame pressing down.

Koko's Despair Choro crushes him with words: "Crows and ravens ate your father's gravel!" Koko weeps, unable to answer. If he could, he would strike Choro, not from anger, but helplessness. Suddenly, a rubber shoe hits Choro's face. Sparks flash in his eyes as it falls into the boiling pot; the bozo splashes over Sheker's chest. Sheker shouts, springing to her feet. But Koko had already slipped away, small and silent, vanishing through the door before anyone could catch him.

Koko, the Orphan Koko is born in his mother's arms, left behind when his father goes to war. His father dies in battle. His mother cares for him tenderly, sends him to school, nurtures him, but four years ago, illness takes her too. Alone, the boy, once cherished, comes into the hands of his father's sister, Sheker. One day, a teacher comes to take him to the orphanage. Sheker shouts and refuses, clinging to him. "Koko is not an orphan! My husband and I will care for him," she insists, keeping the boy under her strict watch.

Sheker's Lessons After the teacher leaves, Sheker speaks sharply to Koko about the orphanage, warning that children raised there turn to theft. "If anyone comes again to send you away, say you will not go," she instructs. Sheker says school brings little benefit; what matters is work at home. She tells him to focus on chores, tending the household, and learning practical life. Sheker has never borne a child herself. Perhaps because of this, or her harsh nature, she divorces her third husband in summer, leaving her bitterness to shape Koko's upbringing.

Sheker and the Old Homestead Three months ago, Sheker moves into the old house left by Koko's father. She works nowhere, not even on the collective farm. She makes her living selling bozo. Choro has long admired her, though he has not yet claimed her. He drinks her bozo, chatting and boasting: to one, he says he is a miner; to another, he works on the farm. Choro wanders everywhere, with no home, nothing to his name, a drifting man like any stranger on the streets.

Koko Under the Tree Koko sits beneath the great tree, memory heavy in his chest. That day, after the quarrel, Sheker found him in the field and beat him with a reed stick. Such fights have become ordinary, though Sheker promises she will not strike, she never keeps it. She tries to please Choro, giving him

whatever scraps she has. Once, she teased Koko with the thought, "What if I marry, and you have a brother-in-law?" The memory stings. Anger rises in Koko, quiet and burning, beneath the shade of the old tree.

Koko and the String Koko sits, anger simmering at Choro, furious for Sheker's beatings. He whispers to himself: "Stay still, I'll never let you go when you grow up." He tries to soothe his own heart. Children return from school, and Koko is distracted, admiring them. Rasul approaches. Koko holds up a string tied around his hand, a single kernel of corn dangling at the end. "What is this?" Rasul asks. Koko grins, proud: "A little dumpling, a legged fish will be caught," he says, imagining the kernel as clever bait.

Koko and the Legged Fish Rasul insists, "I want to see the legged fish!" Koko laughs, "You don't believe me?" He decides to show it. Rasul worries, if Koko cannot, he will lose face. "Come," Koko says, leading him to the edge of the village. "We're here," he points. Rasul asks, "When did this 'pond' appear, with its legged fish?" Koko shrugs, "Let's sit a while." Rasul, gentle and trusting, follows. The fields stretch silent, the village glimmers below, and roosters crow in the distance.

Koko's Legged Fish Trick There is no pond; Rasul stumbles in doubt. Koko ties the string's end to a ditch stake, adds five or six more kernels to the corn, and buries the string in the soil. He glances at Rasul and laughs. Roosters arrive, pecking the corn. Rasul laughs, "I see it now!" The white rooster grabs the string, running in confusion. Koko tugs gently, the rooster follows. "Is this the legged fish?" Rasul asks. "Yes!" they both roar with laughter. "I learned this in Tash-Kömür," Koko says, plotting mischief for the rooster. "Now what will you do with this rooster?" Rasul asks. "I'll barbecue it!" Koko grins mischievously.

Koko and the Rooster Rasul asks, "What will you do if you see a rooster?" "Don't cling to it," Koko laughs. The two wander around the village and reach Sheker's house. No one is home. A pot of boiling bozo stands, and a dirty spruce bucket waits. When the chickens approach, Koko shoos them away. He ties the rooster from under his arm to the corner of the yard. "There, I've settled it," he says. They enter the house. Koko complains of hunger. Sounds of two people moving inside reach them. "I hate you" Sheker shouts. "In the back room, on the shelf, there's a cup of wheat gruel, it!" Koko frowns, upset that he has to hear harsh words next to his friend.

Koko's Escape Koko grabs a bowl and steals the gruel. "Will you eat it?" he asks Rasul. "No," Rasul shakes his head, disgusted by the gruel. But Koko craves it, he is an orphan, hungry for more than food. Anger and longing bubble inside him. He bursts out the door, carrying the rooster, slamming it against the wall. Rasul follows quietly, surprised. Koko strides across the fields, dreaming of freedom, of escape from hunger, from harsh words. How sweet it would be to leave this orphaned life behind.

Searching for Rasul Saaragul Ene calls, "Where is he?" She asks her son, Raimjan, a teacher. "Where is Rasul?" Raimjan replies, "I'm preparing for my lesson." Saaragul walks to the far end of the village, past cows lowing and children playing. Still no sign of Rasul. She asks Tashtan, "Have you seen my grandson, Rasul?" "No," he shrugs. "He's a boy, maybe playing." Back at home, she tells Raimjan, "Look for him." Soon Rasul appears. "Where have you been?" she asks. "I was playing," he says. They gather around the evening table, quiet and calm.

Rasul's Confession Saaragul asks Rasul again. "I was playing with Koko," he admits softly. "He told me not to tell anyone." Raimjan laughs. "Why?" he asks, curious. As a father and teacher, Raimjan often guides his son, asking about his day, teaching him right from wrong. Today, Rasul tells everything carefully, without spilling a thing. Finally, he confides, "Koko's aunt is harsh, she scolds with cruel words. Father, I promised not to tell anyone, and I won't." Saaragul kisses her grandson's head, warmth and pride shining in her eyes.

Koko in the Dark Raimjan says, "Tomorrow, bring Koko home with you," and Rasul nods. Raimjan, a teacher and war veteran, works hard all day. In the dark, Koko lingers, listening to a soft snore from the back room. Hunger presses against him. Carefully, he reaches a shelf, brushing something with his foot. "Has a cat come in?" Sheker wonders at the noise. Koko uses both hands, finds a familiar wooden bucket, and drinks eagerly. But it is not bozo, just the bitter leftover mash. Earlier, by the reed-filled stream, he roasted the rooster, yet its meat is still tough and raw.

Before Dawn Koko sleeps, scratching under his arm. When he opens his eyes, Sheker stands over him, stiff and shadowy. "Where were you?" she snaps. Koko says nothing. "Has your tongue tied itself?" she sneers. "Get up. Bring water. I want to wash." "My stomach aches from the mash," Koko murmurs. "Then what can I do about it?" Sheker scoffs. "Go fetch water. We must make bozo." Since yesterday she has not given him even a crust of bread. With no strength to argue, Koko lifts two buckets and steps outside. Dawn is just breaking.

The Fight by the Ditch Late in the morning, near ten, Koko sits by the irrigation ditch, his feet in the cool water. Here he feels free. Rasul appears from the school road, a bag on his shoulder. "Come," Koko calls. "Today we'll catch another legged fish. Taste its meat." Rasul shakes his head. "Come to our house. My father wants to speak with you." Koko stiffens. "Why? Did you tell him about yesterday?" Rasul stays silent. "You animal! You told your father?" Koko shouts, slapping him. Rasul kicks back. They start fighting until an old man separates them. Rasul gathers his fallen papers and leaves. "Don't come this way again," Koko shouts after him.

Sheker Arrives Sheker rushes up, breath sharp. "You wretched brat! Who are you fighting with?" Koko cannot face her. He turns away. His worn shirt is torn usually Sheker would beat him for that. She would shout that the earth should swallow him for ruining a new shirt. But today she ignores the tear and looks at Rasul instead. "Stop there, boy." Rasul stops. "Your nephew is a troublemaker," he says quietly. "My father called him, so I came. But he fought me. Yesterday he caught a kolkhoz rooster with a trap." Sheker glares coldly. "That is none of your business," she snaps.

Sheker's Fury Sheker glares at Rasul, hands on her hips. "If your father were dead too, you'd steal not a rooster but a sheep," she snaps. "What's strange about that? Will you keep shaming an orphan?" Rasul stands stunned. "I didn't shame him," he says. Sheker cuts him off. "If he steals, who will repay the owner? Does he have a father to bring it back?" "Thief!" Rasul blurts. "I'll tell!" "You'll tell?" Sheker roars, threatening him. Fear flashes across the boy's face. He turns and runs. Sheker grabs whatever lies in her hand and chases after him. "I'll tear your liver out!" she screams across the dusty road.

Rasul Comes Home Crying Rasul comes home in tears. His grandmother, Saaragul, listens to the story and grows upset. Raimjan looks at his son and sighs. "You are already a big boy. Do you cry over this? Maybe you started it?" Rasul shakes his head. "I only said Father wanted him to come. He hit me first. His aunt even threw a stone." Saaragul's anger rises. "That woman frightened the child. I should go and teach her a lesson." Rasul's mother, Shirin, grows angry too. But Raimjan calms them. "Let it be. Boys fight and make peace. Why quarrel with Sheker over nothing?"

The Slingshot Koko sees Raimjan and grows afraid. Yet he slips a stone into his slingshot and leans against the corner of the house. If he hits me for his son, I'll hit him back, he thinks. Raimjan approaches calmly. "How are you, Mr. Koko? Is your aunt home?" "No," Koko says. "She's somewhere in the village." "Come, let's talk," Raimjan says gently. "You'll hit me," Koko answers. "Wait," Raimjan says. But the slingshot snaps, stone striking Raimjan. Koko even throws another. Raimjan pauses, surprised, and then smiles softly. "Come here, my boy. Your father was my friend." Koko hesitates. Did he really know my father?

At Raimjan's Table Raimjan steps closer with a father's kindness and strokes the boy's head. Koko jerks away like a wild creature. "Come to our house," Raimjan says. "Sheker will beat me," Koko murmurs. "I'll answer for it," Raimjan replies, leading him home. The house is neat: rugs, bedding, a round table laid for lunch. Koko sits silent. A bowl of hot pilaf arrives. At first he hesitates, then tastes it and begins eating greedily, not looking at anyone. Rasul starts to speak, but Raimjan stops him. "Poor child, he's hungry," Saaragul sighs. Afterward they give him hot tea and sugar. Koko sweats, wiping his face with a clean towel Rasul offers. Soon it turns black. "You're all soot," Rasul laughs.

Memory of His Parents Raimjan laughs gently and tells Rasul, "If Koko washes, he'll turn into a fine, bright boy." It is only a joke. But Koko stiffens. He almost throws the towel at Rasul and walks out, yet Raimjan's warm voice stops him. Suddenly he remembers his mother, how she used to cook for him, calling him softly. A heaviness rises in his chest. What kind of man was my father? He wonders. If he were alive, he would

beat Choro for mocking me as an orphan. No one would dare shame me like that. Koko lowers his eyes and sits quietly, lost in those thoughts.

A Quiet Tear Koko looks at Rasul. The boy sits beside his mother and grandmother, safe between them. His clothes are clean. Koko glances at himself, his shirt torn, his body dirty. A heaviness sinks into his chest. Shame tightens his throat. Suddenly he wants to cry. His eyes fill before he can stop them. Raimjan notices. Gently he wipes the tears from Koko's face. "Come now," he says softly. "You're a big boy. Don't cry." But Koko lowers his head. The warmth of this house only makes his loneliness deeper, and the tears keep slipping down his dusty cheeks.

Warmth for an Orphan Saaragul Ene thinks how well Sheker could care for this boy left by her brother. Koko's sorrow overflows; he cries openly, wailing into the quiet house. Every heart in the home aches for the orphan's pain. Raimjan, as a teacher, understands. Now is not the time for talk of theft, words would only deepen the hurt. He knows the boy needs warmth, gentle guidance, and kind counsel. Rasul fetches a clean towel to smooth Koko's hair. When Raimjan tells how Koko's father fought and died in the war, Saaragul weeps, feeling the weight of their shared loss.

A Thought of Shelter Raimjan looks at the family and says quietly, "What if we take this boy in?" Saaragul sighs. "Raising an orphan is not easy." Shirin, Raimjan's wife, answers lightly, "Let's hear what the boy himself says." "Rasul!" Raimjan calls. Rasul runs in. "Where is Koko? Did you quarrel again?" "No," Rasul says. "I only told him we should wash his head. I said he would look clean. He cursed and ran away." Raimjan's face tightens with concern. "Go," he says quickly. "Find him at once. Bring him back."

Under the Green Grass Koko walks barefoot where the grass has been trampled to dust. Then he sits on a patch of fresh green grass and looks toward Rasul's house from afar. He hears the thin buzzing of a bee. Maybe there is a hive nearby. One bee lands on his knee; quickly he claps and catches it in his hand. For the first time in many days, his stomach is full, and sleep softly presses on his eyes. Even when I hit Rasul, he thinks, his parents said nothing. Raimjan is real friend of my father. They fed me. They gave me tea with sugar. "Raimjan is a good man," Koko murmurs. "My parents were good too." Just then Rasul is approaching. But Koko does not see him.

Dreams in the Dark Rasul does not notice Koko. He runs to Koko's house and quietly looks through a hole in the window. The room is dark like a cave. A thin strip of light falls on a man sitting in the back, he is Choro. Choro drinks bozo and boasts loudly. Sheker listens with bright, eager eyes. "I'll get a job in the forestry," he says. "I'll have a salary. Sheker, you'll be my wife. Your orphan will work too, he'll gather berries." He laughs. "We'll go to Uzbekistan, we'll herd sheep," he says. "We'll sell wool, milk, and dairy. You'll live like a real lady. Koko will herd the sheep for us." He laughs loudly. "We'll sell the fat sheep and replace them with thin ones. No need to be too honest. We'll grow rich." Rasul slips away silently, afraid to ask about Koko.

At the Reed Fields Rasul goes to the reed fields. The place is empty, and he feels scared. Suddenly he sees a small oven made of stones. There is half-burnt wood inside it. Nearby lie chicken feet and sticks that were used for barbecue. Rasul carefully approaches the place. He picks up one of the sticks and imagines how the rooster's meat is roasted on it. But Koko is nowhere to be found. Then Rasul notices Koko at the edge of the irrigation ditch. "I am looking for you," Rasul says. "My father asks me to find you." Why does your father keep bothering me?" Koko asks. "My father loves you," Rasul replies. "Come on, let's go. We will eat. "Will there be meat?" Koko asks. Rasul looks closely at Koko's face. It is swollen and bitten by a bear. "Let's play," Koko says. They begin to play the sword game. After a while they see Raimjan coming toward them. He takes Koko and brings him home.

Sheker Comes for Koko On the third day, Sheker comes to Raimjan's house. She looks neglected and tired. Standing at the door, she asks harshly, "Is that damned Koko here? He only wants food." She curses Koko again and again. When Rasul sees Sheker, he becomes frightened and runs away. Raimjan, however, speaks to her calmly and in a friendly voice. Sheker says she has come to take Koko back. Raimjan answers gently, "Let Koko stay with us." "Why?" Sheker snaps. "I will never give Koko away." Raimjan replies, "You do not take care of him. You keep him at home doing housework, and he does not

attend school. The boy should go to school. His life must be guided onto the right path.” Sheker becomes furious. “He is my nephew! Why should I leave him with other people? I will take him.”

Sheker’s Rage Sheker screams and tries to push her way into the house. “Koko! I will kill you. Come out!” she shouts. Saaragul stands in front of her and says calmly, “He is like our own child.” At that moment Sheker sees Koko. The boy looks completely different. Only three days ago he was dirty and neglected, almost disgusting to look at. Now he is neat and clean. He wears a white shirt, a nice white hat, black pants, and leather shoes. His hands, once dirty and covered with wounds, are now washed clean, and his nails are neatly trimmed.

Sheker is Furious Sheker stares at him in anger. “Take those clothes off! Your father did not die for you to wear such clothes!” Koko looks at her as if he is seeing her for the first time. His face is dull and indifferent. Without saying a word, he slowly turns away. “Why are you silent?” Sheker screams. “I took care of you! My bread and salt will curse you. Come with me!” Saaragul replies firmly, “Why are you so cruel to him? If he is your nephew, why did you neglect the child?”

Sheker’s Confrontation Sheker shouts at Raimjan. “What kind of teacher are you? Why keep the boy here? Tell him to come live with me! You’re a worthless teacher. I could make a teacher like you out of reeds!” Saaragul fumes at Sheker’s harsh words. Sheker sneers, “Your husbands divorced you because of your character!” “No, mom, don’t interfere,” Raimjan says calmly. “Sheker, stop. I talked to the boy. If you didn’t want to care for him, you should have sent him to an orphanage. You spoil him and make him a thief.” Sheker accuses, “You want his government money!” “I never think of it,” Raimjan replies. “His father was a good man. The child should be raised well. Let the money stay at the government. Sheker must work herself.”

Koko’s Defiance Sheker storms forward, trembling with rage. “Kill me! Kill me!” she screams, wild and chaotic. Koko crouches by the door, heart pounding, unsure whether to intervene. Sheker lunges at Raimjan. He holds her back, firm and calm. “Go home now,” he says. “You are a woman, and we are fellow villagers. Conflict is not good at all. Go. Complain if you must, anywhere you want.” Koko shouts, furious: “I won’t go! Didn’t I say I won’t go? I won’t!” “You don’t feed me! You slap me, you beat me, and you make me stay home instead of school!” His voice cracks, but he remains defiant: “I won’t go!” Over and over, he repeats it, small but unbroken, standing against her fury.

Koko’s Resolution Choro stands by the house. “Why are you keeping someone else’s child? Let him go!” he demands. Raimjan’s voice is firm: “That is none of your business.” He quarrels with Choro, accusing him of laziness and dishonesty. Raimjan stays calm, and Choro hesitates. “Who are you?” he snaps. Tashtanbek arrives. Raimjan explains the orphaned boy’s situation. At first, Tashtanbek thinks Raimjan is taking advantage of Koko, siding with his son. But seeing the truth, he nods: “Never abandon an orphan. It is very good that you will adopt Koko. Thank you.” Saaragul embraces Rasul and Koko: “May your lives be long; now you are siblings.” Shirin calls Koko close: “You are my son now.” Koko lays his head against her chest, finally safe.

CHARACTER ANALYSIS

Koko

Koko is an orphan boy, left without parents due to war and illness. Under his aunt Sheker’s care, he experiences neglect, harsh discipline, and deprivation, which forces him to navigate survival and hardship from a young age. Despite these challenges, he shows resilience, courage, and determination. Koko is sensitive, observant, and capable of forming friendships, particularly with Rasul, which brings him comfort. His defiance against Sheker’s cruelty demonstrates a strong sense of self and moral awareness. Ultimately, Koko’s character reflects the struggle of childhood vulnerability, the longing for family, and the pursuit of dignity and care.

Resilient Koko demonstrates remarkable resilience throughout the story. Despite losing both parents, his father to war and his mother to illness, he survives under harsh conditions. He endures neglect, hunger, and physical punishment from his aunt Sheker, yet continues to seek comfort, friendship, and moments of joy. His ability to withstand adversity shows an inner strength beyond his years. Koko protests when people mock or laugh at him, standing up to Choro when he tries to pinch him for fun and striking him with a rubber shoe. He defends himself when Sheker attempts to take him back from Raimjan's house. Even though he is neglected, Koko maintains dignity when others try to harm or humiliate him. His resilience combines courage, self-respect, and the capacity to endure suffering without losing his sense of self.

Sensitive Koko is deeply sensitive and aware of the emotions and intentions of those around him. He notices fear, anger, and kindness, and his reactions reflect both his vulnerability and his care for others. He feels hurt when mocked or mistreated, yet he also senses when someone shows him respect or affection. Koko responds to gestures of kindness from Rasul, Raimjan, and Shirin with trust and openness, seeking comfort and connection. His sensitivity allows him to form meaningful relationships and shows his emotional depth, even while living in neglect and hardship.

Uncultured Koko is uneducated and lacks knowledge of proper manners. He does not know how to treat people according to social expectations, and he struggles with polite speech, especially the respectful forms used for elders, which are very important in Kyrgyz culture. His behavior can appear rude or impolite, not from malice but from ignorance and the neglect he has suffered. Koko's uncultured manners highlight the effects of his upbringing and show how isolation and lack of guidance shape his social understanding. Over time, his exposure to kind and patient adults begins to teach him proper conduct.

Naughty Koko is disobedient and rebellious. He kills and roasts a rooster in the reed fields and fights harshly with friends when angered or provoked. His defiance and bold actions stem from neglect and the absence of kindness, not from cruelty. Koko does not yet understand social rules or respectful behavior because he has not experienced consistent care or guidance. His naughtiness reflects a natural response to hardship, a way to assert himself in a world that has ignored him, and a form of survival in the face of hunger, punishment, and emotional neglect.

Kind Koko shows kindness despite his hardships. He cares for friends like Rasul, shares small joys, and shows empathy toward others. He comforts those in distress and responds to gentle gestures with trust and warmth. Even when neglected or punished, Koko is capable of compassion, patience, and attachment. His kindness reflects his inner humanity and the potential for emotional growth, showing that despite his difficult upbringing, he is capable of love, loyalty, and caring relationships.

Parallels: *between Koko, the Orphan and The Adventures of Tom Sawyer by Mark Twain*

Both *Koko, the Orphan* by Tologon Kasymbek and *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer* by Mark Twain explore childhood as a time of play, ingenuity, and moral development, showing how boys navigate the world largely through experience rather than formal instruction. Despite differences in cultural and historical context, the two stories share several key parallels:

Mischief and Playful Ingenuity Koko devises the "legged fish" trick, showing creativity and resourcefulness to entertain himself and others. Tom Sawyer famously invents clever games, tricks, and schemes, such as persuading other boys to whitewash the fence for him. Both boys demonstrate problem-solving and cunning outside formal adult guidance, using imagination to engage with their surroundings.

Lack of Supervision or Neglect Koko is neglected by his aunt Sheker and denied schooling, leaving him free to navigate the world with minimal adult guidance. Tom experiences limited supervision from adults, particularly during his adventures away from home, allowing his mischievous nature to flourish. In both cases, the absence of structured oversight contributes to their independence and inventive thinking.

Learning through Experience Koko learns practical skills, observation, and social behavior through play and real-life interactions rather than school. Tom learns lessons about responsibility, morality, and

friendship through his adventures, often discovering consequences through trial and error. Both characters demonstrate that experiential learning can be as powerful as formal education.

Rebellion against Authority Koko resists Sheker's cruelty and refuses to obey her entirely, standing up for himself when he can. Tom frequently challenges adult authority, including schoolteachers, Aunt Polly, and other town figures, often humorously but with defiance. Their rebellion reflects a natural desire for autonomy and tests the limits of social constraints.

Cultural Context Differences Koko's story is set in rural Kyrgyzstan in the 1960s, with themes of orphanhood, exploitation, and survival, reflecting social and cultural pressures of that time. Tom Sawyer is set in 19th-century Missouri, with a focus on childhood adventure, social norms, and community morality in a more stable household environment. These contexts shape their experiences differently, yet both narratives highlight the universal aspects of childhood: curiosity, resilience, and imagination.

Sheker

Sheker is a controlling, harsh, and selfish woman. She does not work, selling bozo to local people, and exploits Koko to fetch water, help make bozo, and filter grain for it. She is possessive, seeing Koko as her property rather than a child in need, and she is also interested in benefiting from him, aiming to take his government money for herself. She enforces her will through threats, anger, and intimidation, resisting guidance and advice. Her rigidity and cruelty prevent Koko from experiencing care, love, or proper upbringing, revealing her obsession with control and personal gain.

Cruel Sheker treats Koko with harshness and neglect, punishing him physically and humiliating him verbally. She refuses to provide proper food, beats him, and yells at him for minor missteps. Even when Raimjan tries to care for Koko or intervene, she continues her harsh treatment. Her cruelty extends beyond physical punishment: she imposes fear, controls his movements, and emotionally intimidates him. Sheker frequently uses harsh and curse words toward Koko, scolding him with insults and threats. Her cruelty is intensified by her obsession with authority, as she insists Koko obey her entirely, refusing to allow him any freedom or protection from her wrath.

Manipulative Sheker enforces her will through threats, anger, and intimidation. She argues aggressively with Raimjan and anyone who challenges her authority, attempting to dominate household decisions. She seeks to benefit personally from Koko, aiming to take his government allowance for herself. She manipulates situations to maintain control, refusing to allow adoption or school attendance. She twists events to make herself appear right and Koko dependent, using fear, anger, and harsh words to bend others to her will. Even Choro's attention or Raimjan's reasoning cannot easily sway her. Her manipulation is intertwined with cruelty and possessiveness, consistently suppressing Koko's independence, undermining his opportunities for growth, and keeping him isolated and obedient.

Exploitive Sheker exploits Koko for labor and personal gain. She forces him to fetch water, assist with making bozo, and filter grain, treating him as a worker rather than a child. She also seeks to profit from him indirectly, aiming to take his government allowance. Her exploitation is reinforced by cruelty and manipulation, as she combines physical punishment, threats, and strict control to extract obedience and labor. Koko is always hungry, his clothes are old and dirty, his hands are infected with fungal infections from constant exposure to dirt, and he never has shoes. His vulnerability allows her to enforce this exploitation, showing how her selfish motives and obsession with control completely overshadow any sense of care or responsibility for his well-being.

Raimjan

Raimjan is a local teacher and the father of Rasul. He takes an active role in guiding and protecting Koko, the orphaned boy, ensuring his safety, education, and proper upbringing. He understands basic human rights and the legal aspects of child-rearing, is knowledgeable about child psychology, and recognizes that poor upbringing can produce difficult and unfortunate individuals. Seeing Koko's vulnerability and potential,

Raimjan decides to adopt him, taking responsibility for his future and committing to raising him with care, guidance, and opportunity.

Caring Raimjan shows genuine concern for Koko's well-being. He provides food, comfort, and attention, ensuring the boy is not left hungry or mistreated. He protects Koko from Sheker's harsh punishments and guides him toward proper behavior. When Koko is scared, neglected, or alone, Raimjan offers reassurance and support, treating him as a child in need rather than a servant. He also nurtures Rasul, balancing his care between his own son and Koko, showing that his concern extends to all children under his supervision.

Patient Raimjan demonstrates remarkable patience throughout conflicts with Sheker, Choro, and even Koko when he resists guidance. He remains calm when Sheker shouts, threatens, or tries to take Koko away, never resorting to anger or violence. He carefully explains his reasoning, negotiates solutions, and waits for others to understand his perspective. Raimjan also listens attentively to Koko's fears and frustrations, allowing the boy to express himself while gradually guiding him toward safety, education, and discipline.

Principled Raimjan consistently acts with integrity. He refuses to exploit Koko or take advantage of any government support meant for the boy. He insists that Koko's upbringing focus on education, moral development, and protection, not convenience or profit. He stands for fairness and justice, advocating for the orphan despite resistance from Sheker and other adults. Raimjan demonstrates that principles matter more than authority or social pressure, shaping Koko's life for the better and providing a model of ethical conduct.

THEMES

Orphanhood

The novella explores the challenges faced by Koko, an orphan who loses both parents. His vulnerability exposes him to neglect, exploitation, and cruelty, highlighting the precarious situation of children without parental protection. In Kyrgyz culture prior to the Soviet era, orphanages did not exist, because the clan system ensured that children were cared for by relatives. Abusing an orphan was considered a grave sin, morally unacceptable, and unforgivable. However, some literary works depict the harsh treatment of orphans, showing that cruelty could still occur. In Koko's case, Sheker mistreats him despite the moral and social expectations. Even during Soviet times, when social workers could intervene, take him to an orphanage, or sue for cruelty, remote villages often remained beyond such oversight, leaving Koko's suffering largely unseen.

Koko's vulnerability is central to the story. Orphaned and without parental protection, he depends entirely on the adults around him for survival, care, and guidance. His physical weakness, hunger, and lack of proper clothing make him an easy target for exploitation and abuse, especially by Sheker, who uses his helplessness for labor and personal gain. His vulnerability is not only physical but emotional; he struggles with fear, loneliness, and the need for affection.

Illustrative moment: Koko stands small and trembling. Sheker glares at him, eyes sharp with hate. He does nothing. His thin body leans under the weight of chores. He looks awful, dirty, sickly, his long hair matted. His hands, up to the elbows, are raw and wounded, streaked with dirt and perhaps infection. He murmurs as he scrubs, murmurs with the rag, feeling guilt for nothing. Every motion worries him, what will Sheker say? His eyes dart toward her, but she does not notice. The orphan boy works in silence, abused for his weakness, unseen except by his own weary heart.

Education / Upbringing

The novella highlights the consequences of poor upbringing and lack of education. Koko, neglected by his aunt Sheker, never attends school and remains largely illiterate. His ignorance of social norms, politeness toward elders, and moral rules, such as understanding that stealing is wrong, stems from this absence of guidance. Raimjan, a local teacher, recognizes that proper upbringing requires both education and ethical instruction. He intervenes to teach Koko appropriate behavior, provide care, and guide him toward a safer,

more structured life. The contrast between Sheker's cruelty and Raimjan's nurturing shows how environment and mentorship shape a child's character. Koko's vulnerability and lack of schooling underscore the critical importance of education not only for knowledge but also for moral development and social integration.

In modern Kyrgyzstan, cases of children not attending school are extremely rare, as the social system strives to educate all children. However, in the 1960s, illiterate orphan children like Koko often could not attend school due to neglect, poverty, or remote living conditions. Even outside formal schooling, Koko shows a spark of ingenuity and learning through play. One day, he sits quietly, anger simmering at Choro and furious over Sheker's beatings, whispering to himself: "Stay still, I'll never let you go when you grow up." Trying to soothe his own heart, he is distracted as children return from school and admires them. Rasul approaches, and Koko holds up a string tied around his hand, a single kernel of corn dangling at the end. "What is this?" Rasul asks. Koko grins, proud: "A little dumpling, a legged fish will be caught," imagining the kernel as clever bait. This moment shows that even without formal education, Koko uses observation, creativity, and imagination to learn and engage with the world, highlighting the role of informal learning in a child's development.

Illustrative moment: Koko, the orphan, was born in his mother's arms and left behind when his father went to war. His father died in battle, and his mother cared for him tenderly, sending him to school and nurturing him, but four years ago illness took her too. Alone, the boy, once cherished, came into the hands of his father's sister, Sheker. One day a teacher arrived to take him to the orphanage, but Sheker shouted and refused, clinging to him. "Koko is not an orphan! My husband and I will care for him," she insisted, keeping the boy under her strict watch. After the teacher left, Sheker spoke sharply to Koko about the orphanage, warning that children raised there turn to theft. "If anyone comes again to send you away, say you will not go," she instructed. Sheker dismissed school as offering little benefit, insisting that what mattered most was work at home. She told him to focus on chores, tending the household, and learning practical life skills. Sheker had never borne a child herself, and perhaps because of this or her naturally harsh temperament she divorced her third husband that summer, leaving her bitterness to shape Koko's upbringing.

Family / Belonging

The story explores what makes a family: love, care, and guidance rather than mere blood ties. Koko's adoption by Raimjan symbolizes hope, belonging, and the possibility of a better future. Raimjan represents the ideal of family through nurturing, protection, and guidance. He provides Koko with warmth, food, education, and moral direction. Raimjan understands the importance of proper upbringing, knowing that a child's environment shapes character and future. He treats Koko with patience and respect, giving him a sense of security that he lacked with Sheker. In contrast, Sheker exemplifies a distorted notion of family. Though she is Koko's blood relative, she prioritizes control, personal benefit, and strict authority. She exploits Koko, forcing him to work, denying him schooling, and attempting to take his government support. Her cruelty and possessiveness deny Koko a sense of belonging and love. Through this contrast, the novella emphasizes that true family arises from care, ethical guidance, and emotional support, not merely blood relations. Adoption, as shown through Raimjan, becomes a means of providing protection, education, and hope for vulnerable children.

Illustrative moment: On the third day, Sheker comes to Raimjan's house. "Koko! I will kill you. Come out!" she shouts. Saargul stands in front of her and says calmly, "He is like our own child." At that moment Sheker sees Koko. The boy looks completely different. Only three days ago he was dirty and neglected, almost disgusting to look at. Now he is neat and clean. He wears a white shirt, a nice white hat, black pants, and leather shoes. His hands, once dirty and covered with wounds, are now washed clean, and his nails are neatly trimmed.