

HUMANITIES INSTITUTE
Feruza Shermatova-Omerani, Ph.D.

KOKOTOY (1980) *Tugolbay Sydykbekov (1912–1997)*

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OVERVIEW

Author

Tugolbay Sydykbekov (1912–1997) was a Kyrgyz writer born in Keng-Suu, in present-day Issyk-Kul Region. Because his official birth date was unknown, he later chose May 14 as his birthday through a family tradition involving his daughter selecting a date at random.

He studied at the Agricultural Technical School in Frunze (1928–1931) and later at the Central Asian Veterinary Institute in Ashgabat, the capital of Turkmenistan. He worked at the newspaper *Leninchil Jash* (1931–1936), served as a consultant for the Union of Writers of Kyrgyzstan (1937–1947), and worked as an editor at *Kyrgyz mambas* publishing house (1949–1951).

In the Soviet period, he was labeled a “nationalist writer,” but his earlier Stalin Prize recognition limited political repression against him. He supported objective study of Kyrgyz history, promoted the development of the Kyrgyz language, and openly criticized official shortcomings, leading some scholars to describe him as a Soviet-era Kyrgyz dissident.

Sydykbekov remained a major figure in Kyrgyz literature for nearly seventy years and died in Bishkek on July 19, 1997.

Literary career

He began his literary career as a poet. His first poem, *Who Are These People? (Bular Kimder?)*, was published in the newspaper *Leninchil Jash* on May 1, 1930. Soon afterward, he wrote *The Old Komuz Player (Chal Komuzchu)*, which appeared in the magazine *Chabuul*. His first poetry collection, *Struggle (Kurosh)*, was published in 1933, followed by *Heroes (Baatylar)*, 1936) and *Poet-Nightingale (Akyn-Bulbul)*, 1938). During this period, he also began working actively in prose.

Like many writers of his generation, Sydykbekov's early works reflected social changes in Kyrgyz society, including the new socialist system, labor, and changing social relations.

In 1937–1938, his novel *Keng-Suu (Keng-Suu)* was published in two volumes, becoming one of the first novels in Kyrgyz literature. In the 1950s, he revised it and republished it as *Among the Mountains (Too Arasynda)*, with volumes appearing in 1955 and 1958.

During this period, he also wrote *Poet-Nightingale (Akyn-Bulbul)*, 1938), the essay *Ala-Toodon Jettoo* (1939), the poem *News from the Night Watchman (Tun Jarchysynan Kabar)*, 1939), and the verse tale *The Greedy Father (Ach Koz Ata)*, 1940).

His collection of stories *During the War Days* (*Sogush Kundorundo*, 1943) reflects wartime unity and patriotism during World War II.

Between 1938 and 1940, he wrote the novel *Temir* (*Temir*), published in 1946, depicting the establishment of Soviet power in southern Kyrgyzstan.

His novel *People of Our Time* (*Bizdin Zamandyn Kishileri*, 1948) marked a major stage in his career. It was first published in *Sovetskii Kyrgyzstan* (*Ala-Too*) and later in Moscow in Russian. In 1949, it received the Stalin Prize, making him one of the leading Kyrgyz writers.

After the war, he contributed to children's literature with *Mountain Children* (*Too Baldary*, 1953). Later, after *Among the Mountains*, he wrote the major novel *Women* (*Zayiptar*). Its first part, *Batiyna*, was published in 1962, and the complete version, including *Mountain Pass* (*Ashuu*), appeared in 1966.

His later works include *Friends* (*Kurbular*) and *Confession* (*Syr Achuu*, 1977), focusing on youth, and *Yimanbay's Character* (*Yimanbay Peyili*, 1980), which continues a character from *Among the Mountains* (*Too Arasynda*).

In his autobiographical works *The Road* (*Jol*, 1982) and *Over the Mountain Passes* (*Bel-Beleste*, 1996), he reflects on his life and experiences.

Novella

The novella *Kokotoy* was first published in 1980 and later featured in the 1988 collection *Kulku jana Omur: Povestter, angemeler* (*Laughter and Life: Novellas, Stories*), a 623-page volume published by Adabiyat. This collection examines the lives of two iconic Kyrgyz folk figures: the comedian Jooshbay and the celebrated orator (*chechen*) Kokotoy (1849–1916). Kokotoy is honored with the title "Chechen," a Kyrgyz term referring to a master orator or folk rhetorician—a traditional role for individuals who used razor-sharp wit, logic, and deep cultural knowledge to resolve disputes and challenge injustice. This essay is based on the novella presented in the audiobook.

Background

Kokotoy Chechen (1849–1916) was a prominent Kyrgyz orator characterized by his intellectual sharpness and social courage. His legacy was preserved through the extensive documentation of Aktan Tynybekov, who organized the oral histories of his life and rhetoric.

Born into an impoverished family of the Tynymseyit tribe in Naryn, Kokotoy rose from a background of manual labor to become a master of oral tradition and history. He was renowned for his remarkable memory and commanding presence, but his primary significance lies in his role as a social critic.

Kokotoy utilized his eloquence to challenge the corruption of the ruling elite, the greed of the wealthy, and the hypocrisy of religious and administrative officials.

By advocating for the dignity of the poor, he established himself as a central figure in Kyrgyz oratory, remembered for his unwavering commitment to justice and his mastery of the Kyrgyz language.

MAIN CHARACTERS

Kokotoy - A brilliant orator who rose from poverty to defend the poor and challenge the elite.

Tash Bolush and *Starshina* - Corrupt officials who exploited poor families through forced labor

Baygazy - An arrogant noble whose obsession with wealth was humbled by Kokotoy's courage.

The "False Saint" - A religious fraud exposed by Kokotoy for exploiting superstition for personal gain.

Botokan Bay and *Sereng Manap* - Elite tribal leaders often outwitted and publicly shamed by

Sultan - A greedy father forced by Kokotoy to honor his daughter's marriage agreement with fairness.

Uzun - A fugitive assisted by Kokotoy who later learned a vital lesson in loyalty and gratitude.

Turdubek and *Takyrbash Bolush* - Cruel, greedy rulers

SYNOPSIS

This narrative chronicles the life of Kokotoy, a resilient Kyrgyz figure who rose from a poor herder to a respected moral authority during the late Tsarist period. His journey begins with forced labor on the grueling "Bloody Roads," where he used sharp wit to survive oppression and eventually escaped by reclaiming justice from corrupt leaders.

Throughout his life, Kokotoy became known for his fearless confrontation of power. He famously humbled the arrogant nobleman Baygazy, exposed a fraudulent "saint" who exploited superstitious villagers, and mediated complex tribal disputes.

Kokotoy's character is defined by a unique blend of humor, intelligence, and deep empathy for the marginalized. Whether defending the honor of the tribe against mockery or sacrificing his own wealth to resolve a marriage dispute for a struggling family, he consistently challenged the exploitative nature of the nomadic elite.

He advocated for tribal unity and social responsibility, reminding the wealthy of their duties to the poor. His transition from a "slave" herder to a member of the ruling clans symbolizes a triumph of merit and integrity over inherited status.

His life reached a tragic conclusion during the 1916 Uprising, a period of horrific massacres when the Kyrgyz people were forced to flee toward China to escape Tsarist forces. Weakened by illness during this exodus (the *Urkun*), Kokotoy passed away expressing deep regret that he could no longer defend his people. He remains a powerful symbol of resilience, integrity, and the voice of the common person against tyranny.

SCENES

Kokotoy's Childhood Years and Early Hardships

The Poor Boys Sent to Road Construction Kokotoy was one of the herders employed by a wealthy nomadic nobleman. Although only fifteen years old, he was known for his intelligence, wit, and confidence. During the late Tsarist period, the *starshina*, the administrative head responsible for three hundred households, gathered young men to build a new road. In reality, the sons of poor families were usually forced into this labor, while wealthier households often avoided such obligations. Kokotoy was among those selected. The boys carried only simple provisions prepared by their families, including cream, roasted wheat, and other modest foods for the difficult work ahead.

Kokotoy's Bold Answer and the Starshina's Revenge When the *starshina* saw Kokotoy riding an ox, he ordered the boy to walk instead. Kokotoy answered with a sharp and humorous remark that caused the other young workers to burst into laughter. Embarrassed by the public ridicule, the *starshina* decided to take revenge. He transferred the boys to the supervision of Tash Bolush, another local leader, and ordered that they work for three months. However, he singled out Kokotoy, insisting that the boy should labor day and night. The punishment was meant to break Kokotoy's spirit, but it also revealed the injustice of local authority under Tsarist rule.

Forced Labor on the Road Among those gathered for road construction were elderly men, teenagers aged fifteen or sixteen, and young adults. Kokotoy was one of the teenage boys, working as a shepherd and servant for wealthy families. The laborers endured hunger and exhaustion while performing difficult manual work. They possessed only simple mattock-like tools and had no machinery to assist them. Much of their work involved digging the earth and clearing stones from the future roadway by hand. Despite the hardship, they were promised that the assignment would last only one month before they could return to their families.

The Origin of the "Bloody Road" Tash Bolush assured the workers that they would be released after a month, yet the conditions were severe. Food was scarce, and laborers received inadequate provisions despite the demanding physical work. Many suffered from hunger, extreme heat, and illness, and some lost their lives during the project. According to local accounts, those who died were buried near or beneath the roads they had helped construct. For this reason, some Kyrgyz people referred to highways as

kan jol—"bloody roads"—believing that such routes were built through the sweat, suffering, and sacrifice of ordinary people.

Kokotoy's Humor amid Hardship Despite the difficult circumstances, Kokotoy continued to entertain the laborers with his wit and jokes. His humor brought moments of relief to exhausted workers, who thanked him for lifting their spirits during a time of hardship. After one month, most of the laborers were allowed to return home, but Kokotoy was required to remain behind. Even then, he refused to lose his cheerful outlook. Laughing at his own misfortune, he joked that Tash Bolush must have grown fond of him and intended to give him his daughter in marriage. Dressed in torn and worn-out clothes, Kokotoy faced adversity with resilience and humor.

Kokotoy's Fearless Criticism of Tash Bolush Kokotoy openly criticized the greed and cruelty of Tash Bolush, despite warnings from the other laborers to remain silent. Unafraid of punishment, he joked that the beatings he received would make his body fireproof in the afterlife. He added that the angels had already recorded every blow as a cleansing of his sins. His humorous yet daring remarks spread among the workers, exposing the injustice they suffered. Eventually, Tash Bolush reconsidered the harsh conditions and decided to send for meat and drinks to feed the exhausted laborers.

Kokotoy's Clever Escape and Compensation While the warrior rested, Kokotoy seized the opportunity to act. Mounting the warrior's horse and taking along the mare he had been riding, he prepared to return home with both animals. He declared that the stallion compensated for the ox that Tash Bolush had unjustly sold, while the mare served as payment for the beatings he had endured. The desperate warrior begged him to leave at least one horse behind. Kokotoy replied that he had survived hunger and hardship on the road, and the warrior could survive the walk back to the village.

Kokotoy Pleads for His Freedom Tash Bolush dispatched one of his warriors to the village to bring meat and drinks for the laborers, ordering Kokotoy to accompany him on the journey. Previously, Kokotoy had attempted to escape from forced labor, but Tash Bolush had punished him by confiscating and selling his ox. Along the way, Kokotoy appealed to the warrior for mercy. He explained that he had already worked for two months, while his poor parents struggled to survive and his siblings served as servants in wealthy households. Despite Kokotoy's sincere plea and difficult circumstances, the warrior refused to grant him freedom.

Kokotoy's Defiant Escape and Reclaimed Justice When the warrior refused to release Kokotoy, the boy waited until the man rested. Seizing the moment, he mounted the warrior's horse and also took the mare he had been riding. He rode away with both animals, declaring that the stallion would replace his ox, which Tash Bolush had sold, while the mare would compensate for the beatings he had suffered. The shocked warrior begged him to leave at least one horse behind. Kokotoy replied calmly that he had survived road-building while starving, so the warrior could also walk back without harm.

Kokotoy's Return Kokotoy later sold the mare and used the money to buy clothes for himself. He then traveled to the Tong region, where he stayed with his sister for almost a year. When he eventually returned to his village, he discovered that Tash Bolush had punished his family by taking all of his father's cattle as compensation for the two horses Kokotoy had taken earlier. Facing this loss, Kokotoy began working again as a horse herder for another wealthy man. Over time, he matured, becoming a more independent, resilient, and strong young man shaped by hardship.

Kokotoy's Moral Authority and Conflict Resolution with Baygazy

Kokotoy as a Skilled and Independent Herder Kokotoy was known as an excellent horseman who could even sleep while riding. Although he served as a herder for Baygazy, he was not submissive and often defended his rights, including his wages and fair treatment. He was highly skilled in managing livestock; the horses under his care were always fat, strong, and healthy. Kokotoy was also famous for his sharp wit and humorous speech, which made people laugh. His intelligence and confidence set him apart from other herders, earning both respect and attention from those around him.

Kokotoy's Compassion for the Old Man One day, an old man arrived at the camp, exhausted and hungry. While others in the camp questioned him and spoke carelessly, Kokotoy immediately intervened. He rebuked the herders for their behavior and ordered them to provide food for both the old man and his tired horse. The old man then shared his sorrow, explaining that his eldest son had died and that he still had young children depending on him, forcing him to continue working despite his age and hardship. Moved by his situation, Kokotoy gave him one of the horses he was herding. The old man gratefully accepted and expressed deep thanks for Kokotoy's generosity.

The Lost Horse and Baygazy's Anger Later, the old man informed Kokotoy that the horse he had been given had died. In response, he offered his younger but weaker horse along with several goats as compensation. However, Kokotoy refused to take anything immediately, saying he would resolve the matter himself with his master Baygazy and told the old man not to worry. Eventually, Baygazy learned that Kokotoy had given away one of his horses and that it had died. Upon hearing this, Baygazy became extremely angry, seeing the act as a loss and an offense against his property, setting the stage for conflict over Kokotoy's decision.

Kokotoy's Calm Confidence before Baygazy Kokotoy remained calm when people warned him that Baygazy might kill him for his actions. He replied confidently that he herded a thousand horses, so losing one horse meant nothing to him, and that even human life could sometimes be compensated with payment. One day, he personally took a fat foal intended for slaughter and went alone to Baygazy's camp. He arrived without fear, prepared to face him directly.

Confrontation and Accusations from Baygazy Kokotoy greeted Baygazy respectfully, but Baygazy became angry and called him a "*kafir*", disbeliever, telling him not to use Muslim greetings. He demanded to know why Kokotoy had given away his horse, insisting it could have become the best racing horse and was worth more than Kokotoy himself. He complained bitterly that he had lost such a valuable animal. In anger, Baygazy ordered his wife to gather his men so that Kokotoy could be beaten.

Kokotoy's Defense and Baygazy's Softening Kokotoy firmly responded that he had come with a foal for slaughter, yet was being insulted unjustly, and that Baygazy's treatment and words were improper. He stated that if he remained alive, he could breed many horses in the future, and reminded Baygazy that the man who received the horse was his relative. He warned Baygazy not to make a big issue out of a single horse, saying that if he lost two horses, Baygazy would completely lose control in anger. He also offered to bring superior *Argymak* horses from Kashgar city. Realizing that punishing Kokotoy would bring shame and weaken his standing among his people, Baygazy softened. He ordered his wife to serve kumis, and Kokotoy responded by offering kumis from Baygazy's own mares that he had brought from the pastures.

Kokotoy's Decision to Leave for Song-Kol Kokotoy asked Baygazy where the horses should be driven and awaited instructions about the pasture. However, Baygazy ignored him and instead ordered his wife to send Kokotoy quickly to the pasture without proper discussion. Feeling disregarded, Kokotoy went outside and addressed the herders, announcing that they would drive the horses to the Song-Kol area. Baygazy, shocked by this independent decision, immediately invited Kokotoy back into the yurt. Kokotoy explained that since his question had been ignored, he had made the decision himself. He then declared that if this was how he was treated, he would return to his parents and no longer serve as Baygazy's herder.

Baygazy's Submission and Kokotoy's Moral Victory Realizing Kokotoy's determination, Baygazy asked him to return to herding and promised never to speak again about the lost horse. He pleaded for forgiveness and asked Kokotoy not to share their conflict with others. Baygazy also offered to build a new yurt for him and cover all expenses for his marriage, allowing him to get married. He admitted that although no one had ever defeated him before, Kokotoy had overcome him through his words. In the end, Baygazy humbly accepted Kokotoy's superiority in argument and sought reconciliation.

Kokotoy and the False Saint

Herding in Song-Kol and the Journey for Supplies The herders brought the horses to the Song-Köl area, a highland pasture located in the Jumgal region. While staying there, they needed salt and food supplies from Naryn. During this time, people spoke about a so-called saintly man who lived along the route. According to rumors, he could heal wounds and even make women pregnant. Because of fear and superstition, the herders decided that Kokotoy should go alone to bring the supplies from Naryn. Despite uncertainty, Kokotoy set out on the journey through the mountain path.

Encounter with the “Saint” in the Mountains On the way, Kokotoy saw a dark, naked man coming out of a cave. Kokotoy greeted him respectfully, but the man responded by dancing instead of returning the greeting. Kokotoy dismounted and addressed him politely, saying that he had nothing to offer but would return from Naryn with food. He asked the man to let him pass. However, the man continued dancing and did not speak. Kokotoy then challenged him, asking him to prove whether he was truly a saint by making his stallion produce a foal immediately.

Fight, Exposure, and Judgment of the False Saint At Kokotoy’s challenge, the situation escalated into a fight. The man became aggressive, and Kokotoy fought back, eventually overpowering him. Both were exhausted and covered in blood. Kokotoy declared that the man was not a saint but a liar. At that moment, several people arrived, including Sereng Manap (manap is a ruler), and found the two lying on the ground. They asked who they were, and Kokotoy identified himself and exposed the man as a false saint. However, the so-called saint claimed he was only asking for food from Muslims.

Accusation and Kokotoy’s Defense before the Community The man accused Kokotoy of attacking a saint and demanded that he be punished by local authorities. Kokotoy firmly rejected the accusation, insisting that the man was not a saint at all, pointing out that he was naked and incapable of any miraculous acts. He argued that people had been deceived by superstition. The tension rose as the community was forced to decide between belief in the man’s supposed sanctity and Kokotoy’s evidence-based accusation of fraud and deception.

Discovery of the Saint’s Cave When the group reached the cave of the so-called saint, they were surprised to find it resembling a small castle. Inside, there was abundant food, as well as blankets, carpets, and various supplies. The place was far from the image of a holy ascetic life. Kokotoy quietly observed everything and began packing the items. The others questioned him, asking why he was taking the man’s belongings. Kokotoy responded that if the man were truly a saint, he should live among people rather than in isolation with comfort and excess.

Debate over the Saint’s Identity The man asked Kokotoy who he was, and Kokotoy replied that he should ask a saint to identify him. The man accused Kokotoy of insulting a holy figure. Others defended the man, claiming he was a saint because he remained naked even in winter. Kokotoy rejected this explanation, arguing that it was not holiness but excess food and meat from people that gave him strength. He insisted the man was not a saint and mocked the belief that appearance alone proved sanctity.

Exposure of the False Saint and Sereng Manap’s Judgment Kokotoy declared that if the man were truly a saint, he should be taken home and proven through his actions, not appearance. He then left the cave after exposing the situation. The so-called saint admitted that he had been living there for nine months, collecting food and goods from people who had been sent or recommended by others. Sereng Manap, observing the situation, remarked that the herder Kokotoy might be connected to Botokan Bay’s (bay is a rich nomad) household. The incident revealed the man’s deception and reinforced Kokotoy’s reputation for truthfulness.

Complaint against Kokotoy and the Summons Sereng Manap went to Botokan Bay and complained that Kokotoy had beaten the so-called saint in the cave. Hearing this, Botokan Bay became concerned and invited Kokotoy to explain the incident. At the same time, tensions rose as people discussed the event and the identity of the man in the cave. Botokan Bay questioned why Kokotoy had trusted others’ claims and acted independently instead of relying on his authority, especially since Kokotoy was responsible for herding his thousands of horses safely.

Botokan Bay's Reaction and Kokotoy's Rejection Botokan Bay felt ashamed of the situation and dismissed Kokotoy from serious duties, telling him instead to help with kitchen work. His wife also criticized Kokotoy, claiming that by beating a "saint" he might have brought a curse, and told him to leave. Feeling unwelcome, Kokotoy returned to his parents' house. Despite this, Botokan Bay was amused by Kokotoy's bold humor and later invited him again, showing mixed feelings of anger, embarrassment, and appreciation.

Kokotoy's Wit, Sereng Manap's Fear, and the End of the Encounter Kokotoy told Botokan Bay that his wife had scolded him, saying that because he beat the saint, all women in the village might become barren. This statement caused further tension and irony in the situation. Meanwhile, Sereng Manap, fearing that Kokotoy would again mock and shame him with sarcastic remarks, fled from Botokan Bay's yurt. Later, when Kokotoy returned to the Song-Köl pastures, he no longer encountered the so-called saint on the road, as the man had disappeared after being exposed.

The Volost Elections and Administrative Structure Every three years, people voted for *volost* leaders, where a *volost* was an administrative unit under the Tsarist Russian Empire, consisting of approximately three hundred Kyrgyz yurts. The Kyrgyz adapted the Russian term *volost* into their own pronunciation as *bolush*. Elections were rarely peaceful and often involved serious clashes, sometimes escalating into bloody conflicts even during relatively stable periods. In the worst cases, the elections resulted in severe violence. Despite this, elections continued as a formal mechanism of local governance.

Elections and Tribal Competition in the Volost System Elections were approaching, and candidates represented the pride and dignity of their tribes and subtribes. Members of each tribe felt collective responsibility for supporting their representatives. Tribal leaders often humiliated other groups, calling them "slave tribes," while boasting about their own noble or aristocratic origins, which were sometimes even falsely claimed. These rivalries intensified political competition and deepened social divisions among the Kyrgyz communities under the tsarist administrative system.

The Ysyk-Kol Assembly Hosted by the Bugu Tribe Once every two or three years, a major assembly was held in the Ysyk-Kol region, bringing together representatives from two administrative areas. Nobles, rulers, and judges attended, while all expenses were paid by ordinary people under the pretext of resolving important matters. From among the "just and noble" figures, a presidium was elected to lead the proceedings. In this particular instance, the assembly and presidium were hosted by the Bugu tribe, as hosting responsibilities rotated between different tribes in different years.

Tribal Mockery and the Humiliation of the Bugu Tribe The Sarybagysh tribe wanted to mock the Bugu tribe. They insulted the Bugu as a "woman tribe" (*katyn*), saying they could not be elected to the presidium. Baygazy, the noble man from the Sarybagysh tribe, actively participated in mocking and humiliating the Bugu tribe. The Bugu people felt ashamed and deeply humiliated. No one among them was able to make Baygazy stop or remain silent, and the situation continued in front of all the gathered people at the assembly.

Kokotoy's Intervention and Defense of His Tribe At that moment, a man came out and spoke. He said that those who kept claiming they were the tribe chosen by God or the Prophet should stop. He asked whether God had created only them and told them to leave God alone. It was Kokotoy who dared to speak openly. He said that saints did not support only one tribe, and he defended the honor of his own tribe against such arrogance. Kokotoy challenged the idea that divine favor belonged only to one group.

Confrontation between Kokotoy and Baygazy Baygazy turned to Kokotoy angrily and said, "Hey, you slave, who you are?" Kokotoy replied that Baygazy had forgotten him. He reminded him that he had once been Baygazy's herder and had herded his horses honestly. He also said that Baygazy had promised to pay his marriage expenses but had not kept his word. Baygazy responded that no one would recognize him and again called him a slave. Kokotoy answered that Baygazy had indeed forgotten him, even though he had served him faithfully and had also made fun with Baygazy's wife when he was away.

Escalation of Conflict and Kokotoy's Rise After hearing this, Baygazy became furious and said he would kill Kokotoy. He took out his knife. Kokotoy also took out his knife in response. The situation became very tense, and people intervened to stop the argument from turning into a fight. After this event, the major Kyrgyz tribes decided to recognize a new figure like Kokotoy, seeing his courage and speech. Kokotoy was included into the important circle of ruling clans. The people told him that he should no longer continue herding. He became an important figure within his tribe and gained a respected social position.

Kokotoy and the Memorial Feast in the Chuy Valley

The Memorial Feast for Sooronbay in the Chuy Valley There was going to be a memorial feast in the Chuy Valley for a person named Sooronbay. Such memorial feasts were usually organized by wealthy people in honor of deceased men, most often from rich families. In this case, the feast was also prepared by wealthy groups, and it became a major social event where tribes gathered. One man named Tokbay complained that a rich person intended to take his horse for use in the memorial feast, reflecting tensions between ordinary herders and the elite families organizing the event.

Preparation for the Games and Display of Wealth As the tribes gathered, they began preparing for horse races, wrestling, and other traditional competitions. The tribal leaders instructed participants to wear their best clothes and bring the best horses, since honor and prestige were at stake. The feast became a competition of wealth and status, where families tried to demonstrate their superiority through animals, clothing, and participation in games. These preparations reinforced social hierarchy and the importance of public reputation during memorial feasts.

Kokotoy's Criticism of Wealth and Competition Kokotoy addressed the wealthy people, reminding them that in previous memorial feasts they had selected the best horses from common people and even kept the prizes when those horses won competitions. He warned that the upcoming feast in the Chuy Valley would expose them to risk, since the climate was different and their mountain horses might not adapt. He also cautioned that their horses could be stolen and that even nobles would not be able to protect them. Kokotoy advised Batyrkan, a local wealthy man, not to travel from the northern Issyk-Kol region to Chuy.

Debate with Warriors and Critique of Noble Behavior One of Batyrkan's warriors disagreed with Kokotoy, saying that he could not predict everything and that it was better to go to the feast. Kokotoy responded that they would likely suffer horse theft and that the nobles of Chuy would later say it was better to have stayed home. He further criticized the nobles, stating that they often forced poor people to pay the expenses of such feasts. Kokotoy emphasized that these celebrations were not only displays of wealth but also systems of exploitation directed at ordinary people.

Kokotoy and Uzun

Kokotoy's Encounter with Uzun Kokotoy met a man named Uzun who was hungry and in a difficult condition. Kokotoy gave him kumis and treated him kindly, and the man thanked him. Uzun explained that he had accidentally killed two people and had been forced to flee from his own community. He asked Kokotoy for his horse. Trusting his words and moved by his situation, Kokotoy gave him the horse without hesitation and allowed him to continue his journey.

Suspicion of Thieves and Kokotoy's Intervention After returning to his village, Kokotoy met two horsemen accompanied by a man walking on foot. He suspected that they might be thieves. The walking man confirmed that the horsemen were indeed thieves and admitted that he had been tempted to join them. Kokotoy advised him not to follow that path and warned him against becoming involved in theft. He later met a local wealthy man and asked him to help the man who was in a difficult situation, showing Kokotoy's continued concern for justice and social responsibility.

Uzun's Return and Restoration of Reputation At another time, Kokotoy visited the bazaar in search of wheat and stayed in a yurt. There he heard that the man named Uzun, who had previously killed two

people and fled, had returned. It was reported that Uzun had paid the *kun*—the traditional death compensation for the people he had killed—and had thereby restored his reputation within society. After fulfilling this obligation, he was accepted back into his community, regaining his social standing and legitimacy.

Kokotoy's Visit to Uzun's Prosperous Home Kokotoy once traveled to the village of Uzun, the same man he had previously helped by giving him a horse and kumis when he was in need. Now Uzun had become a wealthy man, living in a well-decorated yurt filled with carpets and silk blankets. When Kokotoy entered the yurt, the host did not immediately recognize him or show attention. Kokotoy became angry and reminded him that he was the man who had once saved him by giving him a horse and offering friendship, expecting that their bond would not be forgotten.

Recognition, Hospitality, and Moral Lesson After Kokotoy's reminder, Uzun stood up, recognized him, and embraced him, apologizing for his behavior. He explained that because of his past crime, his tribe had been forced to wander across Kyrgyz lands, and he was still in the process of gathering and restoring his people. To honor Kokotoy, he hosted him warmly, gave him gifts, and presented him with a mare. Kokotoy responded by reminding him never to forget his past or the people who had once helped him in times of hardship, emphasizing loyalty and memory as moral duties.

Kokotoy and the Marriage Dispute

Sultan's Refusal of the Groom's Arrival Ceremony A man named Sultan was preparing to marry off his daughter. The in-laws of the groom arrived, but Sultan did not welcome them properly. The groom was waiting at a distant place because the welcoming of in-laws was traditionally a special ceremony and could not be done directly. However, Sultan refused to send any women to receive them. He was dissatisfied because the groom's family, lacking a father, could not prepare a wedding as lavish as Sultan desired. In anger, Sultan declared that he would not give his daughter in marriage and dismissed them.

Kokotoy's Intervention in the Wedding Dispute A young boy was sent to inform Kokotoy that Sultan had rejected the groom's in-laws. Kokotoy rode with the boy and went to the place where the groom was waiting in the forest. He greeted the groom and also respectfully addressed the groom's mother, wishing them well. He then remarked that Sultan's daughter was growing older and should be married. Sultan became angry at Kokotoy's words. Kokotoy responded that Sultan should be happy that his daughter was being married at all. He invited villagers to share the food and sweets brought by the groom's family.

Sultan's Shame and Forced Acceptance of Marriage Sultan felt ashamed and slaughtered a sheep to formally welcome the in-laws. However, he demanded that the bride price include five livestock animals such as horses, camels, and cows, refusing smaller animals like goats or sheep. The groom Mamanazar later complained to Kokotoy about this demand. Kokotoy replied that the agreement had been made when the groom's family was wealthy, but circumstances had changed. Sultan continued to insult both the groom's tribe and Kokotoy. After a few days, Kokotoy learned that Sultan still had not completed the marriage arrangements.

Kokotoy's Final Resolution and Sultan's Submission Kokotoy, who was related to Sultan, criticized him openly, saying he was not a noble ruler but a simple shoemaker who should not act arrogantly. He accused Sultan of greed and questioned whether he wanted to humiliate his daughter by marrying her as a third wife of an old man. Kokotoy then gave five of his own horses to settle the matter and publicly shamed Sultan. He also took Sultan's daughter to his home with the intention of arranging the marriage properly. In response, Sultan told his relatives that Kokotoy must stop humiliating him and finally agreed to proceed with the marriage according to proper traditions.

Kokotoy's Call for Tribal Unity at a Funeral A noble man once asked Kokotoy to accompany him to the funeral of his father-in-law. During the gathering, Kokotoy spoke about the importance of unity among the tribes. He stated that the Bugu tribe had often been attacked and emphasized that all tribes were equal. He argued that God had created all tribes equally and called for solidarity among them. Kokotoy urged the people to move beyond tribal divisions and unite under a shared national identity, stressing fairness and collective strength.

Kokotoy and Takymbash Bolush at Turdubek's Funeral Takymbash Bolush of the Tynymseyit tribe was known for his oppressive behavior, yet he feared Kokotoy because of his sharp and witty criticism of greed and injustice. When a man named Turdubek died, Kokotoy openly mocked him, describing him as greedy and oppressive. Takymbash also attended the funeral and saw Kokotoy there. Kokotoy told the mourners to stop excessive crying, saying that mourning should have limits. This angered Takymbash, who felt that Kokotoy was disrespecting the funeral rituals.

Kokotoy's Illness, Final Journey, and Death Kokotoy later became seriously ill while his tribe was migrating to another place. Someone was riding with him as they moved. During this time, the Russian Tsarist forces were attacking local settlements and killing ordinary people, creating widespread suffering. Kokotoy regretted that he was too weak and sick to help his people during such a difficult period. After two days of illness, Kokotoy passed away, remembered as a remarkable figure who had lived an influential and eventful life.

CHARACTER ANALYSIS

Kokotoy

Kokotoy stands as the definitive archetype of the Kyrgyz Chechen, a master orator whose power resided not in wealth or noble lineage, but in the devastating precision of his words. Emerging from the shadows of poverty during the late Tsarist era, he represents the voice of the voiceless—a man who transformed the struggles of a common herder into a legacy of moral resistance. He is more than a historical figure; he is a symbol of intellectual sovereignty. Through his narrative, we encounter a character who uses his "golden ear" and razor-sharp rhetoric to dismantle social hierarchies and defend the inherent dignity of the Kyrgyz people.

Eloquent Kokotoy is defined by an unparalleled verbal mastery that establishes him as the ultimate folk rhetorician. Known for his "golden ear," he possesses the uncanny ability to absorb and synthesize complex oral histories, tribal laws, and social nuances after hearing them only once. This linguistic precision allows him to navigate high-stakes negotiations and public assemblies with remarkable grace. His speech is described as "sweet like sugar" yet firm as steel, capable of de-escalating violence or exposing a lie with equal ease. For Kokotoy, eloquence is a sacred instrument of justice, used to articulate the rights of the poor against an often-silent elite.

Fearless A "tiger-hearted" spirit defines Kokotoy's interactions with those in power. He is utterly undaunted by the vast wealth of the nomadic manaps or the cold authority of Tsarist officials, treating every individual with the same unwavering demand for fairness. This fearlessness is most evident when he confronts the arrogant nobleman Baygazy, matching a threat of death with his own resolute and steady stand. He refuses to submit to the "Bloody Road" system of forced labor through silence; instead, he speaks the truth even when it invites physical punishment. His courage is grounded in a deep intellectual independence, proving that a man of integrity cannot be intimidated.

Compassionate Beneath his sharp exterior lies a profound, selfless empathy for the marginalized. Kokotoy's character is driven by an instinctive need to protect those who cannot protect themselves. He is frequently seen sacrificing his own hard-earned wages, livestock, and personal comfort to alleviate the suffering of others. Whether he is giving a horse to a grieving, exhausted old man or intervening in a marriage dispute to protect a young woman's future from greed, his actions are consistently altruistic. He views the hardships of his people as his own, advocating for tribal unity and collective support as a moral imperative that outweighs any personal gain.

Witty Kokotoy's most iconic trait is his razor-sharp wit, which he wields with surgical precision to puncture the vanity of the arrogant. He uses humor as a sophisticated form of social critique, turning ridicule into a tool for public accountability. Even in the depths of exhaustion and hunger during his youth, his jokes served as a lifeline for his fellow laborers, robbing oppressors of their ability to break the human spirit. His biting sarcasm and humorous analogies are so legendary that they serve as a form of "moral

fireproofing" against injustice. Through wit, Kokotoy reveals the absurdity of tyranny, making the powerful look foolish and the oppressed feel empowered.

Baygazy

Baygazy's character is defined by a materialistic obsession, notably when he values a racing horse over human life, calling Kokotoy a "kafir" for his charity. At the Ysyk-Kol assembly, his tribalism surfaces as he humiliates the Bugu tribe, calling them "slaves" to assert his own dominance. However, he is ultimately vulnerable to public shame. When Kokotoy's logic exposes his pettiness, Baygazy's aggression turns into submission. Fearing social disgrace, he begs for Kokotoy's forgiveness and offers to fund his marriage, finally admitting that Kokotoy's intellect and moral standing had overcome his own inherited power.

Materialistic Baygazy's primary value system is strictly tied to material property. This materialistic obsession is most evident when Kokotoy gives a horse to a starving elderly man; Baygazy reacts with disproportionate rage, valuing the animal's potential as a "racing horse" over human survival. He explicitly claims the horse is worth more than Kokotoy himself, illustrating a dehumanizing perspective where capital and livestock are prioritized over compassion. To Baygazy, social status is measured solely by the size of one's herd. Any loss of property is seen as a personal insult, demonstrating a mindset where wealth completely replaces any sense of moral responsibility.

Arrogant and Tribalistic Baygazy relies on social hierarchy and tribal superiority to maintain his dominance. He utilizes derogatory language to suppress dissent, frequently labeling Kokotoy a "slave" or a "kafir" to maintain his perceived authority. His participation in the mockery of the Bugu tribe at the Ysyk-Kol assembly illustrates a deep-seated tribalism that defines his worldview. Rather than using his influence for leadership, he wields his status to humiliate those he considers socially inferior. This aggressive behavior reinforces social divisions, as he views tribal lineage not as a cultural identity, but as a justification for the oppression of the marginalized.

Vulnerable to Public Shame Despite his outward aggression, Baygazy is deeply preoccupied with his public reputation. His eventual submission to Kokotoy is a result of moral and intellectual defeat rather than physical force. When Kokotoy points out that punishing an act of charity would bring Baygazy shame among the people, the nobleman's resolve softens. He realizes that Kokotoy's integrity has stripped him of his moral standing, forcing a pragmatic reconciliation. By offering to pay for Kokotoy's marriage expenses and seeking forgiveness, Baygazy proves that his power is fragile; it is entirely dependent on maintaining a facade of honor in the community.

Sultan

Sultan embodies the greed and class prejudice prevalent within the nomadic elite. His arrogance is revealed when he rejects a marriage agreement simply because the groom's family had lost their wealth, even refusing the traditional welcoming ceremony for the in-laws. Sultan's materialism is further highlighted by his demand for high-value livestock as a bride price, dismissing the groom's humble offerings as insufficient. However, his pride is ultimately fragile; when Kokotoy publicly exposes his hypocrisy and pays the debt himself, Sultan is overwhelmed by shame. He eventually submits to the marriage, forced to prioritize his social reputation over his greed.

Prejudiced Sultan is defined by a deep-seated class prejudice and a disdain for those who have fallen into poverty. When his daughter's in-laws arrive for the wedding ceremony, he refuses to welcome them properly because the groom's family is fatherless and lacks the wealth he deems necessary. He views marriage not as a sacred bond or a traditional union, but as a reflection of his own social standing. By insulting the groom's lineage and ignoring the waiting party, Sultan demonstrates that he values material success over human dignity. His refusal to honor a long-standing agreement based solely on the groom's economic decline highlights his elitist and exclusionary worldview.

Greedy Sultan's greed is most apparent in his rigid and unreasonable demands regarding the bride price. Despite the groom's family struggling with their finances, Sultan stubbornly refuses to accept smaller livestock like goats or sheep, insisting instead on high-value animals such as horses, camels, and cows. He attempts to exploit the marriage to maximize his personal profit, showing a complete lack of empathy for the financial strain he imposes. This materialism reveals a man who treats his own daughter as a commodity to be traded for the highest possible gain. His primary motivation throughout the dispute is the acquisition of wealth, even at the expense of communal harmony.

Hypocritical Although Sultan carries himself with the arrogance of a noble ruler, his character is rooted in a fragile and hypocritical pride. Kokotoy exposes this by publicly mocking him, calling him a "simple shoemaker" who is merely pretending to be a great manap. This insult highlights that Sultan's perceived authority is a facade built on bullying those weaker than himself. When Kokotoy finally shames him by paying the bride price out of his own pocket, Sultan's bravado completely collapses. He eventually submits to Kokotoy's demands because he fears public ridicule and the loss of his reputation more than he values his own supposed principles.

THEMES

Politics:

Power: The Power of Eloquence / Intellectual Resistance

In the novella *Kokotoy*, power is presented primarily as the ability to speak well and think critically, rather than to use physical force. Within traditional Kyrgyz society, the chechen (master orator) plays an important role not only as an entertainer but also as a moral voice who evaluates leaders and restrains abuses of authority. Kokotoy represents this tradition, showing that although elites such as manaps possess wealth, status, and armed support, ordinary individuals can still challenge them through knowledge and eloquence.

Kokotoy's power comes from his "golden ear," meaning his exceptional ability to absorb history, law, and genealogical knowledge through careful listening. This form of knowledge is not material and cannot be taken away, making it a stable source of intellectual authority. Because he understands customary law and social tradition as deeply as the rulers, he is able to question their actions using their own accepted values. Rather than relying on violence, Kokotoy uses reasoning, moral argument, and public exposure to reveal contradictions in elite behavior.

Humor and satire are also central to his resistance. He uses wit to weaken fear, which is one of the main tools of domination. By turning suffering into humor or mocking false authority figures, he reduces their psychological control over others. In this sense, laughter becomes a form of protection and survival. The novella suggests that intellectual independence—refusing to accept imposed ways of thinking—is a key form of freedom in a hierarchical society. Through speech, memory, and satire, Kokotoy transforms vulnerability into strength and challenges the legitimacy of power structures from within.

Illustrative Moment: When Kokotoy arrives at Baygazy's camp, the nobleman immediately tries to assert dominance through insults, threats, and social hierarchy. He refuses Kokotoy's greeting, calls him a "kafir," and claims the lost horse is worth more than Kokotoy's life. He even prepares to order violence against him. Kokotoy, however, remains calm and responds with logic instead of anger. He reminds Baygazy that he came with a gift and points out the violation of hospitality rules. He also warns that punishing him would bring shame and weaken Baygazy's status. Unable to respond with words, Baygazy finally softens and offers peace.

Society

Class: Social Inequality and Class Conflict

The novella *Kokotoy* presents a clear and systematic division between the poor and the wealthy nomadic elite (manaps). This inequality is not accidental but rooted in both traditional hierarchy and colo-

nial administrative structures. Within this system, poor people are treated as expendable labor, while the elite accumulate wealth and power through privilege, connections, and exploitation.

One of the strongest expressions of this inequality is seen in the “Bloody Road” episodes. Young boys from impoverished families, including the fifteen-year-old Kokotoy, are forcibly recruited into road construction under harsh supervision by local authorities such as the Starshina. These laborers endure extreme conditions—hunger, exhaustion, and disease—often resulting in death. Meanwhile, wealthy families avoid such obligations through bribery or social influence. The roads are called *kan jol* (“bloody roads”) because they are literally built on the suffering of the poor.

The elite characters reinforce this structure through their attitudes and behavior. Figures like Baygazy and Sultan openly devalue the lives of the poor, treating them as inferior or disposable. Baygazy, for example, shows more anger over the loss of a horse than concern for human suffering. Sultan similarly reduces marriage to an economic transaction, refusing to allow his daughter to marry into a poor household.

Against this backdrop, Kokotoy emerges as a voice of resistance. He rejects the label of “slave” imposed on the poor and challenges the moral legitimacy of elite authority. Through speech, wit, and public critique, he exposes the contradictions and injustices of the system. His actions suggest that the poor are not only victims but also possess intellectual and moral agency.

Illustrative moment: When the Starshina orders young Kokotoy to dismount from an ox and walk, Kokotoy responds with a sharp joke that causes the laborers to laugh. Humiliated, the Starshina retaliates by extending his punishment to three months of forced labor, while others are released earlier. This moment shows how even humor becomes dangerous under oppressive authority, and how the system harshly punishes any form of resistance.

Tribalism versus National Unity

In the novella *Kokotoy*, tribalism is portrayed as both a source of social identity and a force that divides Kyrgyz society. During the late Tsarist period, tribal and sub-tribal affiliations shaped people's sense of status, belonging, and social responsibility. However, these identities were often manipulated by manaps and local leaders to maintain power and influence, deepening divisions within the community.

This fragmentation is particularly evident during the volost elections. Competing tribal leaders sought administrative positions through bribery, public humiliation, and political maneuvering. In some cases, these rivalries escalated into violence. As a result, tribal interests frequently took precedence over the common good, weakening social cohesion among the Kyrgyz.

Kokotoy emerges as an advocate for unity and collective responsibility. He challenges the belief that one tribe is superior to another and criticizes those who claim divine privilege based on lineage. For Kokotoy, an individual's worth is determined by character and actions rather than tribal affiliation. He argues that internal divisions only make the Kyrgyz people more vulnerable, especially under the pressures of Tsarist colonial rule.

His call for unity is rooted in the idea of equality. Kokotoy repeatedly reminds tribal leaders that all people share a common origin and that their collective well-being is more important than local rivalries. This message becomes increasingly significant during the 1916 Uprising. Faced with massacres and forced migration to China, earlier tribal conflicts lose their meaning in the face of a shared tragedy. Through Kokotoy's words and actions, the novella emphasizes the importance of solidarity, mutual protection, and justice. Ultimately, it presents national unity as essential for the survival and dignity of the Kyrgyz people.

Illustrative Moment: At a major tribal assembly in the Ysyk-Kol region, Baygazy and members of the Sarybagysh tribe publicly ridicule the Bugu tribe in an attempt to exclude them from positions of leadership. While many remain silent, Kokotoy rises to speak. Rejecting the idea that any tribe has been chosen by God over others, he argues that no lineage is inherently superior. Rather than responding with insults, he uses reason and eloquence to defend the dignity of his people. His courage and wisdom earn the respect of those present and establish him as an influential voice within the community.

Ethics:

Human Dignity and Moral Integrity

In *Kokotoy*, human dignity is shown as something that does not depend on wealth, social status, or family background. The novella argues that a person's true worth is determined by character and behavior. Although Kokotoy is born into poverty and spends much of his life working as a herder, he never sees himself as inferior to others. He rejects being treated as a "slave," a term used by the elite to justify inequality and exploitation. Through his actions and words, he defends the idea that all people deserve respect.

The novella also emphasizes the importance of moral integrity. Kokotoy believes that a person's values become most visible during difficult times. He consistently demonstrates honesty, loyalty, and compassion, even when helping others requires personal sacrifice. Unlike the wealthy elite, whose authority often depends on status and material resources, Kokotoy earns the trust of others through his fairness and sense of justice.

Another important ethical principle in the novella is gratitude. Kokotoy believes that people should remember those who supported them during times of hardship. Forgetting acts of kindness is presented as a sign of moral failure, while acknowledging them strengthens human relationships and social responsibility.

Even during the hardships of the 1916 exodus, Kokotoy remains concerned about the well-being of others. Despite illness and suffering, he continues to think about the future of his people. His greatest fear is not death itself but leaving his community without guidance and protection.

Through Kokotoy's experiences, the novella suggests that dignity is preserved through ethical behavior. Wealth and social position may change, but honesty, compassion, gratitude, and a commitment to justice are the qualities that give lasting meaning to human life.

Illustrative Moment: An important example of moral integrity appears during Kokotoy's visit to Uzun, a man whose life he had once helped save by giving him a horse when he was starving and in hiding. Years later, Uzun has become wealthy but fails to properly welcome the person who supported him in his time of need. Disappointed, Kokotoy reminds Uzun of the help he once received. Ashamed by this reminder, Uzun realizes that material success has little value without gratitude and loyalty. The scene highlights the novella's message that remembering kindness is a fundamental moral responsibility.